

Interview with Ambassador Leslie M. Alexander

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

AMBASSADOR LESLIE M. ALEXANDER

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

Initial Interview date: October 17, 2005

Copyright 2009 ADST

[Note: This interview was not edited by Ambassador Alexander]

Q: Today is the 17th of October, 2005. This is an interview with Leslie Alexander. This is being done- you have a middle initial of M, is it?

ALEXANDER: I do. M as in Michael.

Q: Michael. And this is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training and I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy. And do you go by Les, Leslie or do you have another nickname or name?

ALEXANDER: My friends call me Les or Leslie. My former spouses called me Leslie as do my parents.

Q: Okay. Well, let's start sort of at the beginning. When and where were you born?

ALEXANDER: I was born in November 1948 in Frankfurt, Germany.

Q: Well, what were the circumstances of being born in Germany?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: My father, as did I guess an entire generation of young American men, went off to fight World War II. He found himself in Germany, a member of the occupation forces. He met my mother while he was in Europe. She was French, from France, a French citizen, and I was born of a marriage between that young American GI and that young French woman.

Q: Then was the 97th General Hospital going when you were there?

ALEXANDER: It was. In fact, that is the hospital where I was born. Whether it was the 97th at the time I don't know. I know it was a former SS hospital but I don't know whether it was called the 97th but that is the hospital.

Q: I say this because I have a daughter who was born there and I also, my first post was Frankfurt and, this was in '55 to '57. I was baby birth officer and I did nothing but register babies born to GI families there for months. I mean, we'd have about 400 a month or something like that, we were really rolling them out in those days.

Okay. Let's talk a bit about your father's side. What do you know about the family, where do they come from?

ALEXANDER: My father was born in Houston, Texas. He was an only child. He had, well obviously he's only child, he had no siblings. Ironically or coincidentally his parents had no siblings therefore he had an absolutely miniscule family. His father died when he was five.

Q: What was his father doing, do you remember?

ALEXANDER: I have no idea. In fact, he has no recollection of his father. Every time we've tried to find out something about my dad, about my grandfather, my paternal grandfather my father professed to know, claimed to know nothing about him. Whether he did or didn't I don't know. My grandmother, on the other hand, whom I never met, she passed when my dad was 17, just as he was going into the service shortly after graduating from high school.

Library of Congress

He did speak of, a little bit, she was a single mom, having lost her husband when my father was only five years old. I don't know what she did for a living. I know that her, either her grandmother or her grandfather broke horses. And again, I don't know whether it was, because this is all rather vague, but as I understand it from my father, either his maternal grandmother or his maternal grandfather or perhaps both were Cherokee Indians. Anyway, his grandfather broke horses. That's about all that I know of that family. And I say that family because having had no siblings I had no American cousins, no uncles, no aunts. I had literally no American family. The only family I ever knew was my mother's family, these rather strange French people and well, that's pretty much it.

Q: Well, we'll go to your mother's family but let's finish up with your father who was in the service. Did he stay in the service?

ALEXANDER: He stayed in the service until the late '50s. After that he began working for the U.S. government, for the DoD (Department of Defense) to be specific in Europe and stayed in Europe until he retired in the late '80s. So he lived basically his entire professional life was spent, with the exception of a few years, in Europe, in either France, Germany or England. During the Korean War he was stationed in, among other places, Greenland. And that stuck in my mind because I was a young, young child at the time and had the impression that he was living in an igloo. All I knew is that he was someplace very cold and very isolated. I don't know what he was doing up there but he was a young lieutenant or young captain or something and, again, I don't really know what he was doing. And he lived in Europe until 1988, 1989. At that point he and my mother, who was still alive, came to the Washington area, where my father still resides; my mother did until she passed 10 years ago.

Q: Let's talk about the French side. Where did they come from? Where in France?

ALEXANDER: My mother was born in Toul. She was raised in Ahnjay where my very small French family continues to reside. She had one sibling, a sister, my aunt who is still alive

Library of Congress

and lives in Ahnjay. The aunt never married so again, I have no cousins there. I have, I believe, two half-cousins because my mother had a half-sister who was a nun and who left the nunnery and married and had two children. My grandfather on that side was killed in 1949 by the Germans. Again, a very small family and I know very little about them. There is one coincidence that they also had something to do with horses. I'm not quite certain but I think they bred them or raised them or did something with them.

Q: Well then, you grew up, did you grow up essentially in Europe?

ALEXANDER: I did. I lived in France. After I was born my mother took me to France and we went to join my grandmother who at the time was living in Nice and I lived there until I was about two. Then we went to New York where I lived until I was six. During that period of time I rarely saw my father because as I think I mentioned earlier Korea was on and he was off in various places in Korea and Greenland. Then in 1955 or so we moved to Germany because he was assigned to Germany; he was still in the service at the time. And so we lived in Germany until 1959.

Q: Where in Germany?

ALEXANDER: We lived in Kaiserslautern in the southwest of Germany. And it was about that time I think he left the service. We went back to New York for a year. My mother really didn't care very much for life in the U.S. so we went to France where I lived until I graduated from high school.

Q: They're a real pattern here. French don't immigrate well, do they?

ALEXANDER: No, no, they don't.

Q: I was in personnel at one point and if an officer had a French wife you figured maybe 500 miles from Paris is about as far as you could assign an officer.

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: I think my mother's attitude would certainly vindicate what you saw in personnel.

So anyway, we went back to France where I spent essentially all my junior high school and high school years.

Q: Well before that, in Germany, you were going to a military school or?

ALEXANDER: Yes. Elementary school.

Q: Well I assume that as a small child you learned French.

ALEXANDER: I did. In fact, strangely we spoke, we grew up, I have three brothers, one of whom was also in Germany, in Langstadt, while we were living there, obviously while we were living there, but from '55 until '59. My other two brothers were born in New York. But we all spoke German at home because my parents didn't speak, my mother did not speak English, my father didn't speak French but they both spoke German. And so, actually German was quite, was more or less the everyday language and it was only after my grandmother came to live with us, I was about five years old at the time, that we began speaking French regularly. And then of course living in France, I mean, that became the everyday language.

Q: Well how about your English? You don't speak with an accent at all. I mean, some people who have gone through something like this never can get rid of a certain twist or something.

ALEXANDER: I think it was a function of having gone to military schools or schools in which a significant portion of the student body was American or English speaking.

Q: Let's talk a bit about French schooling and all. This would be, you were in a French school in what, '59 to?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: This would have been 1960 until 1966. Because from '59 to '60 we were in New York for year.

Q: How did you find the French schooling?

ALEXANDER: I found it incredibly demanding, much more so than the American system. In fact I have to confess that I found it so demanding that I asked to leave the French system and go back into the American system where I didn't have to work as hard. And my parents weren't very happy about that but they said alright. So I wound up going to an American school in France, or an international school that had an American system.

Q: Was this where, in Nice?

ALEXANDER: No, this was in Orleans, not too far from where my mother was born. The French system, again, they didn't cut you any slack, there was no such thing as grading on a curve, there were classes in which the entire class could fail. Maybe not the year but they would fail an exam. There was no touchy feely, you get an A for effort kind of thing.

Q: Did you get any, this thing where you have to have your copy book and you couldn't blot it literally?

ALEXANDER: Yes, things of that sort. The other thing that the French did, for example, I was born left-handed. I was forced to learn how to write with my right hand.

Q: That must have done horrible things to your handwriting.

ALEXANDER: No, actually it didn't. It did horrible things to my tennis game because I had to switch hands but no, I think it was more of a psychological, had more of a psychological impact than a physical, physiological one. And I also came to appreciate why we in the English we call people who are clumsy "gauche," meaning left in French. Of course today we know better but.

Library of Congress

Q: I have a brother who was left-handed and his handwriting, and he was brought up in the era where they forced him to change and it didn't work very well.

ALEXANDER: I didn't like the French school. I guess I'm being a hypocrite because my 12-year-old, I have a daughter, I have two daughters, one of whom is 12 and lives here, and she goes to the French International School and has always gone to the French International School, either in Washington or Paris or someplace; well, it wasn't international in Paris it was the French School. And it's expressly because of my exposure to the French School and their take no prisoners approach that I decided I want my kid to get a similar education.

Q: How did you find growing up in the French society and all? Do you have any?

ALEXANDER: I was quite fascinated by it because I felt very American. I never had any question, any doubt, any misgivings, any schizophrenia about being multicultural. I always felt that I was an American who just happened to have a foreign born parent who just happened to be born abroad who just happened to be raised in a foreign country. I felt very, very American. But I appreciated the opportunity that we were given to grow up in Europe with its phenomenally rich culture, great cuisine. It was a good time to be an American in Europe. America was at the top of the heap, literally, economically, politically, militarily, diplomatically. Money was no problem. I mean, we were well off compared to most of the people we knew. Americans were liked, respected, admired and often loved. The Europeans still remembered what the U.S. had done to liberate them from the Nazis, what we were doing to defend Western Europe against the Soviets. The Kennedys were in power when I was in high school, in office, excuse me, and the French were completely smitten with the Kennedys. The whole Camelot thing, catered to, pandered to the European image of the United States that Americans were young and beautiful and rich and cosmopolitan and quite dashing and interesting and so it was a great time

Library of Congress

to be an American. And so I embraced my Americanism at the same time that I was very comfortable living in France and being part French. I had no problems.

Q: I assume you spoke at home with your mother.

ALEXANDER: French at home, French, I mean, I was bilingual so I had absolutely no problems going from English to French or vice versa.

Q: Did you get involved in sort of the culture of your area? Sauvignon, wasn't it? Where?

ALEXANDER: This was Orleans.

Q: Orleans.

ALEXANDER: Orleans, I guess they say.

Q: Orleans, yes. Did you pick up a good bit of French culture? I mean, was this?

ALEXANDER: Oh yes. I mean, I knew the area well, I had a little Vespa, I used to go out, I had a girlfriend who lived in a chateau in Beaugency and I used to go out and see her on the weekends. We used to ride all over the countryside, we ate in French restaurants. We were living in France. It was a French existence. I drank wine at age 16 and cognac and beer and ate French bread and went to French movies.

Q: When did you leave this paradise or whatever it was?

ALEXANDER: It was a paradise. I left in 1966.

Q: How old were you then?

ALEXANDER: I was 17.

Q: So where to?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: I went to Munich in what was then West Germany. And I went to college there for a couple of years.

Q: What college?

ALEXANDER: The European branch of the University of Maryland. We agonized about where I should go to school and since I recognized I really didn't have the American experience and was a little uncomfortable being thrown into some situation like that my father said well, why don't you try something like that that's sort of half and half, you'll be with American kids, most of whom will be military kids but you'll get into that groove and, yes, I thought okay.

Q: So this is the University of Maryland's Munich campus?

ALEXANDER: Munich campus, yes, that's what they called it. It no longer exists. It was a small school, I think there were 500, 600 students. It was only a two year school but it was a great transition to a larger school.

Q: Were you interested in any particular aspect of science, history, or literature?

ALEXANDER: No. I liked history, it was something that I felt I was surrounded by it. I was surrounded by politics in a way. I mean, I think we were much more politically aware by virtue of being Americans in Europe very much surrounded by the realities of the Cold War, seeing constant military maneuvers of one sort or another, running into people from all over the place. It was an everyday fact of life. I remember even as a child during the time we were in Frankfurt 1956, I didn't understand it fully but my mother, I remember my mother's collecting us one day and grabbing a bunch of clothes and canned foods and throwing them in a suitcase and said we're leaving.

Q: Must have been October of '56.

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: It was the Hungarian revolution and there was a great concern, great fear that we might actually go at it with the Soviets. And again, I didn't fully understand what was going on but I had a slight notion of the tensions between the Soviet people, whoever they were, I didn't quite understand. And I cite that as an example because there were constant events of that sort that came up during my life that I was aware we were sort of on the front lines.

Q: It was around you. In October of '56 my assignment was if the balloon went up I was supposed to set up a card table in a housing complex parking lot, Plattenstrasse, to document people as they left. The Soviet tanks are 50 miles away.

ALEXANDER: No, we were all very naive. I remember I went to the first grade in New York and we had the bomb drills. We would get under the desk and things.

Q: Duck and cover.

ALEXANDER: Yes, I guess as they did in World War II. But none of us ever thought if there's a nuclear exchange I don't think hiding under our little desk is-

Q: Yes. Was the campus at all at Maryland, being basically military kids, politics probably weren't uppermost, were they? I mean-

ALEXANDER: What kind of politics?

Q: American politics or something.

ALEXANDER: No, no. I mean, Vietnam was getting underway but there were never any protests. No, no. I think as a whole we were an apolitical bunch.

Q: Did you get to move in the Germany society?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: Somewhat. I used to do the museums in Munich. We would go skiing in Garmisch or Berchtesgaden. Yes, we did, I visited places where Hitler lived. We did Oktoberfest, of course.

Q: I was going to say Oktoberfest, yes. I got a medal at Oktoberfest, silver medal, for running five liters, or something. This was when I was a GI there.

ALEXANDER: Yes, there was something we did like that. Yes, you had to drink five liters. I don't know if we got a medal but there was some badge of honor of recognition.

But did I get into Germany, really get into it? No, I don't think so, not to the degree that I was involved in French life, so to speak.

Q: Well, by the time you left there, it would be '68 I guess?

ALEXANDER: Yes, exactly.

Q: Were you able to pick up any emanations from France about the spring of '68 and the student revolt and all that?

ALEXANDER: Oh yes, absolutely. We followed that very closely. I was quite fascinated by the whole Danny the Red.

Q: Yes, he's still on the European parliament today.

ALEXANDER: I did not know that. I know he was elected to the European parliament.

Q: This is a Daniel Cohn-Bandit. He's known as Danny the Red.

ALEXANDER: Danny the Red, yes. No, we followed that quite closely. In fact, by '68 it seemed that our world was exploding. It was Tet in Vietnam, it was clear that that was going to be an unwinnable war or we'd lost the commitment or the will to win it. Europe

Library of Congress

was blowing up; the U.S. was blowing up. And you couldn't live in Europe at the time at 19 or 20 without being aware that European 19 and 20 year olds were out raising hell and fighting with the police and everything else. No, no, I was very, very conscious of that. I was a little frustrated, I wouldn't describe myself as being a particularly conservative kid but my sensibilities were offended by the European left in those days, the notion that the U.S. was an evil empire and the Soviets were somehow only interested in the welfare and the well being of the Western Europeans.

I had taken a trip through Eastern Europe during that period of time. I was studying Byzantium and that took me through Yugoslavia, which was neutral but it was still a communist or socialist country. As I used to say even the communists were embarrassed about being communists so they used to call themselves socialist paradises rather than communist ones. But I also went in Bulgaria which was certainly a typically repressed Soviet-style state and it was clear to me that these people were living in societies that I would not have wanted to live in and I don't think anyone in Western Europe other than Danny the Red and his ilk would have welcomed either. So, I found that terribly offensive.

I began to look at Europeans whom I always thought were more sophisticated, cosmopolitan than Americans, began to look at them with different eyes, as ingrates, as hypocrites.

Q: Well, did you get any feel, I mean, you were still obviously a young kid, but for the importance of the whole intellectuals, unquote, of France and their impact?

ALEXANDER: I found them amusing. As I used to say to people, it's easy to sit at a cafe in Paris and smoke your Gitanes and criticize the U.S. The French had the freedom to be as disdainful of us as they wanted to be and in part because we provided the umbrella to protect those rights. Where I did sympathize with the French was, as someone made the observation one day, you changed after you killed Kennedy; you lost your innocence and you became more cynical and you got involved in this silly war in Vietnam which

Library of Congress

has nothing to do with their freedom or anything else. And I began to question my own government, our own politics but I still found the Europeans somewhat hypocritical and unfairly disdainful of Americans.

Q: As a kid, unlike so many who enter the Foreign Service, you got a real international experience early on, particularly the French, German aspects of things. Did American diplomacy and the profession thereof cross your radar at all?

ALEXANDER: No. In fact, the whole notion of being a diplomat had nothing to do with the realities of diplomacy, had nothing to do with my knowing diplomats; I'd never met any other than the consul general in Munich who came to speak to us and I found his speech to be rather pedantic and nonsensical. I had, I guess, more pedestrian reasons for wanting to get into diplomacy. I saw a movie when I was 12, 11, 12, 13 years old and I was living in France. And it was called 55 Days in Peking and it was about the Boxer Rebellion.

Q: Oh yes, Charlton Heston.

ALEXANDER: Charlton Heston, who was an army major, or marine major, Ava Gardner who was a Russian countess, David Niven who was the British ambassador. Anyway, this all seemed very glorious and dramatic and romantic and exciting and this world and watching David Niven run around with his fancy, he had a uniform because I guess diplomats wore uniforms in those days. And anyway, this all seemed very attractive and I said, I want to do that. And that's where I got the idea, that's where I first got the idea of becoming a diplomat. And I sort of suppressed that notion. Well, I didn't suppress it I just didn't think much about it.

I got into the Foreign Service almost by accident. I just happened to be visiting my parents who were still in Germany at the time. I would have been maybe 20. Yes, in fact, I was 20. And they were giving the Foreign Service exam at the consulate in, well, they were giving

Library of Congress

it at many consulates; I took it at the consulate at Stuttgart. It was a Saturday, it was an all day thing. And on a whim, I had heard that it was extremely difficult.

Q: But you were not a college graduate at this time.

ALEXANDER: No, I was a junior. I was in my first semester of my junior year. And I heard they were giving the exam and I think it was my father, and he said didn't you mention a few years ago that you wanted to be a diplomat because if you do, they're giving the Foreign Service exam here in a few days or in a few weeks. I can't remember the timeframe exactly. But anyway, I made some inquiries, found out yes indeed, filled out an application, went down to the consulate on a Saturday morning and spent the day convinced that I would never pass this exam. Spent the day writing, whatever. And a few months later I got the results and I had passed and I was shocked, absolutely shocked. I found out later that some 10,000 had taken the written exam that year and 300 passed. And so I was again stunned. And as I also found out later if I can be slightly immodest, I had very good reason to be because again, I think only three percent of the people who took it passed and I passed it the first time around which I thought everyone did. It was only after a five month stint or a three month stint at BEX to find out that what I did was not that usual. And then I thought well, maybe this is what I'll do. So I pursued it, I took the oral later and after getting my undergraduate degree I came into the Foreign Service.

Q: We'll come back to this but after your two years at Munich where did you go?

ALEXANDER: I continued with Maryland. I just stayed with the same school.

Q: Again in Munich?

ALEXANDER: No, because that was only two years.

Q: So you went back to?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: Yes, back here and I finished up.

Q: How did you find Maryland, a huge campus?

ALEXANDER: Yes, it was a huge campus. I found it very impersonal. It was pretty much what I expected. It wasn't until later, I always had, and I still do, I have a slight chip on my shoulder, not a chip on my shoulder, a slight resentment, having been raised in Europe, and you lived in Europe so you'll appreciate this point, university was university. If you, speaking of Germany, for example, you went to the school in Munich or you went to Tübingen or you went to Göttingen or Heidelberg, they were all universities and they all had their particular programs and I didn't understand the American system, never having been exposed to it, that there were universities and there were universities. And there was a very definite pecking order, Harvard and Yale were something completely different than the University of Delaware or Maryland or North Carolina or something. Well, I didn't know this, I didn't understand this because I'd never been exposed to this. And it was only as an adult that I began to realize that, well wait a minute, going to university is not enough, you have to go to a certain kind of university. Well, I suppose had I been more aware of that maybe that would have influenced where I went. I don't know. But to this day that bothers me.

Q: No, I mean-

ALEXANDER: It does. It does for some reason, I don't know why.

Q: I'm sure you're had the experiences of a Foreign Service officer of foreign kids coming to you when you're abroad and saying, I'd like to go to school. Where should I go to school? And when you think about it, there seem to be thousands of choices. And some are obviously higher up in the pecking order but others will give a very good education or some more technical and all; it's a bewildering choice.

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: And that's an absolutely terrific example, I guess, of one of the reasons why I felt this resentment later in life. I recall very well when I was in Balzar, Ecuador. The children of my friends, Ecuadorian friends, admittedly well-to-do people, coming to me and saying, we want to go to Harvard or we want to go to Yale. It was always Ivy League schools. And I would say why? Well, because it's Harvard. Because it's Yale. I thought, well damn it, they're foreigners and they understand we have this, why didn't I? And my father was a college graduate, it's not that my father had not gone to college. But it just, I just wasn't cognizant of this pecking order, this scheme, the elite schools, the Ivy League schools. But I felt this natural resentment, well why do you want to go to Harvard? Well because it's Harvard. But what do you want to study? I mean, if you want to study physics, maybe you ought to go to Maryland. If you want to study business maybe you should go to Stanford.

Q: Well, how did you find, you were there, what, '68 to '70?

ALEXANDER: Exactly.

Q: Graduated class of '70?

ALEXANDER: Class of '70.

Q: My wife graduated after- I ripped her untimely from the womb where she was when I met her and she returned to college when I was in Vietnam and she graduated class of '70 from Maryland with a degree in English.

How did you find the campus? Because this is the time when all hell was breaking loose on the campuses.

ALEXANDER: All hell was breaking loose everywhere. Again, as you know, we talked about earlier, in Europe with the Soviets breaking loose and massive, massive, thousands

Library of Congress

and thousands of people; here they had the anti-war riots and demonstrations. I didn't participate in any of that. It wasn't that I wasn't aware I just didn't do it.

Q: Did you feel a little bit, I won't say alienated but also the observer? I mean, having gone through this European thing where you weren't quite part of it either?

ALEXANDER: Yes, in fact I hung out with kids-

Q: This is almost the Foreign Service mindset where you watch these unruly mobs doing their thing and you, wherever you are you kind of observe.

ALEXANDER: Yes, I had a very different approach, a very different attitude at the time. I was interested in getting out of school and education was a ticket to something else. And protesting just didn't fit into my scheme of things. It wasn't that I didn't feel some of the outrage that my fellow students felt, the concern, the anger, the frustration. I didn't particularly care for Nixon, I certainly didn't care for the war but I had an agenda and this didn't do anything to advance my agenda, I didn't want to go out and get my head split open by a police baton. I didn't find it amusing to get gassed or anything else. I just didn't do it.

Q: Well, was University of Maryland very political or not? Big university by that time.

ALEXANDER: Yes, I guess the problem I have in answering that question is when you're on a campus with, you know, 20,000, 30,000 students and there are so many cliques and so many ways to get lost within those cliques you can have, and I imagine it's true today, you can have any kind of life you want. You can be very politically active, you can disappear. I don't know whether it was more active or less active than any other school. I don't know. I just don't have a sense, a recollection of my being politically active. Again, I was politically aware but I very much believed that if we, as a generation, if we were going to change things we had to do it working with the system from within the system, that we

Library of Congress

weren't going to bring the system down, that the system didn't need to be brought down; I didn't agree with that view.

Q: What was your major?

ALEXANDER: I was a business major. There was a very practical reason for that. Again, I sort of had it in my mind vaguely that I would like to be a diplomat but I always assumed that that was a dream or ambition that wouldn't be realized because it was hard. The Foreign Service was an elitist, it seemed to be an elitist institution and the probability of my getting into it was slight, zero possibly even the opportunity to get into it. I didn't come from a Foreign Service family, didn't know anyone in the Foreign Service, had no connections. Again, I wasn't terribly politically astute nor aware; I thought well, business degree, I can always go and work for somebody.

Q: But you mentioned by the time you were 20 you had taken and passed the written exam.

ALEXANDER: First time around.

Q: How about the oral exam? When did you take it?

ALEXANDER: I took the oral exam right after graduating, right after my senior year.

Q: So the Foreign Service was there but you sort of felt that the oral exam would be the place to say you don't come from the right background or something or other.

ALEXANDER: Yes, exactly. Again, in those days the written exam was what weeded out most people.

Q: Yes.

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: But 50 percent of the people who passed the written exam passed the oral which meant that 50 percent would fail.

Q: *Sure.*

ALEXANDER: And I just, I said my odds, you know, 50-50 and so I'm going to go with the possibility or the likelihood that I won't get into the Foreign Service. Again, I'm not from an Ivy League school, my parents aren't New England bluebloods and-

Q: *Well had you, by the time you got to the University of Maryland, picked up these strains about the right school-*

ALEXANDER: I was even more convinced that the probability of my getting in was very slight, very small.

Q: *When I came in I also had the feeling I didn't quite belong to the club. Although I'd gone to the right schools I'd had four years as an enlisted man in the Korean War and I adapted sort of the enlisted man mentality by that time and I really felt that I wasn't part of the people who belonged.*

ALEXANDER: In fairness to the U.S. Foreign Service, my attitudes are also formed by my observations of European diplomatic services, which were certainly elitist. It was just a different world.

Q: *Yes, very much so. You graduated in 1970, had a significant other developed at this point or not?*

ALEXANDER: Yes, I married my college sweetheart.

Q: *Which meant when you graduated in 1970 you had responsibilities.*

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: I guess I did. I mean, there were no children, there were just the two of us but I had to be a responsible adult.

Q: Well did you, were you looking at any business or what were you looking at?

ALEXANDER: Banking. International banking. In fact I had been offered a couple of positions in commercial banking and actually by such institutions as the Fed (Federal Reserve) and the FDIC (Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation) for example as a bank examiner. Yes, banking was what I was looking at.

Q: Yes, and also I assume your languages.

ALEXANDER: Languages, business degree, again, I hadn't protested the war, I appeared to be relatively conservative and safe.

Q: What about the draft, 1970?

ALEXANDER: Well, I had, yes, I eventually got a draft notice, eventually got a draft notice, report to Fort Hollenberg. I had, in fact this was within a week of joining the Foreign Service the next year, 1971.

Q: Fort Hollenberg is where we train intelligence people.

ALEXANDER: Yes but it's also where they asked me to do my physical and I was 22 when I was going through the physical, at the end of it I was examined by a physician, very harried young doctor, sort of looked at me, said you're kind of old to be here for this, aren't you? Because you know, most of the kids who were going through this were, you know, just 18, 19 and they were looking for, I guess for cannon fodder in Vietnam and I had on a coat and tie, and I said, I guess so, and he said what are you doing here? And I said I was told to report here. So he said you really want to do this? I'll never forget this, I said no. He said what are you doing now? I said I've just been accepted into the Foreign Service.

Library of Congress

He said Foreign Service, that's diplomacy or something isn't it? I said yes. He said Jesus. He said why do they want to draft you? What are they doing to do with you? I said Doc, I said, I don't know. I'm here. And so he looked at me and he said you're 1Y. And I said really? And he said yes, you're 1Y. And I said well what's, why am I? I knew what 1Y was. I said why am I 1Y? He said because we don't need you or we shouldn't be taking you or something to that effect. I wasn't about to argue with him. And so I got this 1Y deferment.

Q: What does that refer to?

ALEXANDER: It was a temporary deferment for medical reasons. In fact I pressed him a little bit, I said why? He said you have a planters wart, you can't march. And I really did have a planters wart. And again, I wasn't going to argue with him. Okay, if you say I'm 1Y. It wasn't 4F and I wasn't 4F. I was as physically fit as you know. But that 1Y basically got me out of military service because in the meantime I was sent to my first Foreign Service assignment, once I was overseas they lost interest in me. And I think a couple years later they stopped the draft anyway.

Q: Let's talk about the oral exam. Do you remember any of the questions?

ALEXANDER: Yes, as a matter of fact, I recall their asking me why I wanted to join the Foreign Service. And I told them the story that I told you, that when I was 12 or 13, a young boy living in France, I saw 55 Days in Peking and David Niven was the British ambassador, looked very dashing in his uniform and the whole nine yards and they found that amusing as hell. In fact, one of them said that's the most honest answer that I've heard all day. And I, for some reason that seemed to amuse them.

Another question was, I had taken one course which had been taught by a German who had lived in Africa for many, many years, by a German professor. I attributed the realities of the day to colonialism, to the rise of the bureaucratic elite in Africa, etcetera. I don't remember exactly what I told them but seemed to please this gentleman. They asked me a few things. Oh, yes. One of them was, again, I don't know whether it was good cop, bad

Library of Congress

cop; one of them seemed rather hostile and said well, how do you think you can represent the United States, you don't know the United States. You weren't born here, you weren't raised here. So I remember I had to convince him that I was an American. And again, I don't know if it was good cop, bad cop, they wanted to see how I would handle myself but I think the one thing I do recall was telling him I suppose I could put the same question to your children, assuming that you have some. And that sort of seemed to stop them and they started another line of questioning. That's about all of it I remember. I was nervous as hell and it was in the old FSI building over in Rosslyn.

Q: Oh yes. Rosslyn, yes. I did that at one point.

Well then, this is '70. So then when did you come into the Foreign Service?

ALEXANDER: In '71, in the, I think the 97th class, I think that was the number. I realize that later they changed and they started all over again.

Q: I came in when they were just starting the numbers. I came in class one and then, this was '55, and then they renumbered and renumbered again I think.

So you came into the basic officer course in '71. How did you find the group of people you were with, this basic officer course?

ALEXANDER: I was completely intimidated, completely, thoroughly intimidated. I didn't understand what I was doing with these people, many of whom had grown up in the Foreign Service, their parents were Foreign Service officers. I was the second youngest person in my incoming class, the youngest was a few days younger than me; Peter Reams; his dad had been an ambassador. In fact, Peter and I came in as FSO, the old system, FSO Eights because we were too young to be FSO Sevens. Everybody else was an FSO Seven. Peter and I were 22, the average age of the rest was something like 30, 32. Most of, many of them had been in the service, had been military officers, couple of them had taught at university. I was completely, totally intimidated by these people.

Library of Congress

Q: Well then, how did you find over the six weeks or so of the course, did you find that you began to integrate within this group or not?

ALEXANDER: I did. Yes, yes. In part because most of them were very kind. There were a few who were very aggressive, very competitive. But, unlike many of them I was comfortable speaking a language other than English. I found my own little niche, I found my own way to play the one-upmanship thing, you know. Yes, I felt that by the end of the training, six weeks I think it was as you suggested, yes, I felt relatively comfortable but it was still intimidating for the most part because I didn't know what the Foreign Service was, I didn't really know what it was like to be at an embassy and still hadn't been in one.

Q: Well, one learned a lot of the technicalities but really you didn't learn much of what you were getting into at the time.

ALEXANDER: No, absolutely not, no. I don't remember much of the training. We took the consular course after, I think all of us did, I think I remember more of that than I do of the basis A100 class.

Q: Well that was more practical I think.

ALEXANDER: Yes.

Q: Well, what was the mix of your group? Was it all male, more female, minorities?

ALEXANDER: We were combined State and USIS. We were a small class, I think we were about 20. There were two women that I recall, maybe three. One was a black woman, Loretta, I don't remember her last name, I want to say Johnson but I don't know whether that was her name. And, but again the two or three females were USIS. No females on the State side, they were all white males. Diversity in those days was still something, it was a pretty homogeneous service in those days.

Library of Congress

Q: *Did you have any idea where you wanted to go, what you wanted to do?*

ALEXANDER: I wanted to go to Europe.

Q: *Not go to Beijing or something.*

ALEXANDER: No, no I wanted to go to Europe, be simple, because that's what I knew.

Q: Yes.

ALEXANDER: I didn't want to go to Latin America, I didn't want to go to Asia. The only other posting, in fact, I actively sought a posting in Vietnam. And was accepted for the CORDS program, which they cancelled that year. In fact, it was myself and three other guys, we had volunteered for CORDS and were told a few days later, well gentlemen, you're not going because we've decided to cancel the CORDS program or sending more people, I don't remember what it was. But I surprised everyone including myself but that was, it was something I wanted to do. I said this country, this conflict obviously has marked my generation, I want to know, I want to go and see for myself what is this all about.

Q: *Yes, I had the same feeling. I was more senior at that time but I wanted to go see the elephant.*

ALEXANDER: Yes, exactly. I wanted to see the elephant as you put it. And didn't go.

Q: *So what happened?*

ALEXANDER: Well, we had no assignments in Europe. In fact, of the posts that were available I think almost everything was in Africa, two or three posts were in Asia and two or three posts were in the Caribbean, South America. I wound up going to Guyana because I was the only one who put it down. And the reason I wrote down Guyana was because, I knew nothing about Guyana but I had collected stamps as a kid and at the time the most

Library of Congress

valuable stamp in the world was a Guyanese stamp from British Guyana. So I wrote down Guyana and wound up going to Guyana as a consular officer.

Q: Well I was wondering, I mean here you have obviously fluent French and so you're sent to a-

ALEXANDER: An English speaking post.

Q: An English speaking post, bringing your English up to par. You were in Guyana from when to when?

ALEXANDER: From '71 to '73.

Q: What was Guyana like when you got there? The capital is Georgetown?

ALEXANDER: Georgetown.

Q: Georgetown. What was Guyana like at the time?

ALEXANDER: Well, Guyana had just, was a recently, what's the word I'm looking for? It had been a colony and recently-

Q: Liberated?

ALEXANDER: Liberated, yes, freed nation. The elites were still very much Anglophiles just by, you know, the fight for freedom and all that. It hadn't been a violent conflict with the British. The British, as you know, most of the West Indies were allowed to become free but it was a country struggling with its identity. A country in conflict, great conflict; a country with a government, the first post-colonial government that was essentially put in power with the help of the U.S. and specifically the CIA. The Guyanese were very ambivalent towards the Americans. This was the height of the Cold War; we had deposed Cheddi Jagan who would have been prime minister had it not been for our direct involvement.

Library of Congress

Q: What was our involvement?

ALEXANDER: Well, they had sort of a transition period as the British were leaving and before they had their first democratically elected government they had a premiere, Cheddi Jagan. Cheddi Jagan was the head of the PPP, the Peoples Progressive Party. He was an East Indian, as were most Guyanese, 60 percent of the country was ethnically East Indian from the Indian subcontinent, 30 percent were African Guyanese, Afro-Guyanese, the rest were Portuguese, Chinese, mixtures thereof, what have you. Not surprisingly, the majority population being Indian voted an Indian into office and that was Cheddi Jagan. And we conspired to get rid of Jagan, which we did and saw to it that Forbes Burnham, an Afro-Guyanese, became prime minister. Forbes very quickly turned on the U.S., became a rather devout illuminati in the non-aligned movement and kept us at a distance. It was a country, again, with a lot of political tension, a lot of racial tension, a lot of ethnic tension.

It was, I think a great post for me, never having been exposed to the Foreign Service or diplomacy in general. Being in a small post, to be involved in things that I probably wouldn't have been involved in had I been in Paris, for example. I remember, the ambassador and I were invited to a big function at the prime minister's house, the DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission) wasn't invited, but at a small post, personalities, to the Guyanese I was a diplomat, they didn't care what I did in the embassy. And I remember because the DCM said, "If I'm not invited you can't go." And I rather indiscreetly went to the ambassador and said, "Mr. Ambassador, I really would like to go to this thing. I understand that Fidel Castro's going to be there and I'd like to meet him." And he said, "Well of course, you've been invited, go. Why?" And I said, "Well the DCM says I can't go." "Don't worry about it, I'll take care him." I realized later in my career you weren't supposed to do things like that but I was young, I was naive. Guyana, which I did not like, because I'd never lived in the Third World, was very primitive, took forever to get mail, there was no TV, I really didn't enjoy Guyana but in retrospect it was a great introduction to the Foreign Service.

Library of Congress

Q: Who was the ambassador when you were there?

ALEXANDER: Spencer King.

Q: And the DCM?

ALEXANDER: George Sherry. Ambassador King had been the DCM immediately before going to Guyana, had been the DCM in the Dominican Republic. I believe he was the DCM when L.B. Johnson sent the Marines. From there he went back to Washington for a year or two or maybe not, maybe he went directly to Guyana as ambassador.

Q: How did you find the embassy as a unit?

ALEXANDER: The ambassador and the DCM were very supportive, very kind. My boss, who was a woman, she was a consul-

Q: Who was that?

ALEXANDER: Owie Harpootian, Ovsanna Harpootian. Owie was very strict, she was like a schoolteacher. She had been a Foreign Service secretary, college graduate, and through whatever program they had, Mustang Program-

Q: Mustang Program.

ALEXANDER: Maybe that's what it was called, I was thinking in the military it was.

Q: I think it was called that, yes.

ALEXANDER: She had become a consular officer. And a fine woman. Again, tough, she intimidated me, she was extremely demanding and a great boss. I replaced Ralph Johnson and she used to tell me, she said, I feel like, I felt like a mother toward Ralph, with you I feel like a grandmother, you're so young. Ralph and I both, later on in our careers

Library of Congress

became ambassadors and I always said I was very proud of my boys. But she, I learned a lot from her. Others in the embassy were, to be generous, unkind. The admin people were extremely unkind. They were Foreign Service, well the admin officer was a Foreign Service staff officer, a drunk. The GSO was his staff officer. There were a few others who were generally unkind too. There were a lot of class distinctions, even in the small embassy like that. And my being the most junior of juniors, I used to take it in the neck from people like the admin officer who was very resentful because he was treated as a second class citizen. So I immediately get nothing I wanted to get into this world, into that world but I sort of got caught up into that. I tried as much as I could to avoid those tensions and I did to a certain extent because I was considerably younger than everybody else. But I was very conscious of the communicator, I can't remember what they called them in those days, communications or records officer or what they were called, was black, Henry Grant; they made that man's life miserable, absolutely miserable. The econ officer was also a Foreign Service officer; he was unkind but became very kind later but a lot of it had to do with the fact that I was young and the most junior person and easy to pick on and I didn't know anything.

Q: What were you doing while you were there? Obviously consular, did you do consular the whole time?

ALEXANDER: I did consular the whole time. I did visas the whole time and it was a high fraud policy. Everybody wanted to get out of Guyana.

Q: Where were they going?

ALEXANDER: To New York.

Q: New York. How did you, were you able to get away with saying no?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: Yes. In fact we were told at one point that we had the highest refusal rate in the world but Owie was a tough cookie; rules were rules and we weren't going to give those visas.

Q: Did you ever run across Mrs. Jagan, who is an American citizen?

ALEXANDER: I did, once or twice. Janet Jagan. I ran across her through her brother-in-law, through Cheddi's brother, Paul. I became very close friends of Paul and his wife Ena Jagan. Paul was a dentist like Cheddi. In fact, a funny story is that his name was actually Sirpaul, he wasn't Sir Paul but Sirpaul, all running together, but I thought he was Sir Paul. But anyway, I became very good friends with Paul despite his being 20 years older than me, close personal friends, first name basis, dinners at our house all the time and I met Cheddi and Janet at Paul's place on a couple of occasions; they were extremely gracious. Cheddi used to tell me with obvious fondness about his times in the United States. In fact, I remember his telling me one story when he was a young man, this would have been in the early '40s I guess, traveling in the U.S., traveling in the South, that he wore a turban so that he wouldn't be mistaken for a black American and subject to all the horrible racism that blacks suffered in the South in those days.

Q: Did you find through the social life, because the visa side wouldn't have reflected this so much, the tension between what the CIA had done to Jagan and his party?

ALEXANDER: Oh yes, yes, yes definitely. By the time I left, particularly by the time I left two years later, it was clear that Forbes Burnham and his cronies were not taking Guyana in the direction that I think many Guyanese had hoped. It was becoming increasingly a socialist state, so to speak, a one party, one man. Economically they just weren't doing well. The East Indians were, for the most part, shopkeepers, shop owners, small businesspeople, importers, were finding it increasingly difficult to do business as the burden of taxes and import restrictions and other socialist experiments took their toll on the economy and people were becoming increasingly disenchanted with Burnham. They were

Library of Congress

eventually vindicated because Burnham stayed in power literally until he died in 1985. A lot of people began blaming the CIA and the U.S. for the problems that the country was experiencing as a result of having this one party rule.

Q: Well did you have, were you aware of the sort of influence of the CIA and all? Or was that sort of off to one side?

ALEXANDER: No, I was very again, very naive and had never been exposed to anything like that. But by the time I left yes, I saw the influence, the impact of the CIA's machinations in Guyana. But I have to say, there were some things that I found rather repugnant but I very much believed that they were necessary to keep Cheddi Jagan and his party from coming to power because I was convinced that they would have turned Guyana into another Cuba. As I look back on it now with the force of years behind me I don't think that would have happened but at the time I believed that would have happened.

Q: What kept Guyana afloat? I mean, bauxite or some? I don't know.

ALEXANDER: Bauxite and sugar and U.S. aid. Guyana was, when I was there, the third largest recipient, on a per capita basis, the third largest recipient of U.S. aid. We were spending tens of millions of dollars in that country.

Q: Well, if Burnham was keeping us at a distance, were we just sort of swallowing this or what?

ALEXANDER: Yes, we were. I think there was a compact. Listen, you can play whatever silly socialist, Third World, non-aligned games you want to play as long as they're games. In other words, don't do what Fidel did. And I think Burnham understood that, that as long as he didn't replace the Guyanese flag with one that had a hammer and sickle on it. We were very unhappy when he invited the Russians in, the Soviets, and they opened an embassy, extremely unhappy. But he said listen, this is all part of the non-aligned and I have to, if I'm going to play your silly game, I have to pretend at least to be committed

Library of Congress

to the non-aligned. But I think he was very much cut from the same cloth as many Third World, I use the term, not in a pejorative sense just to distinguish former colonies from European and North American countries, as many leaders in the emerging states of Africa and Asia were doing, I think Burnham is pretty much cut from the same cloth. So we tolerated his activities.

Q: Well, what about the British? Did they, it had been their colony. Were they still a pre-eminent embassy?

ALEXANDER: No. The Americans were by far the pre-eminent embassy. The Brits retained some influence among a very small percent of the elites, those who were themselves Sir Somebody or another or who had been decorated by the British, had gone to school there and there was a certain longing for them but no, no. The Brits didn't have the ability or didn't have the interest to project any power in Guyana.

Q: How did your wife cotton to the Foreign Service and this not-luxurious post?

ALEXANDER: Quite well. She taught school there. She claimed to enjoy it very much. Didn't complain about it. No problems there.

Q: How about the social life?

ALEXANDER: Had a pretty good, pretty active social life. We had friends in the British high commission who were young like we were. We had some Guyanese friends who were also in our age group. The Guyanese elite in those days still had money and were able to entertain pleasantly. Everybody had servants. So we managed to keep ourselves amused. It wasn't the most exciting place in the world.

Q: Was there pretty much a class distinction with the blacks sort of the hewers and carriers of wood and all that?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: Yes. The blacks were either in politics because Forbes Burnham was the prime minister or they were pretty much at the bottom of the pecking order. I don't recall ever meeting a wealthy black person in Guyana. Met plenty of wealthy Indians. Upper class Afro-Guyanese were those who generally tended to look longingly and wistfully for the days of empire because they had been given the little decorations and they were the ones who had run the customs service and the police and all that.

Q: I take it Jim Jones hadn't made his, set up Jonestown yet.

ALEXANDER: No, that was after my time.

Q: That was after your, luckily for you.

ALEXANDER: Yes, thank goodness.

Q: Where did Burnham get his support if he was black and the majority were Indian, was it, that he didn't represent, I mean, it was him or Jagan?

ALEXANDER: Yes, pretty much so. Well, he bought support in the Indian community, particularly among the well to do, with certain favors. Since the government controlled the importation, exportation of everything, that certainly gave him some leverage, a lot of leverage. The police force and the Guyanese defense force were overwhelmingly black and so he had the guns. So he didn't really need much in the way of support from the majority population.

Q: Well did you see much of the movers and shakers of the Third World Movement, the non-aligned?

ALEXANDER: I, well much. I was invited to a couple of functions, one where I met Fidel who was, I have to say, a very charming man, tall, he was much taller than I thought, and actually he was a very handsome man, he was a very good looking man, obviously a very

Library of Congress

charismatic man. I met others from Africa, I don't remember who they were now, they all sort of, they all seemed to be cut from the same cloth, literally. Again, I don't say that in a pejorative sense but.

Q: Well then in '73 whither?

ALEXANDER: Norway. Oslo.

Q: Oh boy. What a change.

ALEXANDER: Quite a change, yes.

Q: Was this just an assignment or had you asked for it?

ALEXANDER: Well, I wanted to go to Europe and I said listen, I'm coming out of a 25 percent hardship post, been down here with the snakes and the bugs and no TV and I want to go to Europe. But again, since I didn't know anybody and didn't know anything, I very naively thought I was going to get to go to Paris or, I don't know, Rome or someplace; I wound up going to Oslo. I think pretty much because they had to give me something after Guyana and so they gave me Oslo, which was no prize. But you know, I'd asked for Europe so what could I say?

Q: So you were in Oslo from '73 to?

ALEXANDER: To '75.

Q: '75. Again, no chance really to use your French or your German.

ALEXANDER: No. But because of German I was able to pick up Norwegian. In fact, after my two years there, I didn't go through language training, I tested and managed to get a 3/3 in Norwegian which was for me a pleasant surprise.

Library of Congress

Q: What was the state of affairs in Norway when you were there?

ALEXANDER: Probably pretty much what they are now. Small country, there were a little under 4 million people at the time. They had discovered oil.

Q: Oil was, the North Sea oil was there?

ALEXANDER: Yes, it was beginning to come online then. They still hadn't, they were getting rich but hadn't got there yet since they were just starting that but they had the oil rigs out there and that was pretty much it. The Norwegians skied and pumped oil out of the North Sea there and that was about it. I found them in the main to be boring, harmless, healthy, and physically healthy, food was horrible, it was cold.

Q: Doesn't sound like one almost thinks of, well, it was pretty dark there too, wasn't it?

ALEXANDER: Yes, it was dark six months of the year. And six months of the year, of course, we had a lot of sunshine.

Q: Yes. Who was the ambassador when you were there?

ALEXANDER: My first ambassador was Phillip Crowe, a political appointee, who died shortly after leaving there in '74. He was replaced by Tom Byrne. He was married, I believe, to George Meany's daughter.

Q: Labor leader.

ALEXANDER: Labor leader. A big fellow who subsequently went off to be ambassador of Czechoslovakia and was compromised by the Czech security service, sexual entrapment of all things.

Q: Well, tell me from Guyana how did you find the work? I mean, what were you doing?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: I spent half my tour as consular officer and half my tour as an economic officer.

Q: How did you find, I wouldn't imagine there would be any challenges in consular work, would I?

ALEXANDER: No, but what was fun about consular work there was I got to issue passports to a lot of famous Americans. I met Kirk Douglas, who was there filming a movie. His real name was Issur Danielovitch.

*Q: Probably *The Long Ships* or something.*

ALEXANDER: Yes, I can't remember what the film was but something.

*Q: *The Vikings* or something.*

ALEXANDER: Yes, something like that. He was born in Siberia of all places.

Q: Yes. He came from a-

ALEXANDER: A Russian Jewish family.

*Q: He wrote a book called *The Rag Man's Son*, I think, an autobiography.*

ALEXANDER: But I didn't know this until I got his application. He was a very kind man. I remember he told me about his life and everything, quite fascinating. I met Sean Connery, who was at the height of his James Bond fame; he didn't apply for a passport, obviously because he was a British citizen. Liv Ullmann, the famous Norwegian actress and a few other people. So I liked consular work there. I never met anyone like that in Guyana. But I liked the economic work as well because we had the oil and the oil was important, not only economically but strategically and politically because that's when we had the first of the

Library of Congress

oil shocks, the long gas lines and everything else. Norway being a part of NATO, we were looking to countries like Norway to help offset the influence of the Arabs.

Q: Well what was your estimation and obviously of the embassy of what the oil was doing to these Norwegians?

ALEXANDER: My sense at the time was it was doing little if anything. Taxes were very, very high. The welfare state was very, very deep. The Norwegians themselves seemed to be quite content being the same. Let me be more clear. Having a lot of money, being very bourgeoisie was not something that the average Norwegian seemed to aspire to. In fact, it was almost in bad taste to have a lot of material things. They seemed to be quite content to be able to cross country ski, to heat their homes, raise their families. But I have to say to their credit they were not particularly impressed with flash or money. They seemed to take great pride in being hopelessly middle class. So my sense was that whatever money was coming in as a result of being an oil producer was going to the state and was being used for the greater good, to strengthen, to deepen the welfare state.

Q: Well, were many Norwegian young people going to the United States for higher education or this wasn't a pattern?

ALEXANDER: No, the ones that I knew, very few of them. Those who did go abroad to study went to the UK and for some reason, I seem to recall those who did go to the UK they went actually for high school rather than university. But for the most part, no, they stayed home.

Q: To the north Norway abuts onto the Soviet Union up on a very strategic peninsula. Did that have any repercussions, I mean, was that a factor?

ALEXANDER: We had a listening post in Tromso, way up north. In fact, it was, I understand it was our northernmost Foreign Service post. I never got up that far; most of us didn't, we were not encouraged to go up there. We had a Foreign Service officer

Library of Congress

up there. We were, of course, conscious of our living in a country that actually shared a border with the Soviet Union and we knew that there were activities that took place in the waters in that area but again, I wasn't privy to any of that, absolutely not.

Q: As an economic officer, how did you find the Norwegian bureaucracy? Was it responsive to getting figures and that sort of thing?

ALEXANDER: Yes. I found it was a small country, transparent country, people were very direct. Getting information was not difficult. Again, the only thing that Washington really was interested in was the oil. And since American companies were very much involved in their oil industry, we had access to the information through the American companies as well. So I don't think much was hidden from us.

Q: Our Vietnam problem was coming to an end while you were there. How did that play in Norway?

ALEXANDER: The Norwegians were never as vocal in their opposition to the war as their cousins, the Swedes. When we closed the embassy we took the people off the roof and hauled down the flag and all that. I remember sitting in my living room and also watching all that. The Norwegians I think were quietly pleased because, again, they were a NATO ally, they were a tiny country, they did feel threatened by the Soviets, they did like Americans, they spoke, almost everyone in Norway seemed to have a relative in Minnesota, Wisconsin, someplace. I think the Norwegians were happy and I think they were as much happy for us as anything else, that we no longer were going to have Vietnam hanging around our necks like a stinky, horrible albatross. I think there was just a sigh of relief, finally the nightmare is over. Maybe the Americans can go back to being Americans, whatever that meant to Norwegians. They awarded Henry Kissinger the Nobel Peace Prize, him and his Vietnamese counterpart, for helping to bring the conflict to an end. I was disappointed; I went to the ceremony, the one and only time in my career that I wore tails for an official function. And Kissinger, as you may recall, didn't show in person to

Library of Congress

collect his prize, neither did his Vietnamese counterpart, I can't remember his name now, Tran or something like that. And I think, again, that was a reflection of how the Norwegians and the Nobel Peace committee felt, just happy it was over.

Q: Yes. Did you get any feel for Norwegian diplomacy? Because later they became much more an agent in world diplomacy as a small honest country, good honest broker, a good place to do business. But did you have any feel for that at the time?

ALEXANDER: No, no I didn't. And in fact the sense I had was that Norway still very much considered itself a non-player. It was very much a minor, minor partner of the U.S. and its primary concern was Soviet activity in Norwegian waters and on its border. No, I think in those days Norwegians still pretty much looked to the Swedes to carry water and those great issues of the day and to carry their water on great issues.

Q: Did you get any feel for Swedish-Norwegian relationship that often a lot of jokes on both sides?

ALEXANDER: Yes. The Norwegians, I think, sort of resented the Swedes. They felt like the country cousins of the Swedes. The Norwegians are certainly much more conservatives than the Swedes. The Swedes were known for, among other things, pornography, their porn industry, and that's something that the Norwegians just would not have permitted. They were much more Lutheran. And I think they had generally an inferiority complex when it came to the Swedes. I mean, the Norwegians didn't produce cars; the Swedes produced two, Saab and Volvo, and they had other world class industries that the Norwegians didn't have. So I think the Norwegians were generally intimidated by the Swedes. They admired them and resented them at the same time.

Q: How about relations with the Germans?

ALEXANDER: The Norwegians did not speak much of the Germans. In fact, I used to bring up the Germans periodically and it was like throwing ice water on a party. I think it

Library of Congress

was probably because of Quisling and they just wanted to forget anything to do with the war and anything that might raise the specter of the ghost of Quisling. So it just wasn't a topic of discussion.

Q: Because of oil and other relations, were the Norwegians pretty close to the British do you think?

ALEXANDER: They liked and admired the British. Norwegians spoke, the only country I ever lived in, as a matter of fact, where a majority of people spoke English comfortably. There seemed to be a correlation between how well educated you were and how British you sounded when you spoke English. I met Norwegians who I thought they were British, absolutely. I also met Norwegians, for that matter, who spoke American accented English with no trace of Norwegian accent who'd never been to the U.S. Rather phenomenal. They were very impressive in that regard, but it was a reflection of how they felt about the British. They really liked the British, they admired the British, they dressed like them. I think they looked to the British for a lot of their social cues rather than to the Swedes or to the Danes.

Q: This is tape two, side one with Leslie Alexander. Yes.

ALEXANDER: I was saying the Norwegians, I think, looked to the British for fashion, for cultural cues, things of that sort rather than to the Swedes.

Q: You were saying you found it essentially a very boring place, was it?

ALEXANDER: Yes, I don't think the Norwegians were the type of folks who were going to light up the world, but again, it was intended more as a critique than a criticism. They were honest people, they were serious people, they were people of their word. They had a wry sense of humor. They drank too damned much. And when they drank a lot they were funny. I don't think I ever saw Norwegians fight, even at their worse. I mean, they would

Library of Congress

exchange angry words. They were unpretentious people, but again, they were provincial. They could never be sophisticated and they didn't claim to be terribly cosmopolitan.

Q: Well then, you left there and what? We're talking about?

ALEXANDER: 1975.

Q: 1975 whither?

ALEXANDER: FSI, Polish language training.

Q: Had you asked for this?

ALEXANDER: I asked for either Polish or Japanese. By then I was beginning to feel more comfortable as a Foreign Service officer. I was beginning to unlock the code, so to speak and I was ready to spread my wings a little bit. I also figured it was time for what we called in those days a hard language as opposed to a soft language, so I volunteered for Japanese in part because I had done shotokan, a form of karate, for several years and it was a whimsical thing. Again, I was only 25, 26, 27 so I was allowed to be whimsical. But I wound up being selected for Polish language training and so I came back to FSI, the old FSI, spent 44 weeks suffering through Polish and went off to Cracow or Krakow.

Q: How did you find Polish as being taught and as a language?

ALEXANDER: As a language I found it absolutely utterly bizarre. In seven cases, German had four and people used to complain about that. No, I suffered in Polish. I came out with a 2 plus/2 plus. I didn't come out with a three. I eventually did get my three but not out of language training. But I liked the Poles. They, I said to someone who asked me, well what do you think of the Poles? I hadn't yet been to Poland. I said you know, I have a feeling they're going to turn out to be the Italians of the Eastern bloc: wild and creative. I had very pleasant interaction with the Polish language department, with the language instructors, who I thought were very, very professional, very good and extremely well educated and

Library of Congress

sophisticated people, too sophisticated to be teaching for FSI wages. But again, you know, these were people who, most of whom if not all of whom had fled Poland and, you know, took whatever work they could find to our benefit.

Q: Well I think this is one of the things often forgotten, that the FSI, you pick up an awful lot of the culture of a country from your language teacher. I had two Serb teachers who at one time, I thought they were kind of a little bit Neanderthals and it really came home to me much more after Serbia under Milosevic, I realized that I hardly ever ran across this type of person in my time in Belgrade, but by God they certainly cropped up during the Milosevic time, slaughtering Croats and Bosnians.

ALEXANDER: My Polish language teachers were all university graduates, sophisticated people, very frustrated with Americans and that frustration used to come out often in this classroom. They resented very much Polish jokes, they resented this notion, this stereotype of Poles of being stupid, you know, how many Poles does it take to screw in a light bulb. They used to point out all the time, you know, we're the nation of Chopin, of Copernicus, you know, we're not a bunch of uneducated dolts. And you know, if you know the history of Poland, if you know the history of your own country, they used to tell us in the United States, you would know that those who left Europe, whether Poland, Italy or wherever, were peasants. Obviously if you were a member of the intelligentsia or the bourgeoisie you weren't going to emigrate; why would you? Several million Polish peasants went to Chicago or wherever. But that doesn't mean that those who stayed behind, just like in Italy, were somehow better. They railed against the characterization of Poles.

Q: Within a very short time when Pope John Paul II came as pope, as Polish pope, really the Polish jokes went out. But until that time, the Poles were the designated people you could make fun of. You couldn't do it with Irish, certainly couldn't do it with the Jews or the blacks anymore because these were politically incorrect.

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: Exactly.

Q: *Well, you went to Poland. Probably maybe a good place to stop, I think. You went to Poland from when to when?*

ALEXANDER: 1976 to 1977.

Q: *'76 to '77. You went to what, Poznan?*

ALEXANDER: To Cracow.

Q: *Krakow. Cracow.*

ALEXANDER: Well, in Polish Cracow, Krakow auf Deutch in German.

Q: *Okay. We'll pick it up anyway, '77.*

Alright. Today is the 20th of October, 2005. Leslie, it's, 1976, what was Cracow like at the time you got there?

ALEXANDER: Grey but yet beautiful, beautiful because of the architecture. Grey because the communists and the coal soot which seemed to be everywhere, all over southern Poland. There was a sense of despair. I think the Poles were worn out, tired of the regime, tired of the pressure from the Soviets to conform. I just had a feeling that I was living in a town that was just tired. There wasn't much mirth, there wasn't much gaiety, there wasn't, there just wasn't much light.

Q: *What sort of government did the Poles have?*

ALEXANDER: Well, it was a communist regime, pretty much like any at that time in Eastern Europe, modeled on the Russian or the Soviet government: repressive, paranoid, totally unresponsive to the people. I used to joke that the irony, these countries were

Library of Congress

called workers' paradises. You'll recall, whether you were speaking of Bulgaria or Czechoslovakia, Poland, what have you, they were all paradises for the worker and I always found it amusing and terribly ironic that the Polish word for worker was, or is nenedvodnik, robotnik, and I said that seems to be quite suitable, the notion of what a workers' paradise should be, or is.

Q: Was it a consulate or a consulate general?

ALEXANDER: At that time it was a consulate. We had two consulates, Poznan and Krakow and also the embassy. There were only three of us. There was myself, a first tour officer, a consular officer and a BPAO, a USIS (United States Information Service) officer.

Q: So you were in charge?

ALEXANDER: No, actually, when I arrived the USIS officer was in charge.

Q: Oh. Who was that?

ALEXANDER: Peter Bichkahasky. Hungarian American. Like myself he was born in Germany after the war. We were the same age. Peter was a superb linguist, terrific linguist and a very charming man, the Poles liked him very, very much.

Q: What were you doing?

ALEXANDER: Well, the consulate, we were flying the flag essentially. We were a presence in that part of Poland that had traditionally provided the most immigrants to the U.S. So we were a presence, we were there to more or less to be a thorn in the side of the Soviets, to offer up another vision, however limited our resources were to do that. We did some visa services because there were Poles who had relatives in the U.S. who wanted to visit, most of them didn't qualify for visas because it was quite clear that they were intending immigrants. Other than that we would occasionally sponsor some sort of cultural event, just try to make our presence felt. I spent a lot of time running around the

Library of Congress

countryside in our consular district looking at factories and other things without much of a mandate to do any kind of economic or commercial work, which was my specialization, and the occasional political reporting. We were just a small, small post.

Q: I've heard somebody who served in Poland around that time was convinced that there must have been at least three dedicated communists within Poland at the time. Was there a disaffection from communism for the most part?

ALEXANDER: There was a widespread disaffection; some of it was political, some of it was economic, economic to the degree that the system wasn't providing what people wanted. In fact, being in a small consulate in southern Poland, as opposed to being in a large embassy in Warsaw, we were reminded almost on a daily basis of what it was like to be a Pole because we actually had rationing cards. We, again unlike the embassy, we had to buy our food locally for the most part and we were restricted in what we could get our hands on. I'm not going to say we suffered, we didn't, we were inconvenienced. But that experience, waiting in line to buy sugar, waiting in line to buy fresh fruit, when they had it, gave me or gave us I should say, a small sense of the *vie coutigiene*, the everyday life of the average Pole. So yes, the Poles were disaffected, they were angry, they were angry as hell.

The Catholic Church, which flourished, wasn't an alternative to the regime but it was certainly a, well I don't know what it was. It wasn't a political institution; the church is and was the church. It was a source of inspiration, a source of strength for a nation that again, I would characterize as tired, worn out, deceived, angry. I, however, my very strong sense was that there were still quite a few people who were committed to the regime, more than a few toadies, people who benefited from the regime, benefited handsomely with very nice homes and privileges. The secret police apparatus was enormous. I'm sure it numbered in the tens of thousands if not the hundreds of thousands. Certainly the party and its officials and its stooges was large. Again, I don't have numbers, I don't know if any of us did. But the suggestion that the regime was propped up by a few hundred or a few thousand or

Library of Congress

even a hundred thousand people I think is, misses the mark. Of the 30 million Poles, I'm sure three, four, five million of them were devoted to the system. They might not have been convinced communists but they, again, were part of the regime and they benefited.

Q: What about the ideology of Marxism? There is a difference between being part of a political party and getting all the benefits and then believing in the ideology.

ALEXANDER: No. Again, I don't have numbers. If there were three million people in the party, three might have really believed it, you know, in Marxism.

Q; By this time it had pretty well run its course as far as the true believers I think.

ALEXANDER: Yes, I think that, again, I was there in the mid '70s, they had already invaded Hungary and put down the '56 uprising, '68 in Prague and even in Poland, there were occasional outbreaks that had to be putdown, outbreaks of popular discontent. So I don't think anyone in Poland really believed in the system.

Q: What about the role of the Catholic Church?

ALEXANDER: Well, the role of the church was enormous. Most Poles were practicing Catholics, unusual when you consider that in France, another predominantly Catholic country, maybe one of every four or five Frenchmen went to church on a regular basis in the '70s. I would say that 65 percent of the Poles attended church fairly regularly. The archbishop of Krakow where I was stationed was an enormously popular figure, and went on to become Pope. In fact, the first time I met him was skiing just south of Krakow in Zakopane. He was dressed up in a ski outfit that looked like something from a 1930s Hollywood movie with the long wooden skis and the short pants. And a Polish gentleman I knew said, "Would you like to meet the archbishop?" And I said, "Yes, are we going to do this next week, Monday?" "No, right now, would you like to meet him?" I said, "But we're skiing." He said, "Yeah, well he's skiing too, he's right over there." And I said, "No, you're kidding me." And sure enough, it was him. He was a very, very stocky, powerfully built

Library of Congress

man. You could tell he was probably, well in fact he was an athlete. I think it was that kind of activity, seeing the archbishop skiing around, that endeared him very much to the Poles and the priests were, for the most part, widely respected, admired. They were courageous. Many of them were persecuted by the regime. The Poles looked to them as the voice, the vision of an honest, free Poland and I think the church took on a significance in Poland that it hadn't had in generations in Europe.

Q: How about the security forces, secret police and all that? Did you get harassed or were you aware of them or?

ALEXANDER: I have to laugh at that question. I was harassed, yes. Yes. On more than one occasion. I smile though, because the person I replaced was assaulted shortly after arriving at post, reportedly by a drunk. He was struck a few times; he wasn't hurt seriously but it shook him up. I learned after leaving post that the person who came after me suffered a similar incident, again a drunk. I never had that problem. I'm convinced that one reason why was because shortly after arriving, I may have mentioned this already, I met a fellow who had a karate dojo and I had been doing karate for several years and I asked whether I could go to the dojo and work out and he said I'd be honored. So I went. This was within five days of my arrival in Krakow, five or six days, during which time the secret police were peering through the windows and everything else. Well, to make a long story short, I think they realized that the likelihood, the probability of a casual drunk beating me up was rather slight and it would have been clear to everyone that, well no, this wasn't a casual incident, this was a deliberate move on their part and I don't think they wanted that provocation. Moreover, I think they also realized well wait a minute, if we're going to go and shake him up we're going to really do it and we'll probably need more than one person and that gets a little bit, that takes it to a different level and we don't want to go there. So I didn't, I wasn't physically harassed. But I certainly was mentally harassed.

My marriage broke up there in part because of the stress, the tension of living in a very small post with very little support from the embassy. Again, we had no commissary at

Library of Congress

post or anything of that sort. I remember coming back from a trip to West Germany with my wife and our daughter, who was a little over a year old at the time and we got home and I walked in the door and within a minute or two she started screaming, yelling and she was in the bedroom and I ran back to the bedroom and I said what's wrong, what's wrong? She said they've been through my things, they've been through my things. And she could sense that they had gone through all of our things, all of her underclothing and she felt violated. This wasn't the first time that this had happened. They used to do this kind of thing periodically; they would break into our residence and rifle through and do things and they would let us know that they had done it in somewhat subtle ways. And it worked on you because it gave you, you know, if you don't feel safe in your home, if you don't feel that you can leave your home without someone going in there and rifling your things, you know, it's, psychologically it's very unsettling. We had no Marine security guard or any kind of security guard and they could do this kind of thing with absolute impunity and they did. Of course, we were followed. Poles that we knew were harassed and asked questions and asked to spy on us. We had a nanny for our young daughter who was the daughter of a professor at the university, a very sweet young woman, Vojenna her name was, I still remember her name for some reason, and she came to us after a few months and said that she was going to have to leave. And we said are you unhappy, is it the pay? She said no, no, I'm very, very happy, you're nice people but my dad is just getting it, you know, taking it in the neck every day, you know, they're pressuring him to pressure me to report on you, to spy on you and we don't want to do that kind of thing. So she left. And all of these things added up, the weight of all this was such that it just, my wife just packed it in and just said I'm leaving and left post, which is one of the reasons why I didn't finish my full tour there, it was a short tour anyway, it would have been two years in those days, but I did over a little over a year and said the heck with it.

Q: Were they trying to use female lures or not?

ALEXANDER: No, no, well, Peter was married, the USIS officer was married. I don't think they ever used that kind of lure with him. Mike, the junior officer, Mike Fick, never reported

Library of Congress

to me, anyway, that he was being in any way approached by beautiful young women. It didn't happen to me because I was married. But one of the reasons I wanted to leave post after my wife left was I didn't want to stick around and wait for that to happen. I thought, you know, why get set up?

Q: We all remember some years ago, but I'm older than you are, the Starbeck case. That was one in Warsaw where a Foreign Service officer was compromised and actually went to jail.

ALEXANDER: Well, I know of cases. Again, I'm speaking of the three of us who were in Krakow at the time. But I know of cases of other officers who were approached. I won't name names, but someone here from FSI who was visiting the post was caught in a compromising position. So I know they did this kind of thing but for whatever reason it didn't seem to happen to us. I have a very strong sense that had I stayed on at post it probably would have.

Q: Well I'm sure that, you know, Agent 305 would have been assigned to you as soon as your wife left.

ALEXANDER: No, they did sic somebody on me but it was a guy, a guy to play tennis who was ostensibly the son of a government minister, sort of a well to do kind of guy. In fact, I can't even recall now how I met this fellow who was about my age but it was clear to me after running into him twice at two different functions that, ah, this is my handler. It was a fascinating time, you know, to live in. Well, at that time of my career, I mean, the Cold War was the overarching strategy, policy. Well, it wasn't our policy to have the Cold War but it was the major problem that confronted us. It was the issue of the day much as terrorism is today. And to live in the Soviet bloc, to interact with it, you know, up close and personal, so to speak, was an experience that I welcomed because it gave me a real sense of why we were doing what we were doing globally. This wasn't something esoteric or imagined,

Library of Congress

contrived. It was very real. After living in Poland it was clear to me that the West had to defend itself against a regime that was totally perverted.

Q: Was there a, I'm sure there was a University of Krakow, wasn't there?

ALEXANDER: The Jagiellonian University. Very old university.

Q: Was this a place that you could go to or was this of interest to us? You know, what were the students up to and all?

ALEXANDER: We could have gone to the university and occasionally we did. I was asked on one or two occasions to go and address the students; not all of them but groups. It's sort of a strange, strange relationship we had with the university. On the one hand they were curious and we were curious. We needed each other yet at the same time we had to be careful that we didn't compromise them; they had to be careful that they didn't get compromised by spending too much time with us and therefore being accused of being less than loyal to the state. So it wasn't an easy relationship. It was a warm relationship but it wasn't as close as it might have been had there been a different form of government. In fact, I think the relationship we had with the university paralleled the relationship we had with Poles in general, Polish friends and contacts in general. You wanted to spend some time with them, yet at the same time you had to be careful that you didn't put them in a difficult situation and they had to be careful, again, of not being accused of somehow being agents of the Yankee imperialists. So it wasn't always a smooth relationship.

Q: Did you have much dealings with people from Krakow West, in other words Chicago?

ALEXANDER: A few. We had a couple of Polish American congressmen come through the area. I remember meeting Barbara Mikulski who was a very impressive young congresswoman at the time, now a very senior senator. Senator George McGovern, who was not, I don't believe, Polish or didn't have Polish ancestors, but passed through Krakow but for the most part we didn't get many visitors, official or private. I do remember very

Library of Congress

well a visit from a grand rabbi from New York. Voldhandler his name was. That's funny, I hadn't thought of him for many, many years. Rabbi Voldhandler came through and asked for assistance. He was trying to document, clean up, preserve, rescue, save as many Jewish cemeteries as he could, principally the big Jewish cemetery in Krakow and then a few others in the consular district. They had fallen into disrepair, neglect; the communists certainly had no interest whatsoever in maintaining or saving the cemeteries and the Poles in general didn't seem to be interested in that. So he came to me and said he was getting nowhere with the authorities, they wouldn't give him the time of day and was there anyway I could help him. I said well, being the American consul they're not terribly interested in helping me either but I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you a very official looking document which says basically nothing but it'll sure look impressive. And I took the red ribbon and a red consular seal, signed it and basically I took language very similar to what's on the inside of a U.S. passport saying will you please give this person any and all assistance that you can, you know, consistent with your laws and international obligations and a lot of fancy words. But the document looked impressive as hell. We put it on thick bond paper. And so I gave it to him and he says, yeah well, let's try this. Well I'll be doggone, he came back a week later and he said, Mr. Consul, he says, I cannot thank you enough, I went back to some of the same places, they gave me the same nasty reception until I whipped out your thing and they were so impressed that they began to cooperate with me. So I guess he was able to get a lot of things done. He is about the only person, though, other than the senator and the congressman, that I recall coming through.

Q: Well, did you get any feeling, or was this just a non-subject for the Poles, about the Holocaust there? Because many of the Poles have the reputation of being quite anti-Semitic, so this was not the cause that we in the United States felt about it. Did this come up much or not?

ALEXANDER: It did. In fact, it did. I was frequently told by Poles that they helped the Jews and they didn't understand why the Jews resented them and accused them of not having helped them to escape or hide from the Nazis. I think it was almost a case of thinking

Library of Congress

that they were protesting a little too much. Because after a few vodkas it wasn't unusual, I won't say it was common, but it was not unusual to hear some rather pronounced anti-Semitic statements and a lot of anger at this perception that many Poles seemed to have that the Jews were accusing them of somehow collaborating or being indifferent to their plight. I have to say, despite having a Polish sister-in-law that I do think that a lot of Poles did not like the Jews. I have no reason to believe that any Pole ever aided and abetted the Nazis in anything.

I certainly am going to defend the Poles here 100 percent. I think that they were somewhat less concerned about what was happening to them. So, it might very well be that the Jewish anger at the Poles is not without some foundation. I guess it might be the difference between having committed crimes of commission and crimes of omission and if I were to use such a strong word as crime, because it wasn't the Poles who set up these extermination camps, we have to remember that it was the Germans. After all, I would say that they were guilty of crimes of omission. And you know, in point of fact that's not a crime. So it's a shame because both the Polish Catholics and Polish Jews suffered, I think, equally. We have to remember that, too. We don't use the word holocaust when describing what happened to the other Poles but in point of fact there, we know what happened, their officers being slaughtered by the Russians, in the forest. And the Germans certainly killed hundreds of thousands of Poles for being Poles. So I think the misery that was visited upon the Polish nation was so broad and widespread that whether Catholic or Jewish, I think that the Poles suffered enormously and I think that they deserve our sympathy.

Q: Well now, you mentioned the slaughter of Polish officers in the Katyn, I may be mispronouncing the word, Forest. This was done by the Soviets?

ALEXANDER: It was done by the Soviets, yes, yes.

Q: What were you picking up from the fraternal brothers, the Russians, from the Poles, how did they view them?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: How did the Russians view the Poles?

Q: I mean, how did the Poles that you met, did they-

ALEXANDER: View the Russians?

Q: Did they talk about the Russians?

ALEXANDER: Yes. Obviously they didn't speak openly about the Russians. I think in the main the Poles were totally contemptuous of the Russians. Disliked them enormously, wanted them to go home, resented their presence. There was absolutely no love lost there. I had a couple of Russian diplomats complain to me about the Poles, how they weren't loyal and faithful to the cause, which I found a little ironic.

Q: Was there much of a Soviet military presence around where you were?

ALEXANDER: No. Well, let's put it this way: there wasn't an obvious Soviet presence. The Soviets, at least in southern Poland, particularly in my consular district, made it a point of keeping their soldiers bivouacked outside of the major towns so you didn't see them in Krakow or some of the larger cities. In fact, I rarely saw a Soviet military presence in southern Poland. I know it was there, we all knew it was there, obviously, but you didn't see the troops. You saw many, many more American GIs in West Germany.

Q: Yes.

ALEXANDER: I saw a much greater American presence in Germany than I ever saw a Soviet presence in Poland.

Q: The Soviet combat troops essentially were posted in East Germany and it was a service of supply in Poland which of course made the Soviets very nervous because they had this restive population sitting on top of their supply lines.

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: Yes. Even driving through East Germany, which I did maybe five times, on the old autobahn from Poland through East Germany to Austria or to the other border crossing into West Germany. I can't remember what it was called now, even there I rarely saw Soviet military people, but certainly in Poland almost never.

Q: Well then, was there a Soviet consulate in Krakow?

ALEXANDER: There was a Russian Soviet consulate in Krakow. You frequently saw the Russian consul general in the company of local party officials, cutting ribbons for the John Vladimir Lenin, Paper Factory or something. What kind of life they had privately, in other words when they weren't performing their official duties, I cannot say; I never saw them in the few restaurants that we frequented. Certainly they didn't travel in the same social circles that I did. I saw them at official functions hosted by the local governor, the mayor or something like that. We'd smile, we'd exchange a few words, a few pleasantries and that was it.

Q: Well then, you left there slightly early.

ALEXANDER: Yes, yes I did.

Q: Did you have any problem saying my wife has left and so I want to get out?

ALEXANDER: No, absolutely none. There was a policy, I think there was a policy that was in force for all of Eastern Europe, if you wanted to come home they would bring you home. In fact I had heard, and I believe it was true, if you had gotten yourself in a situation you had asked earlier about female lures or something or another, and not to be sexist, I say female lures because we're so few female officers in those days if you somehow did get yourself compromised they had a policy: "Listen, come to us, tell us, we'll get you out of here immediately. Don't let yourself get compromised, you cannot get compromised if we know it and they know that we know; they can only compromise you if you're trying to keep it hidden." I would imagine, I can't tell you because no one ever admitted to such things,

Library of Congress

but people probably left under those circumstances as well. I left because I didn't want to leave under that circumstance; I wanted to go before that happened. And you know, on a very personal level, if I was going to save my marriage I couldn't have stayed on. As it turns out, I didn't save my marriage but I didn't know that at the time but I would have asked to leave anyway.

Q: Well then happened in '77 when you left?

ALEXANDER: I came back to Washington. Since I left nine or 10 months before my tour was over there was no ready assignment waiting, so I came back to Washington and I took a job as the chief of the written inquiries branch of the visa office. I took that job because it was about the only thing that was available and it was actually a supervisory job. I had a staff of maybe 10 or 12 people, which at that time in my career was a first. I wasn't thrilled about being in the visa office, so I did that for five or six months and then I negotiated another job, again in Washington, in what was a small office in what was then part of the secretariat, it was S/NM, which amused me and everybody else, but it was narcotics matters. That little office eventually became what is now the bureau of drugs and thugs, but it started as a small office on the seventh floor reporting directly to the secretary. It was a special advisor with a small staff.

Q: Well let's talk quickly about the visa side. There must be a deluge of letters about visas.

ALEXANDER: Thousands. Thousands. Every month we handled thousands and thousands of letters.

Q: You know there's one thing about just writing and say well, we'll certainly look into your case. But I mean, if somebody wrote in, did something happen other than to get a routine letter back?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: Oh yes, absolutely. We actually wrote individual letters to every single person who wrote to us. Much of the language was stock because 99 percent of the letters were “why did you turn down my,” and fill in the blanks, “brother, sister, cousin, aunt ...”

I assume that section still exists intending immigrants. They didn't have compelling ties or didn't have strong ties. You know, 20 years old, single, no job, the consul felt... But occasionally we would get extremely politically cases. One that I remember on my watch was this rock group, the Sex Pistols, a punk rock group. There were thousands of letters written saying do not give these people a visa or why did you give them a visa because they were offensive in the extreme.

Q: This was a British rock group.

ALEXANDER: A British rock group. In fact, the reason why I remember this so well was that we were deluged with letters saying, “we understand these folks want to come and tour the U.S., do not give them visas. They're nasty, dirty, vile creatures.” The Sex Pistols got a visa, they came to the States and one of them, Sid Vicious I think it was, murdered his girlfriend under the influence of drugs while he was here. Well, we received twice as many letters after, from people saying “we told you so, and why did you give these people a visa.” I mean, the outrage was really astounding. We had to answer these letters. And, of course, there was a congressional inquiry. So there were cases, that's a rather dramatic one but, there were others, for example, involving the Dalai Lama or other people who wanted visas, couldn't get them, shouldn't get them, should get them. There's certainly a very political dimension to visa work which I didn't fully appreciate until I spent a few months in the visa office.

Q: It was very good exposure for somebody who, for when you reached the higher ranks and understanding that often you have a visa operation going on in the embassy to which officers other than counselor officers paid little attention to. But you understand that this can be an explosive situation.

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: You're absolutely, absolutely correct. You're correct in every sense, not only about the visas and they're being possibly potentially explosive but officers being indifferent to the visa operation. I had colleagues, political, economic officers who were absolutely contemptuous of consular work and consular problems. They took pride in never having done consular work or very little of it. My time in the visa office made me very aware of how important the function was. As a result, when I became chief of mission myself, one of the very first things I did was to go down to the consular section, which was often in a separate building because we really did treat them as second class citizens; I would go to the consular section and sit on the visa line with those visa officers and spend two or three, four hours. I didn't interview the applicants, obviously, but I sat there and I would ask the consular officer questions, why did you turn that person down and why did you give that person a visa but not in an inquisition type of fashion. I mean, they understood I was asking out of curiosity, I wanted to be educated, I wasn't challenging their decisions. The junior officers loved this, I mean, they were excited: "my God, the ambassador is sitting here with us on a visa line." But I felt that I had to do it, number one to give support to those people who I think are the unsung heroes of the embassy. They had the toughest job, and still do, of anyone in the embassy, or almost anyone in the embassy. So I wanted to give them, to let them know that, "hey, you're not forgotten even though we've put you off in a separate building," or something else, and "I do appreciate what you're doing. I also want to know the dynamics of who was trying to go to the United States and where the problems areas were because whether we like it or not, 95 percent of all foreigners and Americans who come in contact with a Foreign Service post come in contact with consular officers."

Q: It's the public face of-

ALEXANDER: It's the public face of diplomacy.

Q: Yes.

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: And it's the ugliest face we have. And whether you're the Secretary of State, in fact, especially if you're the Secretary of State, I hate to say it, we don't pay any attention to that function. We go ahead and we create this office of public diplomacy and we send people off to try to sell the good story and 95 percent of the people that are coming in contact with us on a daily basis, foreign and U.S. citizens, we just blow the opportunity to put our best foot forward. Yes, we can't do things for people when they want us to do things. Their expectations are often not realistic, but there are ways to handle that. I know when I was a consular officer Americans would come into me and say "well, what do you mean you don't have money to give me?" I would tell them, "listen, where are you from?" "I'm from Texas." "Okay, if you were in New York and you were robbed and you lost your money, what would you do?" "Well, I'd call my relatives in Texas and ask them to send me money." "Oh, okay, here's the phone, let's do that." "Oh, I hadn't thought of that." In other words there are ways to deal with these problems. And people left happy. They would call their relatives. I would rather spend 10 dollars of the government's money on a phone call than spend 100 dollars or 200 dollars or 500 dollars holding their hand, having to go and see them, repatriating them, whatever the case may be. The point is that we can do, I think, a far better job of selling ourselves, but for some strange reason we just don't.

Q: I'm concerned, and I'm sure you are too I'm a consular officer by profession-

ALEXANDER: Oh, I didn't know that.

Q: No, but I mean, I was consul general in four places. But I'm concerned today about how we're treating applicants from Islamic countries. I mean, we've got real terrorist concerns in screening, but are we being polite in doing this and making real efforts to show that this is not a hostile atmosphere? I'm dubious.

ALEXANDER: Well, again, I don't know, but if I were the ambassador to Pakistan or any Muslim country I would certainly want to go down and sit on the visa line and get a sense of what's going on. Are we treating these people correctly? Again, if the ambassador,

Library of Congress

the DCM and senior post management is not aware of this you invite mistreatment. I'm not suggesting that consular officers mistreat people, but if that's the inclination, you do certainly make it easier by keeping the consular folks as far away from you as possible which again, I hate to say it, we do all too often.

Q: Well, then you moved over to the part of the secretariat that was dealing with, what? With criminal activities?

ALEXANDER: No, at that time it was strictly narcotics. It was an office that was created in response to Mexican brown heroin. Vietnam was over, the war had ended a year or two before, but a lot of the GIs came back with a habit and drugs were just running rampant. I'm not blaming the GIs coming back from Vietnam, but it was part of the phenomena. Drugs were found everywhere, or were being used to a degree on a scale that no one ever imagined and all of a sudden we woke up to the fact that most of these drugs, almost all of them, were being manufactured outside the United States and imported into the country, and someone said, maybe we ought to start looking at this as a diplomatic problem as well as an enforcement issue. This office was set up to advise the Secretary and to coordinate with foreign governments to the extent that such things were being done in the time when possible assistance, aid and, the idea was to raise the issue from one of strictly legal, criminal to diplomatic, political level. So, and Mexico was probably the catalyst, because most of the heroin that was coming into the U.S. from Mexico. We were having so many border problems, so this office was set up. It expanded while I was there, in fact became a bureau shortly before I left.

Q: You were there from when to when?

ALEXANDER: I was there from February or March of 1978 until January of 1980; almost two years.

Library of Congress

Q: What sort of things was your office concentrating on at that time? I mean, say with Mexico?

ALEXANDER: I was the program officer for Mexico. That was by far the largest overseas drug program we had. We were funding the program to the tune of some \$80 million, which, in 1978, was a staggering amount of money. We were essentially trying to eradicate the poppy fields and, to a lesser extent, the marijuana fields. It was the marijuana eradication that got most of the attention because we were using an herbicide called paraquat that started the paraquat scare across college campuses in the U.S. and became quite the issue of the day. I don't think there was a week that went by that there wasn't a story in The Washington Post or The New York Times suggesting that the youth of America were being poisoned by paraquat on their marijuana. We were sued by a group called NORML which was the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws. I was interviewed by everybody from Rolling Stone magazine to the Wall Street Journal and The New York Times. It was rather amusing in a way. Our principle project was eradicating the poppy fields. We, the State Department, got involved in something which we had never done before. We essentially built an air force comprised of helicopters and fixed wing aircraft. We pioneered new aerial spraying techniques. We paid the Agriculture Department to do experiments with different types of herbicides. We were looking to have minimal environmental impacts, minimal health impacts. We were paying certain agencies to develop programs that we could use to spot cultivation of drug crops from the air, and a lot of this stuff was brand new. The technology didn't exist and I find it interesting to look at what we do today in Colombia and realize that hey, you know, you're responsible for the program that's in place there, you know, you and your colleagues pioneered this stuff and you know, it's been refined over the years but the basic program was started back then.

Q: How did you come up with these programs? I mean, just a small group sitting around saying hey, we got to figure out a way to do this? Could you contract this? How did you operate?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: Basically as you just suggested. We were a very small group, a handful of people who didn't really know much about this field. We had some old, and I don't mean old age-wise; well, yes, actually they were older than me, I was a kid, I was in my 20s, these guys were in their 40s and 50s. We had some old AID public safety types who were onboard with us and we had some liaison officers from DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) from Customs, but basically a handful of people sit around a table and say, "well, you know, how are we going to approach this problem and what are we going to do?" There were so few of us, and this was so new, that despite my being at the time an old FS5, which today would be an FS3-

Q: Yes, which would be defined by, let's say a captain.

ALEXANDER: Yes, maybe something like that, yes, around that level, I'm not sure a captain, between a captain and a major maybe or something. The point is, I was pretty doggone junior, especially so when you consider that, I mean, Secretary Vance called me down to his office and the two of us sat there and I ran through what I was doing, what my program was doing, with the secretary of state. And anyone who knows the State Department knows that FS3s, in today's grading system don't sit down with the Secretary of State one-on-one for more than five seconds. To sit there for a half an hour or an hour, just you and the Secretary was, I think, well, it was a reflection of just how small the office was, but also how concerned he was. I even got a note from the president once. I did some night reading on something, I can't remember the issue, but I got back a nice little note from President Carter saying keep up the good work. Again, I was an FS3; FS3s don't get personal notes from the president. They don't have, again, one-on-ones with the Secretary but I did. I took a chance when I went into this office because it was a new office. It wasn't a geographic bureau. My friends, my contemporaries said no, no, it's too out of mainstream, this drug thing, you're going to ruin your career and blah, blah, blah. I shared those concerns, but I also saw it as an opportunity to get involved in something on the ground level; something that I sensed was going to get bigger rather than smaller;

Library of Congress

more important rather than less important. It was a gamble, particularly in those days where, again, the State Department was still pretty traditionally tied to political reporting, economic reporting; you serve in Europe and you do this kind of stuff but you don't do drugs and you don't do global issues and population, environment; those were just not things to do. I'm glad I did it because I think that's where my career began to separate from those that I came into the service with.

Q: What was the Mexican response to what we were trying to do?

ALEXANDER: I felt that the response was astoundingly positive. The degree of cooperation with the Mexicans, when I compare it to the relationship between the two countries today, was absolutely first class. The Mexicans took this issue as seriously as we did. They threw resources at it. Yes, there was corruption on their side but they tried to assign elite units to the problem to go out and actually eradicate the poppy fields manually where we couldn't do it with the helicopters, and round up the traffickers. My day-to-day contact was the assistant attorney general of Mexico, who was a young guy not much older than me. In fact, the Mexicans and the Americans in the embassy used to tease us, because we even looked a little bit alike. We had a great, great relationship. Fernando Viesa is his name. His boss, the attorney general, was the same way. He would fly out with us on the helicopters and see what we were doing and we even got shot down once.

Q: What happened?

ALEXANDER: We were flying over a poppy field, I think it was in Sinaloa Province, I'm pretty sure it was Sinaloa Province. I flew out so many times that I can't remember every trip, but a couple of guys popped up out of nowhere as we were hovering over one of these fields and started unloading their weapons, discharging their weapons, firing at us. They put some rounds into the helicopter and we had to come down with a hard landing. There was a nasty little firefight that ensued, during which two or three people were killed. Anyway, for the Mexicans it was dangerous work. They did get killed, but I think they were

Library of Congress

as committed to it as we were. What happened over the years; the mutual recriminations and things, may have contributed in large part to where we are now. I'm not saying that the Mexicans don't cooperate, but the trafficking part doesn't seem to have improved. The production side has. To the best of my knowledge the Mexicans aren't in the business anymore or certainly not on the scale that they were of producing brown heroin.

Q: How were relations with the DEA and the enforcement agencies? Frequently the DEA wants to go in and do things in a foreign country which the foreign country says "wait a minute don't you do it, we'll do it ourselves." There's this built in tension, but at this point, how did you find it?

ALEXANDER: The tension existed then. The dynamic wasn't much different than it is today, I would imagine, but I think attitudes were different. There really was a feeling in those days that America was at war, that we were drowning in drugs. It was a national epidemic and people were afraid, they were frightened. There was a sense in government that we had to address this and we had to win this war or it would be the death of us, literally. I don't know whether it was the Carter administration, or not, but the personalities, while strong, were not combative. I would have to go back and ask the person who became assistant secretary what her sense was, but my recollection was that we had very good inter-agency cooperation, DEA, CIA, Pentagon, all the folks involved. I mean, we had our occasional turf battles, sure, and there were missteps. You know, the DEA was an enforcement agency and they had to go and get the bad guys and things, sometimes things happened and the Mexicans would get upset but we usually would defend the DEA and my recollection was, more often than not, they behaved appropriately and if they stepped on a few toes they weren't stepping on our toes and they were to be defended. So I would say that the cooperation was good and the relationship was good.

Q: Going back to what you said previously, what would you say the true story about paraquat was? I mean, were we lacing campus marijuana with-

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: The paraquat in the marijuana? No. This was a lot of hype. In point of fact paraquat, it's still used today. You probably, if not you, certainly your neighbors, use it on their weeds. It has commercial names like Round Up and it's a well known herbicide that's been around forever that doesn't leech into the soil. Again, I'm not a scientist and I don't have shares in this so I'm not going to carry water for these folks, but our sense in those days was that this was about as safe a herbicide as we had in the inventory. Despite what we were told by the manufacturer, I used to go out to Beltsville to the USDA lab to see personally, and we did all kinds of tests to see if the effects on marijuana were not going to contribute to some pandemic health crisis.

Q: Well my gosh, in particular in the era when we were coming out of Vietnam and Agent Orange was a major issue.

ALEXANDER: Yes, yes. This was not an Agent Orange issue and it did not do what the defenders of marijuana smokers were purporting that it did and certainly enough time has gone by now, 30 years, that we know that yes, it was, as we suspected, a good, safe herbicide. It killed the plant so quickly that the probability of paraquat tainted marijuana getting into the marijuana supply was negligible. Regardless, the ingredients of marijuana without the paraquat were so much more noxious and dangerous than the paraquat that the argument was a silly one to begin with.

Q: How did you find our embassy in Mexico City responded to this?

ALEXANDER: Oh, I thought they were terrific, absolutely phenomenal. The folks that they had working this issue for the State Department, for DEA, Customs, and the other agencies were absolutely some of the best officers I ever worked with. Joe McLaughlin, Caesar Bernal, who was a Mexican America, old, old family, they'd been in Texas for 200 years; those two guys were magnificent. They had terrific relationship with the Mexicans, the ambassador respected and admired them, heeded their counsel. They frequently

Library of Congress

came to Washington to brief congressional staffers. These guys were great, absolutely great.

Q: You mentioned you met with Secretary Vance. What was his interest in this?

ALEXANDER: State had just taken over this role, this international narcotics role and so I think he wanted to know, basically, at least from me, specifics about the Mexican program: what were we trying to do and why were we doing it the way we were doing it, was there anything that the president should know? He had seen, you know, reading the press and listening to the news and all the uproar about the paraquat, and was interested in what I thought. I was actually surprised at amount that he seemed to know or how closely he'd been following this issue. It was obviously of great concern in the administration.

Q: Who was your supervisor, who was the head of your unit?

ALEXANDER: The senior advisor who later became the assistant secretary was Mathea Falco, a young woman in her mid 30s, extremely impressive woman who had come, I believe, from the Hill. She had been a Hill staffer. Her deputy was Ed Corr, a Foreign Service officer who had been, the ambassador to Peru or went out as the ambassador to Peru, I can't remember now. They were my senior bosses.

Q: So, although it was a very small group it had some senior clout.

ALEXANDER: Yes. Yes, we did, in part because we didn't have much competition. It wasn't that there were 15 agencies all vying for a piece of this particular pie. We were very young as a group but I think it was our youth that gave us a lot of influence and a lot of power because we were energetic. Not that people, older people were not energetic. We were in a sense converts, pilgrims. We were pioneers.

Q: Well, you were committed.

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: Committed, yes. Enthusiastic and willing to try almost anything that was legal, obviously. We weren't wedded to old ideas because there were no old ideas to draw on.

Q: You talked about the embassy and the great cooperation you had in Mexico. What about the bureau, the ARA? Did you have any sort of turf battles with them?

ALEXANDER: No, no. Absolutely not. I would speak to the Mexico desk on a regular basis, but they pretty much left us alone. It was kind of understood that the White House is interested in this and these guys are doing what we don't have to do. It's a nasty business, it's a thankless job. We were being attacked again in the press and the media, by a lot of people on the Hill who were concerned about-

Q: Well why were you being attacked?

ALEXANDER: We had, no one wanted to admit it, but a significant portion of the children of the elite, of the American illuminati, were in university and they were smoking dope. Whether you went to Harvard, Yale or you know, Podunk U, this was something that was widespread in the United States. Not only were college kids doing it, but a whole lot of other people were doing it as well. You know, it was all the, you know, the wink, wink.

Q: Well, the businessman's cocaine, a couple sniff's had replaced the three martini luncheon.

ALEXANDER: Yes, yes. In fact, that's a good example. The cocaine phenomena, which came out of this marijuana thing, was more of an '80s problem than was a '70s problem, but it was part of the same dynamic. There were a heck of a lot of people out there doing drugs and they were concerned about the quality of their supply. A lot of the people who were smoking marijuana, again, these weren't the throwaway people.

Q: The kids around the pool hall.

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: Yes. These were the well to do, the elites and their kids, many of them, and so they were concerned and that was a very important, significant ingredient in the resistance to what we were doing.

Q: I realize you had the Mexican portfolio. What about Burma and Afghanistan?

ALEXANDER: Others had that.

Q: So you didn't get involved?

ALEXANDER: No, I didn't get involved in that. I didn't get involved in that and I will not even try to speak of that program.

Q: Who flew the helicopters? Where'd you get the helicopters and fixed wing planes?

ALEXANDER: We, the State Department, bought them from Bell. They were Bell 206s and Bell 212s. Fixed wing aircraft, we had Pipers and other things that were used for observation purposes. We gave them all to the Mexicans; they were flown by Mexicans whom we trained but we weren't actually operating the aircraft for Mexico. There were U.S. laws against it, and Mexican laws against it.

Q: But you're saying you used to go down there and get on these flights?

ALEXANDER: Yes. Yes, I'd go down every couple of months and I would usually fly out to one of the provinces because I had to see how the operations were going. I was the one that the staffers on the Hill would call first, asking, "what are we doing in Mexico, I understand that we lost a helicopter" or this happened or that happened. Helicopters were expensive and when they crashed people wanted to know why, what happened. Also I wanted to have a complete understanding of what was happening, you know, exactly how the program was working. I wanted to be sure we weren't just flying around observing it, but that we were spraying a lot of these fields. I wanted to see how that worked and the

Library of Congress

only way to do that and to speak with any authority was to actually go down there and observe it firsthand.

Q: Well, I mean, when you go on one of these flights which you go on-

ALEXANDER: Let's put it this way, should I have been armed? Yes, probably because we were flying in really remote areas and again, occasionally there were firefights. If I needed a weapon there would have been one available. Let's just leave it at that.

Q: Wear a flak jacket, by the way?

ALEXANDER: Yes, yea, oh yes. Definitely. In fact, I remember once taking it off and sitting on it and a couple of Mexican soldiers who were on the helicopter with me smiled and said, "well you know, you're supposed to wear it." And I said, "yes, I will when I get out." And they said, "why don't you wear it now?" And I said, "well because if they shoot at us the bullets are going to come up through the floor." And those two guys looked at me, took off their jackets and sat on them. And all of a sudden they sort of smiled like, this gringo's a little crazy. They sort of looked at me a little different, like well maybe this guy's not so stupid. I learned that lesson the time we were actually shot down and we took rounds and they came up through the bottom of the fuselage. And so I thought well, when I'm on this thing I think I'm going to start sitting on it. I don't know whether that would have actually worked or not.

Q: This is good standard type thing.

ALEXANDER: Well, it was noticed after that experience that more and more people were doing it. I had some people tell me, "no, you should keep it on and you know, this is a big myth, and people used to do this in Vietnam and stuff," and other people used to say, "no, you're smart, sit on it." I sat on it, that's what I did because my experience had taught me you want to sit on this thing. But yes, no, flak jacket, I definitely had and weapons were available.

Library of Congress

Q: Well then, when you left this, you left this job when?

ALEXANDER: January of 1980.

Q: Did you see this as an area you wanted to get involved with overseas? Was there sort of a narcotics profession, a narcotics division?

ALEXANDER: One arose out of our founding this office, this bureau. When I started there it was S/NM, Narcotics Matters, part of S. When I left it was INM, International Narcotics Matters. Now it's, I think, INL. It's further evolved. I was there, literally at the inception, seeing this bureau and then we started creating this cadre of narcotics officers that were assigned to embassies abroad. I had no desire to do that. I felt that I had done it and was time to, I hate to use the word, I mean, I'm going to be a hypocrite, to go back into the mainstream. In other words, I had served in a functional bureau, but I had to attach myself to a mother bureau, a geographic bureau, at some point in order to get those overseas assignments that I needed to get and I didn't want to restrict myself to going to places where they had narcotics affairs officers and I didn't want to be that specialized.

Q: There isn't much of a career pattern for that unless, you move to a bigger country, but after you finish with Colombia where do you go?

ALEXANDER: Yes, exactly. So I felt that, having done narcotics in Washington was enough and I wanted to do something else. I enjoyed it, it was one of the best jobs I had in the Foreign Service. Again, it gave me an exposure to the upper levels of government at a very early stage in my career and I think it helped me, very much so.

Q: Where did you go and how did you get the job?

ALEXANDER: Where did I go after that?

Q: Yes.

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: Well I left in January, I went to FSI for six months to do the 26 week economic course which they were giving to economic officers who didn't have degrees in economics. I had a degree in business so I was encouraged to take the course. I did, and I'm glad I did because it was a nice change after the wooly world of drugs to be in a more academic environment. So I spent six months doing the econ course. I don't know whether they still give it.

Q: I think they do something. How did you find it?

ALEXANDER: It was tough.

Q: This is quite a prestigious course.

ALEXANDER: Yes. It was a tough course. I think almost anyone who went through it with me would characterize it the same way. It was hard. There were others who had business degrees and degrees in accounting and that helped us a little bit, compared to those who were poly sci majors or something, but it was tough. It was like four years of college in six months, or two years of graduate school in six months, or some combination thereof. I was up 'til 2:00 every night for six months, studying for tests. It was a graded course. I mean, you could fail; that just wasn't an option, obviously. At the end of it I felt a great sense of accomplishment.

Q: Did you feel the course was one that would help you? Particularly in economics there can be courses which are terribly theoretical but from a practical point of view have absolutely no bearing on the world of a Foreign Service officer.

ALEXANDER: Yes, in fact I found half the program probably had little if anything to do with my life as an FSO, as an economic officer. Whether I needed those courses for a better general understanding of economics I'll leave that to others to decide but probably so. Did,

Library of Congress

for example, did studying statistics help me as an econ officer? Me personally? No. Maybe others it did.

Q: Well then where did you go? Whither?

ALEXANDER: After that I was assigned to Madrid, but I had a six months gap between the Madrid assignment, which started in January of '81 and my having finished the econ course which I did in June of '80. I had five or six months there to fill and so I went to the Board of Examiners. I volunteered to do that. I think someone approached me and said would you be willing to go to BEX for a few months, I said yes, in fact I'd welcome that opportunity, I'd like to see how that works.

Q: This is what, '81?

ALEXANDER: This is '80, this is the latter half of 1980.

Q: Well in the first place, how about, you know, we talked about your growing up bilingual in French and picking up German and then Polish, but Madrid speaks a different language.

ALEXANDER: Yes. I went to BEX for four months and then I had a month of Spanish training before going on to Spain.

Q: How'd you find the BEX? You were doing this in 1980.

ALEXANDER: '80. I enjoyed it. I learned a few things about myself. I was able to go back and look at my own performance, how I was evaluated. It was at that time that I discovered that I had done something in it, I guess I'm bragging, not that this is something that one brags about but I didn't realize that most of my colleagues, those who entered the service with me, had taken the test more than once. I was one of the few who'd taken it and passed it the very first time, the written exam. In fact, I was so naive I had the impression if you failed there was no going back for a second or a third time. I was stunned to find out that people had taken the written exam two or three times before passing it. That amused

Library of Congress

me. By that time we had begun to do a much broader oral exam than when I came in nine years before; there was an all day session; I understand they still do that today. You had the interview, the three on one interview, but that lasted an hour. Well, that was pretty much like when I came into the Service, but then after that you had a whole bunch of other exercises, in box exercises and other things that were observed by the examiners and the idea was to find out what the old oral exam and written exam didn't tell examiners: what is this person like as a human being? Is this person overly aggressive, overly retired and shy, cooperative, what have you? It gave a dimension that was lacking before to this process, a human, personal dimension. So we were able to see that yes, Adam may be the brightest guy that we've talked to in a long time, you know, got a 99 on the written and you know, has a PhD in international relations from Harvard but, you know, Adam is an SOB, a disagreeable, vain SOB and can't work with anyone. We don't want that person. So again, it was quite fascinating to see these folks who on paper were absolutely impressive yet in person were just disastrous.

Q: Did you find that also it was sort of fun rubbing up against these young people coming out, you know, asking questions?

ALEXANDER: I won't say it was fun, it was often a very curious interaction because I was the same age; we were contemporaries. I was 31 at the time and I would say a good 60, 70 percent of the people that I was actually examining were my age. And I had been in the Service for eight or nine years, you know, and they were quite astounded, "you're an examiner? But you look like a college kid."

The other thing that I discovered when I was there, which surprised me, I have to admit, the most impressive people...

Q: This is tape three, side one with Leslie Alexander. Yes.

ALEXANDER: I was terribly impressed by these young military officers. I don't recall, we may have had one or two NCOs (Non-Commissioned Officers). My recollection is

Library of Congress

overwhelmingly there had been young military officers. They were much more mature than their non-military counterparts; balanced, their judgment was rock solid. They handled the exercises that we threw at them with aplomb that was just magnificent. It was just so impressive. We'd create these little scenarios; you're the admin officer at post and somebody's wife is drinking too much or someone's running around on their spouse or this, that, you know. The situation's drawn from real Foreign Service experiences; how would you handle this. And those who had gone to college and then on to graduate school and gotten their Masters in international relations or PhDs, the point is those who had very little exposure to life outside of academia had the most impractical solutions. The military guys would nail these things. They just knew.

Q I did this for awhile in the mid '70s; and also another group that impressed me were the people who had been in the Peace Corps. I had always had a slighty, because I really hadn't know them, only from thinking about Peace Corps I thought they were a bunch of sort of artsy fartsy idealists and all, you know, two years living in a mud hut or something, these are pretty good people.

ALEXANDER: I would say 90 percent of the Peace Corps people were magnificent. Ten percent, however, had chips on their shoulder. I recall, and again this only happened two or three times of the 30 or so former Peace Corps volunteers that I examined, they arrived with these chips on their shoulder and they lectured us on foreign policy and you know, our failings in country x y or z. You knew that early on in the day well, I don't think this person's going to make it through, and I never understood that; why they so willingly shot themselves in the face, but they just ranted and raved about, you know, how we weren't doing the right things in India, wherever. They may have been right but that wasn't the issue. The issue was listen, you're trying to get into this organization and you have to show us that, yes, that you have some sense of proportion and there are ways to criticize. In fact, people frequently did criticize U.S. foreign policy, but they did it in a balanced, intelligent, non-aggressive sort of way and we actually liked those people, said okay, you get points for that, you're not a toady, you know, you do challenge, you do question. We

Library of Congress

weren't looking to hire people who, you know, were going to sign on to whatever garbage; we didn't want apparatchiks.

Q: The great dilemma at that time, and I'm not sure it's as bad now, but when we were trying to hire minorities and more women, women probably weren't as much as a problem, but the minorities were a problem because there wasn't as much as a cadre and we weren't offering much comparable money to what they could get outside.

ALEXANDER: We had so few minority candidates that the head of BEX and the DG and the examiners sat around one day and we were talking. This was an issue that was talked about almost on a daily basis. There was such a dearth of minority candidates; particularly African Americans. We were sitting around one day and I made the observations, we all go around on these recruiting trips. I've noticed that for African Americans we go to traditionally black colleges. And the others said, "yeah, that's where you're going to find black students." And I said, "yeah, but are you going to find black students who are interested in foreign policy?" So the head of BEX said, "what are you getting at?" I said, "well, why wouldn't a black student interested in foreign affairs do what a white student does and go to the Georgetown School of Foreign Service, for example?" And there was a stunned silence. Everyone just sort of looked at me for a second. The next week they sent some people over to Georgetown looking for black students and lo-and-behold they found some and they were interested in the foreign service. I got, and I didn't know this until two years later, I got a meritorious honor award for that silly suggestion.

They started sending recruiters around. They got off this notion that if you want Asians or Latins, or Blacks or whatever, let's not be victims of our own stereotyping. If they're interested in the foreign service they are going to do the same things white kids are going to do. They're going to go study at traditional foreign service schools. I don't know if that holds true today, but it certainly did for the five or six years...

Library of Congress

Q: From what I gather, we still go to the traditional black colleges. I think almost out of reflex or maybe because people would be hurt if we didn't do it. But I think, once again, you're not going to get your top student. You go where the top students are. Berkeley, Stanford, Harvard, Tufts, Georgetown, that sort of thing.

Spanish? You said you had a month of Spanish language training?

ALEXANDER: My exposure to Spanish was bad, bad movies in the sense that Mexicans were portrayed with funny accents. The time that I spent on visits to Mexico doing the drug thing and I sort of spoke a pigeon Spanish which I picked up. Having strong French helped but I had never studied Spanish formally. But I had a month or six weeks, a very brief time at FSI studying Spanish and then I went off to Madrid.

Q: What was your job in Madrid?

ALEXANDER: I was an economic officer. I had the “cats and dogs” portfolio. Fisheries and aviation issues. Things of that sort.

Q: You were there from '81?

ALEXANDER: From January 1981, in fact I arrived a week or two before the coup. The famous coup.

Q: Was this the national guard?

ALEXANDER: Exactly. Lieutenant Colonel Antonio Tejero, 'Tejerazo', pulled out his pistol, shot the ceiling and called the parliamentarians the equivalent of “you dumb bastards get on the floor.” What was shocking was Spain was emerging, or so they felt, to be a western democratic nation. It was going to take its place along with the French and Italians and then they have a coup in western Europe, a military coup. They thought that western Europe was way beyond that. I think to this day there are people, like yourself,

Library of Congress

I'm constantly amazed by people who say, "was this the Lieutenant Colonel?" I mean, the number of people who still remember the details.

Q: Sure. It was a small thing. The king proved himself.

ALEXANDER: The king proved himself, exactly.

Q: He put on his uniform and said "cut out this crap."

ALEXANDER: Exactly.

So I was there from January 1981 to the summer of 1983.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

ALEXANDER: Terry Todman.

Q: What was the situation in Spain when you got there?

ALEXANDER: You had the old Franco regime, they still cast a long shadow. Many of the Francos were still in government. They were slowly but surely being pushed out, but there was still a lot of sentiment in favor of that type of government. You had the younger Spaniards, the Felipe Gonzalez crowd were trying to move Spain into the 20th century. So you had a very vivid, very animated dynamic there between the old and the new. The old Spain, backward, shut up behind the barrier of the Pyrenees. De Gaulle having said Europe stops at the Pyrenees, that sort of thing. Again, Spain wanted very much to be European; it wanted to rejoin western Europe after 40-50 years of political isolation, and to a certain extent, geographic isolation.

So this made for a fascinating mix of tradition in politics and culture. It was a great time to be in Spain because I saw the old Spain and the new Spain. The old Spain which was dying and the new Spain which was being born. They went into the European Union and

Library of Congress

the Common Market while I was there. Both of these things would have been considered highly improbably if not outright impossible five or six years before. Spain went from being a rather rural country to a rapidly industrializing one. It was a great time to be in Spain.

Q: Even before Franco, Spain was a very backward country. What were you seeing? I imagine although you had the cats and dogs thing, you must have been seeing a great sense of awakening of young people.

ALEXANDER: Absolutely. I did other things, particularly when my colleagues were on leave. I had a lot of friends in the banking community. That was a very dynamic sector. The pirate banks were being capitalized with money from abroad. They were getting bigger. American banks were coming into the market. French banks.

Q: And this was the engine...

ALEXANDER: Exactly. They were coming in to help fuel the industrialization of Spain; the transformation from a heavily rural country to a modern European one. New factories and industries and what have you. During that time, for example, General Motors built what was then the most automated plant in Europe in Zaragoza. They built an Opel factory there. Spain was exploding. It had the advantages of climate, cheap labor, low taxes, there were many, many advantages for European companies in particular that wanted to relocate operations from northern or central Europe to the Mediterranean, to Spain. A lot of this money from the banks was used to fuel this very quick expansion. The Spaniards themselves were, like the Chinese today, eager to buy products that up until then had simply been out of reach, or unavailable. So you had a very rapidly expanding consumer market there for everything from automobiles to the latest high-tech whatever was being manufactured in those days. So it was extremely dynamic. It was a happy time because everything was going up. Incomes were going up. Expectations were going up. Life expectancy was going up. New streets, new highways, new buildings were going up. Very dynamic. It was a time of great happiness. Restaurants were filled. People were

Library of Congress

happy. The Spaniards, particularly after Felipe Gonzalez took over, had cast off this image of somber, morose, dark, primitive Spaniard of Franco's time, the civil war and all that nastiness. They were the new kids on the block.

Q: Was he a socialist.

ALEXANDER: He was a socialist. But I think we can use that term rather loosely. Certainly economically.

Q Well, this is the Reagan administration. And socialist. Were we initially kind of nervous?

ALEXANDER: No. Absolutely not. I think it was one of the few times an embassy in Europe really did have an important role in the nurturing of European political leadership. The kind of role that we hadn't had since maybe in the forties. To clarify a little bit what I mean. The probability of the political counselor in France today, or in Rome, dealing with, meeting with, having dinner with the guy who is going to be prime minister next year is slim to none. But we actually socialized. I knew two or three of Felipe's ministers. They weren't ministers at the time. They were young guys, my age. It was clear to us. I think we did a great job of identifying the emerging leadership. We sent them to the States with the IV (International visitor's) program and we used to take them out and socialize with them, party with them, what have you. When he took over he named as his minister of labor, or commerce, or whatever, he named guys that we had as contacts. In fact, one of my little moments of irritation with my leadership at the embassy was once these guys became ministers, we were told we could no longer talk to them. I remember approaching the DCM and saying, "the minister is a personal friend of mine. What do you mean?" "Well, ministers are the ambassador's contacts." I said, "well, that's stupid. That's absolutely stupid. That's not a way to leverage our resources here." "Well, when you become an ambassador you do what you want. But this embassy, the ambassador deals with the ministers."

Q: Terry Todman had the reputation for being one of our imperial ambassadors.

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: Yeah. He worked hard. I think he was a very smart man. But yeah, his style was an old-fashioned kind of style that I certainly didn't follow. He was not one of my models. In fairness to him, he gave his officers an exit interview. When I left post in 1983, he said, "had you been me, what would you have done that I didn't do?" I said, "Mr. Ambassador, quite frankly, I would have gotten out of this office, I would have walked around this embassy, and walked into offices like mine, and sat down for a few minutes, half an hour, and asked them, 'what are you doing and why are you doing it?' We never saw you, you sat up here, you were untouchable." The other thing I mentioned to him was the business about the ministers. I said, "you know, I knew two or three of these guys personally. I worked hard nurturing these guys and trying to inculcate them with certain values as I understood we were supposed to do. And they become ministers and all of a sudden we're not allowed to talk to these guys anymore." He was very gracious. He said, "well, those are certain pointed observations." He didn't get angry, he didn't seek to defend himself, he didn't say much of anything.

Q: Did you get involved in any aviation crunches or problems.

ALEXANDER: No. My headaches with the aviation were, unfortunately, plane crashes. We had a couple of really, bad plane crashes with several hundred people perishing. Those were always very nasty. My biggest headache was the fisheries portfolio. Because Spain was a major fishing power, I guess it still is. Unfortunately though, the Spaniards were predatory fishermen. They were always violating their quotas and doing illegal things. Whatever quotas we gave them in our fisheries were never enough. So there was this constant friction between what they wanted and what we were willing to give them and constant problems because they were always over-fishing and doing things that they weren't supposed to do. So that was a major, major headache.

Q: How did we deal with it?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: Well, we would catch their ships with too many fish in the hold. We would fine them, very high fines, and send them packing. I think on one or two occasions we seized the ships and held them; the fish spoiled and we released them after sorting that out. But there was no resolution. Again, the Spaniards always wanted higher quotas. No matter what we gave them it was never enough. So there was this constant tension.

Q: With a socialist government, did you see developing in Spain the same problem that I think France and Germany had? Such a generous social net: Unemployment insurance, difficulty to fire people. This social net is beginning to destroy Germany and France. The Brits under Margaret Thatcher sort of got out from under it. Did you see that developing in Spain?

ALEXANDER: I didn't see it because by the time I left the socialists had only been power for about a year. So they weren't able to implement those kinds of programs to any meaningful degree. Actually, I left believing they were not going to institute these kinds of programs despite their being this socialist party. They were very pragmatic. They had very good ministers, very well educated, young ministers who had already discerned some of the problems with this social welfare state and they weren't going to take the country too far in that direction. I think there were more immediate, pressing economic and commercial issues for the government. For one, just sheer development. Spain was so far behind in so many things. They had to do that. They had to dismantle the Franco state. Spain, very much resembled Italy of the 1950s where a significant portion of the productive sector, industry, was in the hands of government. These big government corporations were inefficient, but controlled so much of the economy.

Q: Like big steel?

ALEXANDER: Big steel. Auto manufacturing. They were dinosaurs, exactly. They had INH in Spain and that was the counterpart of Eni in Italy. The point is, it was a very large state-holding company that had tentacles into so many sectors of the economy, Inefficient,

Library of Congress

the source of patronage jobs, these institutions has to be dismantled. I think that the new socialist government was much more concerned with dismantling that than they were with building their own version of it.

Q: Did you have much contact with the universities?

ALEXANDER: I didn't have much contact with the universities.

Q: How about the labor side?

ALEXANDER: I was on a first-name basis with the gentleman who became the minister of labor. But with labor, the same with unions, we had a labor attach#. That wasn't part of my bailiwick. So, no, I didn't really.

Q: How about Barcelona and Catalonia? Was that sort of off limits? How was that treated?

ALEXANDER: It wasn't off limits. But we had a consul general and he served as the ambassador to Catalonia. He did not welcome the embassy officers running around his territory. He insisted, and he was able to make it stick, that we would fly into Barcelona, we would go to the consulate and he would come with us on our calls. He also, to the extent that he was allowed, would dominate the conversations that embassy officers had.

Q: What was his name?

ALEXANDER: I can see his face. I think his last name was Wyams if I recall correctly.

Q: Was Catalonia developing in a different way?

ALEXANDER: It was more developed industrially. It was more developed than Madrid. Historically I think that had always been the case. Closer to France; on the Mediterranean. It was more cosmopolitan, more outward looking.

Library of Congress

Q: Madrid is right in the middle.

ALEXANDER: Right in the middle, out there in the high plateau. Maybe it's an unfair comparison. Washington and New York. New York is a financial capital and Washington is a political capital.

Q: What about the Basque territory?

ALEXANDER: The Basque territory was more like Catalonia. More developed, ship building, steel making, things of that sort. Again, but if you look, they're on the water, bordered France, more outward looking. They were independent minded, spoke a different language, saw themselves as different than the folks in Madrid; different than the folks in Spain.

Q: Were there problems? People blowing people up and that sort of thing?

ALEXANDER: Oh yeah. The Basques very much wanted an independent state. I dare say there wasn't a week that went by that they didn't kill somebody.

Q: What was our feeling? Did we think there could be a viable Basque state?

ALEXANDER: No.

Q: Did it make sense?

ALEXANDER: Absolutely not, no. Our policy was to keep Spain whole and intact. This meant keeping the Basque region in Spain. The Spaniards came up with this sort of autonomous regions, they toyed with ways to give the Catalans and the Basques and others a certain degree of autonomy but within a strong central state. That's what we supported.

Library of Congress

Q: What about American investment? Were you and others in the economic section seeing Americans and encouraging Americans to come in and invest? What was the response?

ALEXANDER: We were. I mentioned, for example, General Motors built the most automated plant in Europe in Zaragoza, an Opel plant. We were interested in many, many sectors: electricity generation. Fast food restaurants: McDonald's. Banking. We had several American banks that opened. I don't remember all the sectors that American business was interested in. We viewed Spain as being a wide-open, new place to do business.

Q: One of the things that happens, we've seen this phenomenon, a country that has been very backward, when it jumps in usually ends up getting the fanciest, new equipment. So it catches up. Instead of stringing wire, it has wireless phones or more automation. Were we seeing Spain turning into a fairly modern economy?

ALEXANDER: Yeah. Again, I have to be careful here, because I left in 1983. What Spain is now, it became after I left. But certainly it was easy to sense that that was where Spain was going. It was going to have factories that were cutting-edge relative to other places in Europe. It had the work force capable of rapidly grasping these new concepts and new technologies. Spain might have been less advanced relative to its European neighbors, but it wasn't Third World either. It was clear to me as I was leaving Spain that Spain was going to become very, very quickly a modern European state and probably within 10 to 15 years would be virtually indistinguishable from most other economies in Europe.

Q: How did you find your Spanish contacts? You mentioned in Poland everybody was sort of depressed.

ALEXANDER: I was very impressed with my Spanish contacts. They were well educated. They were surprisingly friendly. I don't know if they were pro-American. They certainly weren't anti-American. Open minded, talented people.

Library of Congress

Q: Okay, this is probably a good place to stop. You left Spain in 1983 and then wither?

ALEXANDER: Brazil.

Q: Okay, another language.

ALEXANDER: Another language. I had four weeks of Portuguese.

Q: Okay, today is the second of November, 2005. You took Portuguese for how long?

ALEXANDER: Four weeks.

Q: Did they have sort of a course that...

ALEXANDER: They took a Spanish speaker and gave him a funny accent and turned him into a Portuguese speaker, exactly. It was a four-week course and I was able to pick up the requisite three after that course. So it wasn't difficult. Spanish and Portuguese are much closer than people who don't speak the languages realize.

Q: The pronunciation is different.

ALEXANDER: Very different. I wouldn't call it guttural. It's like comparing a French accent to an Italian accent. The languages are again, similar, but they are pronounced differently. This is Portuguese and Spanish.

Q: So you went to where?

ALEXANDER: Porto Alegre.

Q: And you were in Porto Alegre from when to when?

ALEXANDER: From the summer of 1983 until the summer of 1985.

Library of Congress

Q: Okay, describe where Porto Alegre fits into the Brazilian scene and what it was like when you went there?

ALEXANDER: It was one of several consulates in Brazil. It is now closed. But at the time, it was the southernmost post we had in Brazil. So southern that a year after I arrived, it was August, I don't recall the day, I was sitting in my office looking out of my window and I saw what I thought were snowflakes and I said, "no it can't be," because I'm in Brazil. But sure enough, it was snowing. It wasn't a blizzard, but snow is snow. We were that far south. I cite the snow to give a sense of how different that part of Brazil was from the rest of Brazil. When we think of Brazil it is a tropical country with all that implies, but it is a lot more. Where I was, the Brazilians were of German-Italian extraction. There were very few Afro-Brazilians. Again, when one thinks of Brazil, all they tend to think of Africans, of the tall, beautiful, the mulatta, the women and the fabulous samba outfit. That was not a part of the Brazil in which I served. That doesn't mean you wouldn't see vestiges of it, pieces of it here or there, but basically I lived with what were called the gauchos. Most Americans would think of them. But the same as the gauchos of Argentina. The pampas run through Argentina, Uruguay, southern Brazil. It has a very similar culture. They drink *matte*, they wear the whole gaucho outfit. They ride the horses.

Q: Bolos?

ALEXANDER: Well, bolos, no. They have them, I never saw them used. But it was a very different part of Brazil. It was, at the time I was there, not unlike like what Texas was for many years to the U.S. bigger than life, politicians were bigger than life. In fact, six of the eleven presidents, at the time I was there, had been from the state of which Porto Alegre was capitol. The gauchos dominated political life, Brazilian political life for a generation. Many of the senior political officers were from that part of the country as well. It gave me an opportunity to have contacts with senior Brazilian officials that folks in the embassy did not have. It wasn't because I was better than they were, but I had an opportunity through the back door to meet these people through their families; through their parents,

Library of Congress

through their cousins or their brothers, sisters, what have you. So Porto Alegre was in many respects a good listening post into the inner bowels of Brazilian politics. Strange, because we were 2,000 kilometers from Brasilia.

Q: Yeah, oh boy, you couldn't be farther.

ALEXANDER: Exactly. But those powerful politicians, the military people came home on the weekends and they spend their vacations with their families. So again, through social events I was able to have contacts with some of these folks. I was able to assure the embassy that Brazil was going to end its 20 years of military dictatorship and have a relatively smooth transition to civilian military rule. And fortunately, I was right.

Q: Were you the principal officer there?

ALEXANDER: I was.

Q: Did you have anybody else with you?

ALEXANDER: I had a USIS officer, a consular officer and a small staff of Brazilian employees.

Q: From your viewpoint down south, what was the state of Brazilian-American relations?

ALEXANDER: My optic was a commercial one. Novo Hamburgo, which was a town not too far from Porto Alegre was at the time a fledgling shoe production center. But it was clear that the Brazilian shoe industry, which was headquartered there, was going to become quite large.

Q: Lots of leather.

ALEXANDER: Exactly. You've got it that was a formula. Today I think, I read somewhere recently, that 20% of the shoes purchased in this country are of Brazilian origin. And

Library of Congress

there are a lot of shoes bought here. Indeed, that industry did become a very large and important one for the Brazilians. Their relationship then would have to be characterized as good, as positive. They were most interested in having access to our market and therefore having good relations with us. So, I would characterize the relationship from their perspective, not just the shoe people, but other people in the area as very good and very positive. Brazilians liked Americans and frequently would compare themselves to Americans. They would say to me, "we're from large countries, we have diverse population, ethnically diverse, we're a nation of immigrants, we dwarf our neighbors, etc., etc. I don't they sought to model themselves after us, but they felt a sort of kinship with Americans in the main. I would have to say 99.99% of everyone I came across seemed to be very fond of Americans or favorably disposed to the United States.

Q: Was there any ripple effect from the Falklands / Malvinas dispute. After trying to be neutral we really ended up supporting the Brits. How was that felt where you were?

ALEXANDER: This is not widely known, I don't think the Brazilians would admit to it, but they supported the Brits as well. They allowed our planes, I'm not certain about the British planes, but certainly our aircraft, which were used to support the British, landing rights in Canoas, the big military base in my consular district. Again, this was all hush-hush, no one spoke of it. The truth is that Argentina was the only military threat to Brazil. In the region there was no other country that could challenge Brazil militarily except Argentina.

Q: Were they still going, from that silly from the American perspective, nuclear competition?

ALEXANDER: Yes. They were. It was on my plate and it was a matter of some concern obviously to Washington,. On more than one occasion I publicly as well as privately was called upon to question the need for Brazil to consider a nuclear option, and usually the reply was the same. We have the same right as everyone else to pursue nuclear energy. I think that was the excuse.

Library of Congress

The Brazilians flirted for a while with this nuclear option. I don't have information as to how far along they were in that. Whether it was just talk.

Q: Were you sort of given instruction to go out and take a look at various things? Or things like that?

ALEXANDER: Not that I can recall, no, I wasn't instructed to look into that specifically. I had discussions with my masters in the embassy about Brazil's nuclear program and their arms industry. I think all the mission officers, whether one was at a constituent post or in the embassy, we were conscious of the need to be aware of certain things that the Brazilians were doing or trying to do and report those things accordingly.

Q: Who was the ambassador while you were there?

ALEXANDER: Diego Asencio. He was a good ambassador. One thing I really appreciated about the ambassador was his allowing all of his principal officers to be mini-ambassadors. In fact, he tested me once, "you're better known in Brazil than I am." I said, "well that's not true, you're the ambassador." He said, "well, you get more air time nationally than I do."

But he was generally amused by that. He was in no way bothered by it or anything else. In fact, I think he felt privately that was good. I want you to get out there. I don't care who does what as long as we're getting the job done.

Q: Well, how would you get air time?

ALEXANDER: I don't know, I think in part because the local media liked me for some strange reason. I used to dance the samba, for example. They'd never had Americans doing those kinds of things. But, I like to dance.

Q: Were you a bachelor at the time?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: No. I was married at the time. I'd do other things. I would give interviews. My Portuguese was fairly good, and maybe that helped. When I tested, I tested at a 4+ when I came back. So that I think helped a bit.

I just gave interviews and a lot of times what I said locally would end up on the evening news nationally.

Q: I take it that where you were was sort of the Texas of Brazil in a way. The military tradition was there.

ALEXANDER: Exactly.

Q: The cowboys.

ALEXANDER: And again, as I mentioned, six of the eleven presidents had come from there. They had a very heavy thumb print on the country.

Q: Brazil was still under military rule?

ALEXANDER: It was. It made the transition to civilian rule in 1984.

Q: When you arrived, what was the hand of the military?

ALEXANDER: I think it was still fairly heavy. The then president, Figueiredo, was a general. The military ran the country. It was essentially up to them whether or not Brazil was going to have a civilian president.

Q: Did they have the equivalent to major generals in the provinces? Or were they civilians?

ALEXANDER: No. There were civilians in the provinces. The governors were civilians. I don't know if the Brazilian military were ever that heavy-handed. Their military were very involved in industrial and the political life in Brazil. There was some latitude for the civilian

Library of Congress

leadership. The head of the various states, in almost every instance that I'm aware of, was a civilian. That being said, the military had to give the green light to Brazil's reverting to a civilian president; which they did. I think they did it out of conviction. They felt the time had come and this was just not the way for the country to advance; with a military regime running the country. To their credit they stepped back. They gave it up and the civilians took over. It was a rather unusual transition because the president-elect died before he could actually take office. So there was a period of several weeks in which the Brazilian body politic stumbled all over itself trying to figure out what to do. There was no precedent for this. The person who was elected, Senator Tancredo, poor man, just died. They finally settled on a formula which seemed to satisfy everyone. They made the vice president-elect the president. Jos# Sarney. He took over. That was the end of that. The Brazilian military went back to the barracks where they've stayed ever since.

Q: Was there the equivalent of a dominant aristocracy or the wealthy people, who were the power brokers?

ALEXANDER: There were several old German families. I mentioned that the Germans and the Italians were the ones you were most likely to find in southern Brazil. The Germans were the most successful of the immigrants and they called the shots. They were the political elites and they were the economic and cultural elites.

Q: Were we still on a lookout for Nazis in the area?

ALEXANDER: When you say "we" I don't know if the U.S. government was actively pursuing Nazis in Brazil. But certainly the Israelis were and maybe others were. Yes. If Nazis were apprehended by someone I guess they were taken to wherever: Germany or France or Italy and tried. I do know there were many, many people looking for Mengele, for example, who was living in Rio Grande del Sol and died in Brazil; not in my consular district. I recall I think it was in Sao Paulo's consular district. But he had lived in my neck of the woods. In fact, I had a few Germans tell me that Mengele had lived there. So I think

Library of Congress

that was widely known that he and some of his cronies were in and out of the area. Given there was such a large German population that's not terribly surprising.

Q: Looking at your area, you had Uruguay, Argentina and Paraguay all abutting.

ALEXANDER: Paraguay no. But Argentina and Uruguay yes.

Q: What about smuggling? This is a big business.

ALEXANDER: Yeah, it's a big, big, big business. And it was especially big in the tri-corner area of Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil which was part of Sao Paulo's consular district. That was slightly to the north of me.

Q: But you're closer aren't you?

ALEXANDER: Yeah. And we had a lot of stuff coming through. But that wasn't an issue that was put on my plate. I just didn't have the resources to deal with that. It was my understanding that someone in Sao Paulo and Brazil followed that picture.

Q: Well, it wasn't our problem in a way.

ALEXANDER: Not as much then as I understand it is now. Today, I'm told that we're much more concerned about it because of al Qaeda terrorists reportedly taking root in the area there.

Q: What about the ruling class, or whatever you want to call it? Did they send their kids to school in the U.S? Or did they send them to France or England?

ALEXANDER: From what I can recall, their kids went all over the place: Switzerland, France, Italy, the U.S., Germany in some cases, some of them went to school in Brazil. So I don't know whether the elites had a favorite place to send their kids. I do know that the elites more often than not had vacation homes, or second homes, in the U.S. Whether

Library of Congress

they were of German origin, or Portuguese origin, or what have you, the U.S. seemed to be their second most favorite country. They felt comfortable in the U.S., I think more so than they did in the old country. Whether again, Portugal, Germany, or wherever it might be. At the time they liked the U.S., they liked Americans, they were comfortable there. They were especially enamored of south Florida, Miami, like most Latin elites, they weren't any different. Now that I think about it, I think the first thing you do after you rob the national treasure is run off to Miami and buy an estate or a villa or something. These folks weren't doing that, at least the ones I knew. They were making the big bucks and they were buying big places in Miami.

Q: How would you describe relations, from your perspective, of the Brazilians with Argentina and Uruguay.

ALEXANDER: The gauchos liked the Argentineans because culturally they were able to relate to them. They had the myth of the cowboy, the gaucho. A lot of their customs: eating beef and the barbeque, and all that; they were essentially the same. I think in an everyday sense there was an antagonism. Politically, the Brazilians saw the Argentineans as being a bunch of lazy, wealthy competitors. Not so much economic competitors, cultural competitors. But again, I would like to say the Brazilians and the Argentineans didn't like one another, but my sense is that they did. They recognized that they were sort of quasi European nations stuck off in a non-European or non-North American part of the world. They had great soccer teams, they needed one another. The Argentineans wouldn't have been what they were without the Brazilian competition and vice versa. And I think in a lot of ways they admired one another. They were different enough that they didn't have the contempt that the Chileans and the Argentineans had for one another.

Q: Yeah. Did you get any high-level visits through there? Or were you pretty much out in the boondocks?

ALEXANDER: I was out in the boondocks, mercifully so.

Library of Congress

Q: What were you doing commercially, promoting commerce?

ALEXANDER: Not much. Again, we were probably the largest foreign investor in Brazil at the time. The Germans had some heavy-duty investments: a big Volkswagen factory and other investments. But the U.S., still, was the dominant commercial partner of the Brazilians. There just wasn't much for us to do where I was because it had been done. There was the Mars food group, the candy people. At the time they also owned Uncle Ben's Rice, I don't know if they still do. I know that they were very interested in growing rice in the south of Brazil. They started that while I was there. I spent a lot of time with them on their project which they were able to launch successfully. They introduced the finished product, Uncle Ben's, to the Brazilian market. So, I don't want to imply that we had no commercial activity, or that I did nothing in that area. We weren't called upon to do much, and when we were we did. Our time was spent predominantly on getting Brazil, to the extent we could contribute to that, getting Brazil to do the right thing: give up the military, move to civilian leadership, and join with us in trying to spread democracy in the region. That was our primary mission.

Q: How much of a port was Porto Alegre.

ALEXANDER: It wasn't much of a port when I was there. I think principally because Santos, which was in the Sao Paulo consular district, was the major port in southern Brazil. There was no need to go to Porto Alegre.

Q: Well, Sao Paulo was a big industrial center.

ALEXANDER: Yeah, big industrial. Sao Paulo was New York. But it was also Pittsburg, Cleveland and Detroit, and everything else.

Q: You were there for two years, and then what?

ALEXANDER: I went to the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island for a year.

Library of Congress

Q: This would be 1985 to 1986?

ALEXANDER: Exactly.

Q: How did you find the Naval War College? I've talked to very few foreign service officers who have gone there.

ALEXANDER: I think most FSOs were smarter; I was one of the dummies. Had I been smart, I would have gone to the National War College. I went to Newport thinking I would be living in a beautiful city. I was correct, it was a beautiful little town for sailing and sipping cocktails. I had to work. I worked like a dog. I found out unfortunately after I got there. The Naval War College is different from the rest of them. Here we take tests and you can fail. I said, "wait a minute, I didn't sign up... I signed up for a gentlemen's school. I want to be lectured to. I want to go to Europe for a week or two with a group and have embassies tell us what they're doing." "Well, we don't do that here. This is an academic school." I'll tell you, academically it was the most challenging year of my life. It certainly made my college years look like kid stuff, because the military officers, most of whom were naval officers, were extremely competitive and very, very bright. Anyone who thinks that military guys aren't too swift upstairs, they are absolutely wrong. You don't become an admiral by being a dummy. Whether they were air force or army or naval officers, these people were looking to put stars on their shoulders and they were competitive, they were bright, they were inquisitive. They were a very impressive bunch of people. To make a long story short, I suffered, but I got a masters degree out of it, which at the time was the only one of these schools that actually was accredited to give degrees. So, when I was finished I was quite pleased that I had done it. But it wasn't fun.

Q: What type of courses were you taking?

ALEXANDER: Strategic planning, defense economics, things that we all sort of semi-consciously think about. What does the economy look like when it's on a war footing?

Library of Congress

The old “guns and butter” debate. And how do you convince industrialists in a country like ours, you don't have a directed economy, that we've got to have aircraft and this whole debate about “does the U.S. need a steel industry?” Do you want to get your steel from someplace else if you're at war? And what do you do if you're at war with the country who is making the steel? These are issues that tend to be awkward sometimes. Things like that. Obviously more traditional military, directly military studies, exercises. We invaded Iran five different times, five different ways to try to figure out which was the best way to invade them. Things of that sort, that's what war colleges do.

Q: Often at war colleges foreign service officers act as sources able to pontificate on foreign affairs and all because it really is a different mindset.

ALEXANDER: Yes.

Q: We pick it up without really realizing what we have. But it doesn't sound like there was much time for you to play that role.

ALEXANDER: No, no. I have to say, though, the process while rigidly academic was still very dynamic and I was frequently called upon by my fellow students, as well as by the professors, to comment, to pontificate. It wasn't gratuitous. A lot of the professors would say, “what do you think from your perspective as a State Department guy?” whenever there was a need or requirement for role playing, as you can imagine, I was always the Secretary of State. But I had five or six, eight other civilians there from other agencies. I was the only State Department guy. They were able to interject their perspectives on things at times too. And, I had military officers who had served in embassies or had some exposure to international affairs. But in the main, people sort of looked to me to give the State perspective on things.

Q: Well, after getting your masters degree and doing a lot of sweating, what did you do? In 1986.

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: I went to Rome as the economic counselor.

Q: So you were in Rome from 1986 to...?

ALEXANDER: to 1989.

Q: Who was our ambassador?

ALEXANDER: Max Rabb, political appointee. Longest serving ambassador we've ever had in Italy.

Q: He was very proud of that.

ALEXANDER: He was, and with good reason. He didn't speak Italian but I thought he did a remarkably good job.

Q: Why don't we talk a little bit about him? How did you find him?

ALEXANDER: I thought he was great. I absolutely loved Max Rabb. I admired him. He had the ability to come across as sort of foolish and harmless. But that was all a facade to mask a very supple mind. Again, I think it's important to appreciate. He was a man who did not speak the language, as he said "I'm too old to learn." He was 80 years old. But he managed nonetheless to make himself understood and to be understood. He had some tough challenges on his watch: the Achille Lauro, getting the Pershing missiles in. We couldn't get NATO to agree to allow us to base these missiles. Max Rabb convinced the Italians to do it. They were the first, and once the Italians agreed to take them, the resistance from the others collapsed.

Q: This is with the SS-20 with the Soviet Union.

ALEXANDER: Yes. It was a major, major diplomatic coup on the part of Maxwell Rabb. One that I don't think he's been given a lot of credit for. I don't want to wax too

Library of Congress

hyperbolically. But Max Rabb's role in that issue alone went a long way towards bringing down the soviet empire.

Q: Oh yeah. The SS-20 versus the Pershing missiles and the Cruise missiles was the last great confrontation between the Soviet Union and the Western Alliance and the fact that we were able to respond, sort of put an end to this very dangerous game of trying to up the ante.

ALEXANDER: And it put an end to it for several reasons. The Soviets realized that NATO collectively had the will to resist. Economically they just couldn't take it to the next level.

Q: Yeah.

ALEXANDER: So again, I think Max Rabb's role in that was terrible important. There were other things that happened on his watch too. The Chernobyl thing, the nuclear plant blew up.

Q: In the Ukraine.

ALEXANDER: In the Ukraine. And of course, that had enormous political reactions.

Q: What was the Italian reaction?

ALEXANDER: Oh, like everyone in Western Europe, absolutely infuriated with the Russians for having tried to hide that. For not having alerted anyone to what was going on. So, the reaction in Italy was universally negative to Chernobyl. I think that helped to reinforce Max Rabb's arguments

You have a large communist party and you like to flirt with this notion that the Russians are misunderstood and they're not really all that bad and blah, blah, blah and we're the bad guys. But this is the reality of this regime., These are people who will permit thousands of their own citizens to die rather than to say we've screwed up.

Library of Congress

Q: This is the first time you were in a really big embassy. Sometimes embassies takes on the aspect of the country they're in. Italian politics are a thing.

ALEXANDER: A work of art.

Q: How did you find dealing in the embassy? Was it a problem?

ALEXANDER: I wouldn't say it was a problem. It was challenging. I hadn't thought about it; it was the largest mission that I had served it at the time. We're talking about a sophisticated European nation, a proud and long history. These were the descendants of the Romans. People who had the greatest empire ever seen. The Italians were in their own right owners of a proud, wealthy and prosperous country, screwed up as it might have been in a lot of ways. There were a lot of things going for the Italians as well.

What I found frustrating about being in an embassy like that at that time was that there were so many competing interests: the political-military one, the economic one. Italy was the sixth or seventh most powerful economy in the world or the global influence. It was a part of the European market and so every time we got into argument with Brussels we were directly or indirectly getting into argument with Rome. These interests had to be addressed. The biggest frustration was trying to get the ambassador or DCM focuses on economic issues when they were dealing with vitally important military issues. Trying to find that balance. And among ourselves, in the various sections we had to be careful not to so offend the sensibilities of the other sections that we would have engaged in a destructive relationship rather than a positive one. There were times that I would not bring things to the attention of my masters knowing that my colleague, the political-military counselor, had a very critical issues that had to be addressed. So, at country team I might shut up thinking what I have to bring up is just not as important as what he's got to deal with. So, I'm going to keep my mouth shut so the ambassador can focus on this. I think that was often reciprocated.

Library of Congress

We had a very good relationship; most of us. But there were other things. For example, I was Rick Ames' cover boss. Little did I know that the man would turn out to be the largest, the worst spy in U.S. history. But that was, in some respects, a distraction. Because he would come to me periodically, probably once a month or so, I don't think I'm exaggerating. I would go with him to some function. He used to drive a very expensive, the largest model that Jaguar made. He used to park next to me in the embassy. I asked him, "How can you afford, what are you, a GS-12, 14, 15, how can you afford a Jag on your pay? You've got a wife and a kid." And he said, "Oh, well Rosario comes from money." I believed that because I had known plenty of foreign service officers who had married the daughters of well-to-do Venezuelan, Colombians, and Brazilians. The other thing, I found strange was he had a very obvious drinking problem, but nobody seemed to care.

Q: Did you get quizzed a lot later?

ALEXANDER: No, in fact I was in Mauritius when the story broke. In fact, I had just seen him two weeks before because I was on my way to post and ran into him just by accident. And we stopped and we had a cup of coffee; my wife and me and him and his wife. We were at a shopping mall out in Tysons Corner, Virginia, and stopped and had a cup of coffee for about half an hour and we left two days later for post and he was arrested two weeks later. When the news broke, I heard it in Mauritius, I was in my office and I heard the name and thought it can't be the same guy. Someone came in and I said, this Rick Ames, it's not the same Rick Ames who was in Rome and did this and did that? They said "yes." I said, "My god, I know this guy, I was his cover boss." And I had thought that someone would call, I didn't know that much about him. I was quite prepared to answer any questions. Nobody ever asked me any.

Q: And somewhere in the files they have your picture.

ALEXANDER: I'm sure they do. Drinking coffee with Rick Ames.

Library of Congress

Q: Let's talk a bit about the economy. From 1979 to '81 I was consul general in Naples and I can never forget being told that Naples was the foremost producer of gloves in the world and it didn't have one registered glove factory in it. You had this grey economy. It can be a very difficult economy to deal with.

ALEXANDER: It was difficult to the degree that Washington agencies had a phenomenal appetite for data. It was difficult at the time to explain that we could extrapolate, but we couldn't get the kind of direct data they were looking for because of this grey economy, this underground economy. I would say fully 35 to 40% of the Italian economy was underground. Nonetheless there are tools that we have and today I am sure they are more sophisticated than they were in the 80s. We had tools that we could use to extrapolate certain activity. So I can't say that was a major problem, a major headache. We were just as busy however, with other, more political-economic issues than we were with strictly economic ones. For example, we had a full blown program to supply our embassy in Iraq. Almost all of that stuff was passing through Italy. Either through Italian ports, we had to have procedures in place to get the stuff in and get it out discretely and quietly. On occasion we wouldn't fully disclose to the Italians what we were up to. Other times we would because we needed their help. Plus, we had promised them that we wouldn't ship live ammo, things that could blow up and kill people without letting them know, and on occasion they would get uptight. You're sending an awful lot of stuff through such-and-such a port. "Go elsewhere." "No, we can't, it's got to get here." So, the whole Iraq supply chain took up a lot of my time.

Q: Could you explain. Put it in context why we were sending munitions and other things to Iraq at the time?

ALEXANDER: Saddam was engaged in this holy war with the Iranians. The war that dragged on ten years and killed probably more than a million people on both sides of the line. We supported Iraq in that because we were against the Iranians. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. We didn't like the Iranians and we thought that maybe Saddam was

Library of Congress

the answer to that problem, but as we now know, it didn't work out that way. But, again, we spent a lot of time making sure that Saddam was getting arms and munitions.

Q: How cooperative did you find the Italians in getting your reporting and statistics and all that?

ALEXANDER: I found the Italians to be the most responsive of our friends and allies that I had ever worked with. This doesn't mean they were pushovers and would lie down at every request. They would also dig their heels in and say, "no, we're not going to do that." There were plenty of issues in which we were never able to move them. We did nasty things to them in turn. We wouldn't accept Parma ham for many, many years. Ostensibly for health concerns.

Q: What was the reason, do you think.

ALEXANDER: Some type of worm or microbe. They weren't processing the ham in accordance with our health standards. We were concerned that something would be introduced that would affect our pigs. So we kept Parma ham out for many, many years. Much longer than I think we had to. But, again, they did things to us. They wouldn't let our commercial flights land in Rome. They had to land in Milano and things of that sort. I bring this up not to suggest that we had a contentious, difficult relationship. I don't think we did. In the main, the Italians were among the best friends we had. They genuinely bent over backwards to try to please us. I think there was a lot of good will on the part of Washington as well. There was a lot of things that we were willing to do for them that we might not have done for the French. So I would describe my contacts as being serious, sober people, committed to trying to work with us, but very protective of their own national interest.

Library of Congress

Q: Did you, it continues today, a dispute with the European Union over a common agricultural policy. Which essentially is heavy subsidies for a small group of farmers in both France and Germany. Did this have any resonance in Italy?

ALEXANDER: It did to the extent that the French and the Germans bought off the Italians with other EC programs. To be honest, the Italians also benefited from the common agricultural policy (CAP). The CAP was very good to the Italians as well. There was a lot of inefficient farming being done in Italy. A lot of agricultural products that are critical to their economy: cheese, wines. So they were benefiting also from the common agricultural policy. Not as much as the French. Moreover they were getting a lot of help for the southern part of Italy. All kinds of funny programs they had to develop the south. Essentially these were payoffs for Italy supporting the CAP or other programs of interest to the French and the Germans. This caused us a lot of problems. I can think of two or three occasions where my Italian counterparts pulled me aside and said listen, "we happen to agree with you, but we're not going to side you on this because we have to support the French," or we have to support the Germans, or whoever, because we are in turn getting so and so, we're vulnerable on that point, so you're not going to get any help from us. One of them was, for example, on hormones in U.S. beef exports. This was a very nasty trade dispute that went on for several years. In fact, I think it's still going on. The Europeans accuse us of having hormones in our beef and we said, "hey, listen, these are natural growth hormones, there's nothing unhealthy. We eat them, and you can eat them." "No, no, no. Our kids will grow breasts." And all this other stuff. And we had bitter, bitter fights. The Italians really didn't have a dog in that fight, but they supported the common market, the EU's line. They supported Brussels' line on this because it was in their interest to do so.

Q: Did you find, I'm particularly interested, having been in Naples, they were putting these factories in that were right from the beginning sort of dinosaurs. They offered employment,

Library of Congress

they were inefficient and there wasn't much of a market for steel, autos, and other ones. How did you see Italy juggling it's finances, or it's investment?

ALEXANDER: There were a lot of inefficiencies in the Italian economy just like there were in everybody else's economy. We spent a lot of money subsidizing steel in the United States that we shouldn't have done. The Italians did the same. They used money to support social policy. You cite a perfect example. Steel factories in Naples that were terribly inefficient. But if they gave work to thousands of people... (end of tape)***

Q: This is tape four, side one with Leslie Alexander.

ALEXANDER: The Italian state supported all kinds of projects in Naples and elsewhere in Italy but particularly in southern Italy, things that any economist would have told you, this is nonsensical. They weren't doing it for economic reasons, they were doing it as part of social policy, giving work and spreading the wealth and all this other stuff. And even Fiat, which was supposedly the largest private industrial concern in Italy, did a lot of this in the south, because they were acting essentially as agents for the Italian state. Fiat itself wouldn't have been able to survive had it not been for large injections of cash from the Italian state, so they acted as an agent of the state and doing the same kind of thing.

Q: Who was the, was he still there?

ALEXANDER: Gianni Agnelli. Yes. Agnelli was still very much in charge.

Q: He was sort of a major figure, wasn't he?

ALEXANDER: He was, he was actually a brilliant man. I mean, he was a very impressive man, but he had his blind spots as well and had a family that he had to contend with, because he didn't own all of it. He made mistakes just like, you know, Ford made mistakes. Anyway, Italy was still very much an economy that was dependent on government largesse, whether from Rome or from Brussels, and there were a lot of

Library of Congress

companies that had a lot of shake outs that had to take place. Olivetti collapsed while I was there because the Italian state just couldn't support it anymore. Brussels was getting fed up with it, and we were getting fed up with it, because in order to support these companies you had to violate all kinds of treaties in the GATT, now the WTO, all kinds of rules about government interventions and all this kind of stuff. The Italians were notorious for doing these kinds of things, much to the chagrin of their own European colleagues, not to mention the U.S. So, you had all this stuff going on, some of which concerned us directly, some of which didn't; but all of which Washington wanted to know about so we certainly had enough things to report.

Q: What about the unions there? I mean the communists had a large, what was it, I want to say there's the chisel and the wheel or, I mean, the C-

ALEXANDER: Yes, the C something or another. We had a labor attach# so I didn't have to deal with that issue, fortunately.

Q: Were they a real problem in the Italian economy?

ALEXANDER: I don't know, I guess I would have to say to the extent that they were a problem, they were a problem because they were unionists, not because they were communists. Their ideology I don't think had much to do with whatever positions they took vis-#-vis the industrialists. I think it was classic worker versus management disputes and, I don't know whether it was even left versus right. They did what unions do.

Q: The thing that always interested me in a place like Italy and I guess France too, is they would have these strikes which would last for one day.

ALEXANDER: Yes.

Q: To me, as a good American, I feel if you're having a strike, this is a serious thing and you don't make a show, you just stop and wait until you get something settled. They would

Library of Congress

have an almost symbolic strike which often would be to the detriment of the people. The bank tellers would go on strike without notice. I mean, that sort of thing, for maybe five hours.

ALEXANDER: Yes, yes. You know, the thing that used to frustrate people about the strikes was it was inconceivable to us that a local union could do what you've just said go on strike for five hours and that would ripple nationally because then the bank tellers' union in the next town over would have to go on strike in solidarity with their brethren and this would spread like wildfire. So it often did have the appearance of being rather capricious, but there was a method, there was a logic behind it, as convoluted as it might appear to us, it wasn't quite as capricious as it might seem, the notion of a one day national strike. In fact, it might even be argued that this is part of the Italian genius. Rather than waiting for things to get so bad that they would blow up and you would have a strike that could go on for months, sort of like what has happened periodically in U.S. history, steel industry where I think it was Eisenhower who had to order that they go back to the mines or the steel mills or whatever. In order to avoid that type of dynamic they would have these smaller strikes or they would do things to head off or to obviate the requirement for something much larger, bigger than anyone wanted to really get into. Italians by nature, I think, are intelligent people. They don't draw lines in the sand unless you force them to for a simple reason. Once you draw that line you know you're going to have to cross it and are you prepared for the consequences? A very long and proud history has taught them that in the long run you don't want to go there if you don't have to. It's just not their mentality. So I think this is part of their way of trying to defuse or deal with larger issues. Listen, let's do something small, possibly symbolic, but it will focus everyone's attention on a need to address a larger issue and we will address it and then we'll avoid having to do something crazy. So it works for them, in the main it worked for them. I think the French sometimes could have taken a page from the Italian book rather than shutting down the whole country for days on end. That rarely happened in Italy. If the trains were shut down, the planes

Library of Congress

were still flying and the buses were still rolling. In France everything would shut down, you can't move.

Q: I'm referring to today as we look at particularly Germany and France, their social programs have begun to really strangle the economy, because they don't produce jobs. I mean, nobody put a factory into Germany or France because once an employee ...

ALEXANDER: Labor costs, yes.

Q: You can't get rid of them and the employment costs are so high.

ALEXANDER: Astronomical.

Q: You know, people go elsewhere. Did you see any...

ALEXANDER: Less critical in Italy. Again, 35 to 40 percent of the economy was underground, to the point that the employers weren't paying taxes and they weren't providing those kinds of benefits. Moreover, the Italians had many more small enterprises. They had large industrial conglomerates like Fiat, but as a percentage of GNP (gross national product) small companies contributed much, much more to the Italian economy than was the case in France or Germany. So I think that the impact of- the impact on employers of having to hire a person with all the sick leave and the maternity leave and this leave and that leave and this benefit and that benefit was not as pressing on the average Italian employer who had on the payroll maybe 10 people, eight of whom were relatives.

Q: Yes.

ALEXANDER: Again, I mean, that sounds amusing to a lot of people.

Q: It works.

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: This wasn't a Third World state, either. Italy produces Ferraris and aircraft.

Q: They produce quality.

ALEXANDER: Quality products, exactly, yes.

Q: It doesn't look great, but they produce the best gloves in the world.

ALEXANDER: No, they also have, since you're speaking of gloves and textiles, everyone knows about Italian design. We've all heard the magic names of the Versaces and the Guccis and the Fendis and etcetera. But behind is an enormous technological innovation as well. You walk into factories in China where they're turning out garments at 10 cents a piece, garments that we couldn't make here for less than two bucks a piece or five dollars a piece in Germany; you look at the machines that are doing that and a lot of those machines are Italian machines. So again, anyone who suggests that the Italians are a nation of shopkeepers or little mom and pop operations making gloves, that doesn't reflect accurately the picture of Italy, at least not the picture that I have. This is a modern industrial state with a rather unique approach to labor relations and to payroll taxes, and it works for them.

Q: I know we had a series of explosions at our consulates throughout Italy and all of a sudden we had to report how much we were paying local people which we hadn't been doing before. This meant, of course, that, as we were reporting it to the government they could tax a significant number of local employees.

ALEXANDER: Yes.

Q: There were various scandals going around as there are in every country, with Eni and also the Vatican. Did any of these erupt and cause you concern while you were there?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: Well, the Vatican, the Banco Ambrosia thing, I wasn't affected at all by that. Some of the Eni scandals, to a certain extent. I mean, Washington wanted to know what was going on and what was the significance of these things. Neither my staff or I spent a lot of time on these issues. We would report, them but everyone else was reporting them, anyone could pick up a newspaper to find out. So, no, I'm not going to say that we spent a lot of time on those issues.

Q: One of the things that used to amuse me, again, I was not an Italian hand or even a European sitting down in Naples for a short time, but looking at the change of governments that went on and we would be asked what is the reaction down south? The reaction was a shrug of the shoulders. But seems like our political sector spent an inordinate amount of time reporting on the minutia of ministerial changes and all this. Was this of any particular interest to your section?

ALEXANDER: Much less so than it was to the political section. The reality was, I think you very appropriately described it; it was musical chairs, it was people changing portfolios. The main actors were always the same, it was a kabuki dance.

Q: I know.

ALEXANDER: You know? And, but Andreotti was also Andreotti, whether he was a foreign minister or the prime minister or the head of the party or what have you; he was always there, as were the others. Basically foreign policy didn't change, industrial policy didn't change. At times there were questions of my brother's bank needs some help and you're not doing it so I'm going to bring down this government so I can do it. In the big scheme of things these weren't sea changes. Sea changes happened once every 20 years and it was usually provoked by exogenous factors, not internal ones. So no, it didn't matter to me who the minister of industry was or who the head of Eni was; it didn't change my world, it didn't change my issues. I often question whether it really changed anybody's world.

Library of Congress

Q: Yes, I just have a feeling that it kept the political section busy.

ALEXANDER: They were responding to Washington. I could understand why the desk officer in Washington or the office director would want to know, I certainly would, what are the implications for us? The prime minister is no longer the person that we dealt with for the past three weeks, it's somebody that we're going to have deal with for three weeks until they get another prime minister, but after a while the names were all the same and it was like having a deck of cards. Well, this week the king of spades is the prime minister. Okay. The next week, oh, now it's the king of hearts. In other words you know who these people are, you've got the bios, you just pull them out and say okay.

Q: Did you get involved in the Pershing missile thing, did that have any effect? In a way the south was going to get a little more in the way of construction there. Did Sicily play any particular role?

ALEXANDER: No, not really, other than being the recipient of Brussels' largesse, you know, as part of the payoff the Italians to support whatever the French and the Germans wanted.

Q: Because the European Union was so basically economic, did you have to keep a watching brief on what was happening in Brussels?

ALEXANDER: Well we did, but that was taken care of because all of the embassies, all of the EU embassies were plugged in and recipients of Brussels. Our mission in Brussels would inform us, send us copies of most of the things that they were sending back; at least those things that had implications for the European posts in general. So we were well plugged in to what our embassy in Brussels was doing and was being told and what they were saying to the Europeans, so we would speak to one another. I had several conversations with my counterpart, for example, in Paris, on issues that were of common interest. We had to be plugged in and I think we were plugged in. Moreover,

Library of Congress

the Europeans themselves, I have to say, were very good about sharing information with us. I had a very dear friend in the local EU office in Rome and I could call her up and ask her any question or say, "is your boss free for lunch?" "Yes, he'd be glad to have lunch with you." And we would go out and I would say, "listen, I'm trying to understand this," or, "my government has a problem with this, can you give me your take on this?" They were very good. Again, as many trade disputes as we might have, and they exist to this day, whether you're talking about subsidizing Boeing or subsidizing Airbus, whatever the issue is, the Europeans and the U.S. are still basically friends. We disagree on a heck of a lot of things, but we agree on a heck of a lot of things. Almost everybody in the EU is in NATO. We are allies and there is an amazing amount of cooperation that goes on. We tend to focus on the disputes and the differences, it's not like dealing with the USSR. At times it could be just as acrimonious but the relationship was very, very different. It was generally marked by a certain amount of warmth and candor and openness and the willingness to try to resolve our differences. It could get nasty when we got into fights over, you know, subsidies, agriculture or to aircraft production but in the main it was a good relationship, a good, positive, beneficial relationship.

Q: Well then, you left there in when, in '89?

ALEXANDER: September of 1989.

Q: Just before the fall.

ALEXANDER: Just before the fall, just a few months before.

Q: Where'd you go?

ALEXANDER: To Washington.

Q: To do what?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: Deputy director for the Caribbean.

Q: This is your first Washington assignment, wasn't it?

ALEXANDER: Yes it was. Well, actually my second. My first was in the '70s doing drugs, but this is my first mainstream Washington assignment. I didn't want to do this work. I joined the Foreign Service, I wanted to be a diplomat. I used to tell people, for me there are diplocrats and there are diplomats. The diplocrats have their strengths, their talents. They're the ones who go up on the Hill and spend most of their time in Washington and they make the policy. The diplomats are those of us who are overseas who are comfortable speaking these foreign languages, learning the cultures, operating, carrying out the policy. I felt that my strength was in the field. I guess it's not unlike military people. There are those, a George Patton, who was a warrior, he liked to go out there and fight. There are, like Eisenhower, who were the strategy guys and the ones who would hold together the alliance and let George go out and kick the Germans' rear end, you know? I just was more comfortable being out there in the field interacting with the foreigners than I was here trying to fight inter-agency battles. I just didn't want to do that.

Q: It comes as it comes to all men, that you have to come to Washington to do this.

ALEXANDER: Yes, yes. So I came to Washington.

Q: So you came in '89.

ALEXANDER: In '89 and I stayed until '91. During which time I focused mostly on Haiti because that was the biggest headache of my portfolio.

Q: Oh yes.

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: And we had a few other problems: hurricanes in Jamaica, a major drug trafficker cum prime minister dictator in Suriname by the name of Bouterse, who caused us a lot of problems.

Q: *Oh yes.*

ALEXANDER: We had an attempted coup in Trinidad led by a Muslim fanatic, Abu Bakr, who I understand is still causing some problems in Trinidad.

Q: *Well, let's talk about Suriname first. What was the problem there?*

ALEXANDER: Suriname was under the boot of D#sir# Bouterse who was a former military, Surinamese military officer, corporal turned sergeant turned colonel turned emperor or something or another. I can't remember what rank it was but he was a thug. He participated in the assassination of several cabinet members and is alleged to have pulled the trigger himself, while his henchmen killed the rest. They massacred some 12 or 13 of them in the '70s and took over the government. He was in office until the Dutch and the Americans just made it impossible for him to stay. He ran Suriname for probably 12 years or so, if I remember correctly, and then stepped down but very much stayed the power behind the thrown. He became involved in drug trafficking out of Colombia heading principally to the Netherlands, gave shelter to drug traffickers, aided and abetted in the shipments of their product to the Netherlands and to Europe in general. This was an all around bad guy, accused of all kinds of terrible things, arms smuggling and everything else. He was always there intimidating the government, trying to get the government to do whatever he wanted done to support his particular agenda. So we were frequently at odds with the Surinamese government because they wanted to do things that were just downright illegal or stupid or unhelpful or all of the above and sure enough, we would always find Bouterse's fingerprints all over whatever they were trying to do or not do. So he was a bad boy that caused the little tiny Suriname to be the source of a lot of unnecessary attention. Not just my attention but even the assistant secretary's attention.

Library of Congress

One day, he said, "I can't understand, here I've got all these countries like Argentina and Brazil," and he says, "I spend a remarkable amount of time on this little country of 400,000 people stuck off the northern coast of South America that nobody's ever heard about. The secretary thinks I'm insane when I bring it up, but it's like thorn in your foot. It's not going to kill you but it's so uncomfortable that you've got to deal with it." That was Suriname.

Q: What were you doing?

ALEXANDER: Trying to keep them on the straight and narrow. Flying down there, trying to buck them up, asking the ambassador to go in and talk to the prime minister and buck him up and making sure that all the FBI investigations we were running there weren't stumbling all over one and another. A lot of small but niggling, irritating issues that we had to deal with and most of them, again, involved the criminal activities of this former dictator who was still the strongman: drugs, prostitution, white slavery rings, arms smuggling, all kinds of crazy things.

Q: Were we thinking of any sort of operation or doing anything like that?

ALEXANDER: Well yes, there was one uncomfortable incident with an operation that came undone. We spent a lot time on damage control, but I prefer not to get into details about that.

Q: Okay. I think I interviewed somebody a long time ago ...

ALEXANDER: It was an FBI sting that went bad, and what made it worse was they didn't clear it with us. They had to come to us after we discovered it, after it was blown so we had a lot of egg on our face and a lot of damage control there. I won't go into more detail.

Q: I interviewed somebody who was an ambassador there way back and said that at one point the military came in just to take a look at the place because they were causing

Library of Congress

trouble then and asked could we take it over and answer was sure, we could send a battalion down and take it but then what do you do? And that was sort of the end of it.

ALEXANDER: It's funny though that you cite that, because we actually on one occasion made it known to the powers that be down there that we were going to do something along those lines; we were just going to just take the place over. Not run it, but we were going to send some force down there, kill the bad guys and have our way with them. We weren't, but they believed it, so that gave us six months of tranquility. You can't pull that all the time because eventually, you know, they call your bluff.

Q: Yes. Well then let's go to Trinidad. What was happening there?

ALEXANDER: This gentleman, Abu Bakr and his followers, they were Muslims but it was more of an ethnic rather than religious thing. They were at odds with the regime and stormed the parliament, killed some people, took the parliament hostage and threatened to kill them all, major crisis, short lived, fortunately. Anyway, to make a long story short Abu Bakr was arrested, the prime minister and most of the government was freed and the crisis was averted. But Abu Bakr did have sympathizers in Trinidad and Tobago, mostly among the disenfranchised, but we were concerned because while the British had left behind their former West Indian colonies a strong tradition of democracy, leaders who where minor players were players nonetheless on a big, big stage; players like Michael Manley and Eugenia Charles from Dominica.

Q: Who just died.

ALEXANDER: Yes. These people were well known. Many of them were respected in London and Paris and Washington because they were adherents to democratic ideals. They were defenders of human rights. They may have represented countries that were small and impoverished but again, no one ever accused Mrs. Charles in Dominica of being a dictator and no one in Dominica screamed about human rights being abused or

Library of Congress

anything. It just wasn't their tradition in most of what used to be called the British West Indies.

Trinidad was viewed as being an extremely stable and democratic country. It is an oil producer; not on the scale of a Venezuela but still, a prosperous country, a model for its neighbors. To have a democracy threatened in this fashion, have someone take over the parliament and try to kill the prime minister was something that concerned us. We didn't know whether this was a one time thing, was this going to spread? Was this a manifestation of a larger problem that had completely gotten by us? We didn't know. There was some concern for a week or so until we were able to sort it out. That sticks in my mind. That I remember very well. It was almost as shocking as the Tejero thing in Madrid. The Guardia took over the parliament there in January of '81; you just didn't expect that kind of thing to happen in a European country. Even Spain. We thought that was all in the past. I think they're, well again, not comparable, but I think the reaction was similar to what happened in Trinidad. This is the British West Indies. I mean, they don't do things like this.

Q: Well then, Haiti. You were there during the Bush administration.

ALEXANDER: Yes.

Q: Bush one.

ALEXANDER: Bush one, yes. Yes, I was there. Well, I was here, excuse me.

Q: I mean here, in Washington.

ALEXANDER: Baby Doc had left and things were very unstable and we were trying to move them towards elections. Alvin Adams had just gone down there about the time I arrived here in Washington and had done a masterful job in getting the body politic there to come together and agreed to have elections and do it in a transparent, democratic way. He had to find someone to run the country in an interim basis and he managed to convince

Library of Congress

them to appoint a former judge, Madam Trouillot, as the interim president until they could have elections. They went to elections in 1990 and they voted for the former priest, Jean Bertrand Aristide. In the run up to the elections and the time after Aristide was elected there was a crisis. People were being murdered, killed, tortured, run off, it was a country gone mad. That took, without exaggeration, probably 70 percent of my time, which now in retrospect makes me ask myself, why did I go to that post immediately following my two years in Caribbean Affairs? I went to Haiti as DCM in '91.

Q: Well, how did we view Aristide at the time?

ALEXANDER: With great suspicion. Contrary to what we were accused, of being anti-Aristide and frankly, Washington, and I say this with total, absolute conviction, was agnostic. We had no candidate. Everyone says we wanted this guy Mark Bazin, who was a former IMF World Bank official and we didn't want Aristide. This is absolute nonsense. We did not have a candidate. I think if you were to ask policymakers in Washington privately, independently, "who would you like to have?" Of the two names I mentioned I think all of them would have said Bazin because they knew Bazin. He was a known quantity. Aristide was a former priest with a record of having denounced the U.S. for all kinds of things. People weren't terribly comfortable with the notion that this priest was going to be the president, but there was no program to advance one over the other. There was no money given under the table to help a candidate. This is all fiction. When Aristide was elected I think that the State Department bent over backwards to work with him. I remember this as clear as I remember anything. The then-assistant secretary, Bernie Aronson, said this man was democratically elected, it is our responsibility to work with him, to help him to help his country and that's what we're going to do. That was our policy. As a person I don't think anyone was particularly warm and fuzzy about Aristide, but we were determined to work with him and we just couldn't.

He was elected in 1990, in December of 1990. I went down to Haiti with the then-assistant secretary, with, among other people, Congressman Porter Goss, now the head of the CIA,

Library of Congress

and Congressman Jim Oberstar, who was the only Creole speaking member of the U.S. Congress. We were the official Washington delegation to observe the elections. We met with all the major candidates, including Aristide, right before the election and I'll never forget this, we were going in to meet Aristide as President Carter was coming out of his meeting. He led his own delegation from the Carter Center, and we stopped and we asked the president a few questions, "well how'd the meeting go?" And he said, "well you know, it's not all that easy." One of the members of his delegation made the observation and the president didn't disagree with him, he said, "this guy is a little strange." And Barry Aronson, the assistant secretary asked the president, "what happened," and the president said, "we asked him two or three times, listen, if you don't win, will you respect the outcome, the election result if you're not the winner? And Aristide had replied well, if the elections are free and fair I will win." President Carter is reported to have asked again, "well if again you don't win, will you respect the outcome?" And he repeated the same thing, "if the elections are free and fair I will win." My sense was what bothered the president was this view, this absolute conviction that he was going to win. He did win. He obviously knew something we didn't, but I think it was troubling, nonetheless, that he wouldn't even entertain the notion that there was any other outcome possible. There were other remarks that he made to us that I think made up uncomfortable and left us with the feeling that the man was, again, strange. Some of his detractors said that he was mentally unbalanced. I don't think he was, but he certainly wasn't an easy man to understand. He wasn't an easy man to speak with, and he didn't seem to have any affection for North Americans, that's for sure.

Q: Well then, what about boat people? What were we doing while you were on the desk?

ALEXANDER: We didn't have a major problem with boat people. Major in the sense, I'm talking in terms of numbers. There were always boat people, you know, 10 here, 20 there. As they were picked up, they were returned, much as they are now. The boat people became an issue when I was actually in Haiti when the numbers went from 10, 20, 50 to literally thousands. At one point we had thousands and thousands of people bobbing around in the Caribbean and the Atlantic trying to make their way to Florida. This was after

Library of Congress

Aristide's ouster, and it reached its peak in 1992. It was a major headache. They were being picked up and sent back, because that was the policy of the United States. They didn't want to encourage people to take to the seas. We'll never know how many of them perished, certainly several thousand. That was a major problem when I was in Haiti, not when I was on the desk.

Q: Alright. I was just looking at the time, this might be a good place to stop. We'll pick this up in 1991.

ALEXANDER: Okay.

Q: When you're off to Haiti as DCM.

ALEXANDER: Okay.

Q: Today is the third of November, 2005. This is tape five with Leslie Alexander. We left you the last time, you're off to Haiti; you were in Haiti from when to when?

ALEXANDER: From August of 1991 until May or June of 1993. End of May, early June. End of May, let's say.

Q: And you were DCM?

ALEXANDER: Well no. Yes. I went to Haiti as DCM. I emphasize the August because that's somewhat significant. I arrived in August and one month later there was the coup against the then-president, President Jean Bertrand Aristide. All hell broke loose. It's not that I had been at post for several months, was prepared to deal with this. Fortunately, because of the job that I came from, I had the background and the knowledge to be able to deal with what was going to be a very, very, very tough tour.

Q: Could you talk a bit about what happened? I mean, sort of the events?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: At the end of September, the evening of the 30th, 29th-30th, the military decided that Aristide had to go. This was based on months and months and months of what the rank and file, what they called the petit soldat (little soldier) perceived as Aristide eroding their privileges, their position in society and other provocations, real and imagined. In any event, he had to go. So with the collusion of some NCOs (non-commissioned officers) and relatively junior officers they decided that they needed a change of leadership so they threw him out of office. There was no evidence at the time; certainly we in the embassy had nothing to warn us that this was in the works. We knew that there was a lot of unhappiness but not just in the military. The bourgeois segments of society, the middle class, the upper class certainly were unhappy with Aristide, not so much because he had eroded their privileges; in point of fact he hadn't. I was always confused by this. His supporters in the congress and elsewhere said that this was a coup instigated by the wealthy, the morally repugnant elite, the MREs as they called them, against Aristide because he was trying to help the poor. That was the most nonsensical allegation because, number one, he didn't help the poor, but at the same time he didn't really do anything to change the privileged position of the elites. He was an incompetent, as simple as that. He didn't do anything.

Q: While he was there, did sort of his strangeness, come across?

ALEXANDER: Yes, yes. That played into, I think, part of his problem. He gave provocative speeches. He encouraged horrendous deeds, the worst of which was Pere Lebrun. To make a long story short, without getting into too much Haitian history, this was necklacing. It was a buzzword for putting a tire around someone's neck and setting it on fire. It was a horrible way to kill people, but it was done on more than one occasion. Aristide would give speeches in Creole, and those of us who understood Creole would hear them and we'd say, "I can't believe the man has just said what he said." Basically he would say it's okay to go out and burn people. If you find that people are not with the program, if they're not with

Library of Congress

the people then you know what to do. You have the instrument; you have the tool that you need to see the record straight, do the right thing.

This was alarming to a lot of people, and it was done on more than one occasion. I think the straw that broke the camel's back was when a very prominent politician well known, widely admired, a moderate, was a victim of this Pere Lebrun. Even the military stood up and said, "If Aristide is going to go after a guy like this he'll go after anybody. He's putting us on notice that we might be next." I think the fear was exaggerated. I have no doubts that had Aristide been able to get rid of the military, he would have done it in a flash, but there was little that I could see, this is just that he was in a position to do that.

After months and months and months of provocations, of inflammatory speeches, no puns intended, of actions that suggested that he was moving in an anti-democratic direction, taking on or using the Duvalier's playbook, creating his own personal gang of thugs, his political opposition, the military and the elites, began to become increasingly concerned about where this was going to end up if unchecked. Washington was becoming increasingly concerned, because we found that his voice was not one of moderation and certain things were going on in the shadows that made us very uncomfortable. I think one of the more egregious cases involved the murder of two or three young men, one of whom had a girlfriend who was the object of the desires of one of Aristide's killers. These guys were found dead, I can't remember now whether there were two or three of them; it was pretty clear from the information that we gathered that they had been bumped off by some police guy who was closely in line to Aristide's people. He had killed these kids essentially because he wanted the girlfriend. The ambassador spoke with President Aristide two or three or four times, said, "listen, you've talked about justice. This is a horrible case and we need to get to the bottom of this, because it's really gotten a lot of attention and people are suggesting that if boys like this, decent boys, can be killed under very funny circumstances then anybody can be killed." Aristide promised he would look into it and do something about it; it was never done.

Library of Congress

Anyway, come September, Aristide had been in office for, well since February, so how ever many months that is. Come the end of September, the military is feeling very, very threatened by Aristide, and they decide that it's time for him to go. So at the end of September they run him out of the palace and take over the country and the generals, the senior military, find themselves in a rather untenuous position. They have a revolt on their hands, among their own troops who are saying the president has to go. The head of the army, ironically, was the man who headed up all the security for the election that Aristide won, and made it possible for Aristide to become president, Raoul Cedras, who was later vilified and accused of being the ringleader in this whole coup thing, and there is absolutely no evidence that we had to suggest that that was true, woke up much as we did at 11:30, 12:00 at night when it became clear that this coup was well underway to be told, the army's gone berserk and they've kicked out the president and they've taken over.

So, he gets dragged into this thing and we have this crisis on our hands because Haiti's first democratically elected president in anyone's memory has just been run out of office and is in exile. Aristide eventually winds up in Washington, where he starts stirring up the Congressional Black Caucus. He convinces them that this is Black thing, that this is the Black masses against the light skinned elites of Haiti, which again is absolutely nonsense, but it was something that Aristide, being the clever man that he was, understood what buttons to push in the Black Congressional Caucus and he used this race thing. We in the embassy were bemused by this, because anyone who knows Haiti, Haitians and Creole, their language, when we got Black congressmen coming down to the country, Haitians, well, the Haitian word for them was blanche, which means, in French, white, which means in Haitian Creole foreigner. Foreigners were blanche. You could be Japanese, you could be Asian, you could be Black, but if you a foreigner you were a blanche, you were a white. Of course, they didn't understand this, they had ways of saying he is a Black white person or an Asian white person. The point I'm trying to make is is that Haitians' view of race and color is very different than an African American's view of race and color and it goes back to the history of Haiti. Haiti didn't have the generations of slavery that we had in the U.S.

Library of Congress

Haitians never developed this self-loathing. Haitians never developed this attitude that whites are better than me, and you might not admit such a thing but this deep ingrained belief in the superiority of Europeans or white people. The reason why Haitians didn't have that was because they kicked them all out. They killed them and threw them out very early on in the game. So you didn't have this slave generation, slave mentality that was bred into people. Slavery didn't exist long enough in Haiti for that to happen. Moreover, what army was it that they beat? They beat Napoleon's army. That was the best army in the world at the time. This was like the Vietnamese beating the U.S. The Haitians, quite to the contrary, didn't see white people as being superior. On occasion they saw them as being inferior. Hey, we kicked your butts, but at best they saw them as just other people with a different skin color, no more, no less. That's the end of it.

Aristide, of course, knew this. He had certain fixations about the way he looked. There is a correlation in Haiti, often, that the lighter skinned you are the more likely you are to be higher up on the totem pole. That, again, wasn't an absolute, and all you had to do was look at Duvalier and all of his cronies to see that wasn't the case, it wasn't etched in stone. Aristide, in exile in Washington used his race card with the Congressional Black Caucus to convince them to convince the administration that he had been wronged and we had to do something about it. There was a change in administration: President Bush Senior left office, President Clinton took over and this desire of the Black Caucus to support Aristide suddenly had resonance in the White House, while under Bush Senior it wasn't. We in the embassy, in the meantime, were caught in this nasty Washington game of what do we do? On the one hand everything we knew about Aristide, from every source, from intelligence we gathered, from conversations, from his own speeches, indicated that he was not a good president and that his policies were not going to be beneficial to us, it wasn't in our national interest to have this man as the president of Haiti. Yet on the other hand we had others, and I think legitimately so, saying be that as it may, this man was democratically elected and we have to support the principle of democracy. This was our policy dilemma and I'm sure Haiti was not the first nor the last country where we had this problem. How

Library of Congress

do you support a person who was democratically elected, but doesn't rule as a democrat? Who is the antithesis of the democratic leader.

While Washington was debating this, we in the embassy were sort of stuck trying to figure out what do we do? We had thousands of boat people who seized the opportunity to take to the seas screaming, "we're political refugees, you've got to take us in."

Q: In a way, wasn't it the boat exodus that began to dominate political thinking?

ALEXANDER: Yes. I think so. I think that the boat exodus was the catalyst for the White House's eventual decision to take on Haiti as a major foreign policy issue. It has been suggested, I have no evidence to support this other than comments that were made by people, as I never saw any intel that actually supported the notion that Aristide himself provoked the boat people exodus. In fact, it was called the Haitian nuclear bomb expressly to get Washington's attention and force Washington's hand, the argument being that this looks bad for you, you've got all these Haitians, these very visibly Black people washing up on these white beaches on Florida being filmed on CNN. The contrast was stark. There they are, being rounded up and told they have to go back to a supposedly murderous military regime, while at the same time you have these fair skinned Cubans washing up on their rafts and they're welcomed and embraced and oh, they can stay but these poor Black Haitians can't. Well they can't because they're Black and you're racists and the whole nine yards. Aristide and his supporters used that imagery very well and again, I don't blame them. I would have done the same thing. You know, you play the cards that you've been dealt, you use the weapons at hand and the boat people were the perfect tool for Aristide to garner the kind of support that he needed to return to Haiti.

Again, my life was made miserable. I was dealing with this issue at the same time that we were in evacuation status. We had a skeletal staff.

Q: Why were we evacuated?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: Well, for two or three reasons. Number one, we couldn't support the size staff we had before, because the first thing that the Bush administration did, around November of 1991, was to impose an economic embargo on Haiti. Economic embargos usually don't work, but they can have ferocious impacts, especially in a country as poor as Haiti. We were under an economic embargo. For the embassy what that was meant was that we no longer had supermarkets that could feed our staffs, where we could go and buy food and things of that sort. There were certain everyday realities that we had to deal with and couldn't, so we had to cut down the staff. There was also the fear of violence. Again, you had a military regime in power and they killed people and we were concerned that if they got upset with us they could turn their guns on us. So, for a host of reasons, we were in evacuation status, principally because we couldn't support the families and the staff that we had and also because of fears for their security.

One of the consequences of being under this embargo was that we were not allowed to make payments to the de facto government for anything which also made things difficult because there was the state electricity monopoly, and a state telephone monopoly. If you wanted to have phone service, if you wanted to have electricity, you had to deal with the government, because they owned these services. I was sitting in my office one day and I get a phone call from someone in the Treasury Department, the head of the embargo office, who says to me, basically, that I had to stop paying the bills, the light bills, since I was supposedly directing this. I said, "well, that's fine and dandy but what do I do? If we don't pay them we're not going to have electricity. If we have no electricity we don't have an embassy." He says, "well I don't care about that. Executive order whatever-it-was says that, Haiti's under embargo, so you have to stop paying these bills under penalty of so and so." Well I blew up and I said, "is this a joke or are you serious?" He says, "do you think this is a joke? Do you think this is amusing? You're violating the law." I said, "well I don't know whether it's amusing, I think it's absolutely insane, because the law also requires statutorily for me to provide for the protection and welfare of U.S. citizens in this country of whom there are several thousand and I can't do that if I don't have electricity. So we

Library of Congress

have a dilemma.” And he says to me, “no, I don't have any dilemma. You have a dilemma. I'm telling you that you are going to” I can't remember what I was threatened with “if you continue.” So I said, “fine, fine, fine,” and hung up the phone and immediately called the principle desk, Bob Gelbard, in Western Hemisphere Affairs, what was then ARA, and I said, “Bob, I've got this problem, I've got this lunatic at Treasury from the embargo office” or something, I can't remember what it was called, “telling me that I can't pay the light bill and the phone bill. If I can't do that; I'm not going to have the services which means you're not going to be able to call me up 40 times a day as you do with all of your bizarre requests and instructions.” He said, “don't worry about it; we'll take care of it.” A day goes by, two days, a week, a month, the guy calls me again from Treasury, all upset. I'm still paying these bills, he has evidence to suggest stuff and they're going to have to take some kind of drastic dramatic action. So I call Gelbard again. I said, “hey, I thought you guys took care of.” “Well, it's not as simple as we thought.” And I said, “come on, don't do this to me.” I said, “this is the kind of thing that you read about in novels, you see in movies, but we've got thousands of boat people that you want to repatriate and I've got officers running all over the country following every single one of the repatriated boat people to ensure that they're not being killed, tortured, abused or anything else as they're alleging they are and I've got my own government threatening me with legal action, because I'm trying to carry out the government's business. I don't want to deal with this. This is a Washington problem, you deal with it.” They never solved it. State was never able to get Treasury to back off on this notion. I mean, we continued to do what we did, but I suppose if someone really wanted to do something bad to me, they could have. This is the kind of insanity that we were dealing with.

Even more insane was the number of human rights organizations, media, Aristide people, boat people advocates who were screaming and yelling that people were being slaughtered by the thousands in Haiti and how could we send back the boat people to certain peril? The fact was people weren't being slaughtered by the thousands. The best we could figure is 300-350 people were killed during the coup itself. That's a lot of

Library of Congress

people; I'm not going to argue that, particularly if it's one of your loved ones, but after that things settled down. That doesn't mean that this was paradise on earth, but the military was not out slaughtering thousands of Haitians. For one thing, there were 7,000 soldiers in the entire Haitian army in a country of seven million with little or no gas, little or no ammunition. They just weren't out killing people; there was no reason for it, just no requirement for it. We were reading these tales and being told that thousands of people are being massacred, so we had people running all over the country to the sites of these supposed massacres asking the locals "can you please take me to your massacre?" And they would respond, "what massacre do you want? There was a massacre, as they say, in 1803, when we killed 200 French people and cut off their heads." "No, no not that massacre. The massacre from the petit soldat that happened last week" and everyone would start laughing.

Anyway, after two or three or four months of chasing down these so-called massacres, we said, "listen, this is BS (bullshit). There are no massacres." Aristide's people insisting that the embassy's in collusion with the military and they're blind and they're stupid and this. We said, "listen, send anyone you want. We'll go there together." Jesse Jackson came down. We went with Jesse to the site of a so-called massacre so he could see there was no massacre. We couldn't find a massacre. There was a suggestion that they covered up the evidence really well, but again, you can't hide thousands of bodies. The point is, we were being challenged by our own people. "You sure there's no massacre?" "Well, I can't state categorically. I can't prove a negative, but I can tell you if there is one there's absolutely no evidence that there has been one, so what do you want us to do?"

So we were going through all this madness, thousands of boat people, who we've got to send back and have to ensure that they're safe. How do I that? I have an evacuated embassy, I have no police force. If some guy comes from the countryside somewhere and goes back because he's been repatriated, I can't post a bodyguard. Well, you figure it out. These were the kinds of instructions I was getting.

Library of Congress

Q: I have the feeling that when the Clinton administration came in they're really unsure of themselves in regards to foreign affairs. I mean, they removed our ambassador from Israel because he said that we can't give a definite monetary support. I had the feeling that they were so afraid of criticism that there wasn't a very firm hand at the helm.

ALEXANDER: I can't indict the administration for being foreign policy neophytes, I can't do it, because I don't know whether the dynamic that you describe had any effect on Haiti policy. The assistant secretary-

Q: For Latin American Affairs.

ALEXANDER: For Latin American Affairs, while appointed by Republican President George Bush, was in fact a Democrat. I don't think, that in the case of Haiti the problem was uncertainty. In fact, I would venture to say it was just the opposite. It was certainty. It was a certainty that what they were being told by Aristide and his people was the truth. Everyone else was wrong including the embassy, including the CIA, including the Pentagon and so on and so forth. I thought that it was that the policy was based more on the sort of polarizing view of Haiti; you're either good or bad and there's nothing in between: we have defined Aristide as being good therefore, by definition, anything else and everyone else is bad. That was convenient and appealed to something that's very inherently, innately American. Too many times in our history we have based our foreign policy on how we feel about somebody. If we like the leader of a country we'll do everything that person wants, even if it means working against our own interests. History is replete with examples; the Shah of Iran, Noriega, Somoza, to name a few where we're really on the wrong side of the issue. And if we don't like someone we demonize them and everything associated with that person. We're against them. Again, history is replete with examples, most recently Saddam. This is, I think, the great Achilles heel of U.S. foreign policy. America leaders do it and the American people do it. We like our foreign policy to be black and white. We don't want any grays, we don't want any vegetables, we just want meat. We have to. In order to sell our policy it's much easier to give it a face. A good face in the case of Haiti, Aristide, a

Library of Congress

priest, a man of the people trying to help his country after years of brutal dictatorship. Or we give it an evil face, Saddam; he has nuclear weapons, he's killed people, he's going to come and drop a nuclear weapon on Washington and San Francisco. That's what we do. Other countries, I guess, do it to a certain degree but we've perfected the art.

Q: There are two groups that can be quite important. One, in the first place, did you end up with a lot of the glitterati, you know, sort of the Hollywood types? The others were the Sandinistas, as they called them.

ALEXANDER: Yes, very good. Well, we didn't get the Sandinistas. We got a lot of the glitterati; a lot of Hollywood actors got dragged into this, all of them in support of Aristide himself. Aristide the man, Aristide the person, which is again, used to alarm us because, if this is about democracy, let's not wrap anyone up in the flag of democracy. That's a process that involves a lot of people. Susan Sarandon and people like that. Academy Awards, they made statements, this is for Aristide and the people of Haiti. Danny Glover and others who were dragged into this thing. A lot of the Washington illuminati also, you know.

Q: Could you open their minds to see this is a complicated thing?

ALEXANDER: No, no, no. No, because again they had made it a personality thing that was easy and it was fun. It didn't require a great understanding of the issues, the subtleties. You just subscribed to the notion that Aristide had been wronged, that he was a good man and we had to right this wrong. Had it been that way it would have been so much easier. But when you tried to explain to these people that this coup didn't happen in a vacuum, this man actually encouraged people to go out and kill people and people were killed; this man, because of a beef with the Vatican, he was a former priest, went out and encouraged a mob to sack the Vatican's embassy that damn near killed the Vatican's DCM and he was horribly hurt. No apologies were offered, and every week there was some violence that was incited either in speeches, very clever, often nuanced, but to those in

Library of Congress

the know clear messages from Aristide in his public speeches in Creole, which again was another problem because none of these illuminati, glitterati and policymakers understood the language and even if they did, Haitians loved to speak in parables. Anyway, nobody wanted to hear all this. Basically we were a bunch of troglodytes, right wingers who were obviously against democracy. In fact, people wanted my head because the ambassador had left, he wasn't replaced and I took over the embassy.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

ALEXANDER: Al Adams. I was there for about 10 months when Al left and then I was told, "well we're not sending an ambassador, you're taking over the embassy." Okay, fine. So that's how I spent the rest of my tour: as the head of the embassy. I had people screaming for my head, you know. I said, "guys, listen, I'm paid to tell the truth. Now, I may be wrong but there's a world of difference between being wrong and lying. I believe what I'm telling you. Again, if it's wrong I apologize."

Q: What about the media.

ALEXANDER: There were great news people.

Q: Television is not usually as serious. They're out for the sound bite.

ALEXANDER: No, the print media. The reporters that were covering Haiti were among the best I've seen anywhere in the world. There was Howard French from The New York Times, Lee Hochstetter from The Post, Don [inaudible] from The Miami Herald. There were others, Bernie Dietrich; these guys were great reporters. They knew their beat, they knew this country and you couldn't BS these guys.

Q: Were they making any headway?

ALEXANDER: Well, this is the fascinating thing. Up until this time I had spent most of my career abroad. I was terribly naive; I was 41 or so, but I was still in many respects

Library of Congress

a babe. Nowhere the seasoned, mature diplomat that I thought I was and this was most educating. In the case of Howard French of The New York Times, I saw a man basically get trashed by his own newspaper, because they didn't like what he was reporting. Howard was summoned to New York, saying, "well how can you be reporting that there aren't all these massacres, that maybe Aristide wasn't the purist, the saint that everyone else claims he is? Are you really, really wrong? Because, we're getting a lot of complaints from our readers that we're obviously crazy." And Howard would say, "I'm sorry, but you pay me to report things as I see them and I can't say that Aristide was this beautiful, saintly man. He wasn't." They removed Howard. I understand from some of the others that they were getting the same pressure from their editors, saying, "well you know, what you're telling us just doesn't jive with what we're hearing from other sources: that these people are fleeing Haiti because they're being massacred by the thousands." The response was, "no, they're not taking to the boats and fleeing Haiti because they're getting massacred. They're fleeing because they know that this is a window of opportunity. Under normal circumstances they'd be turned back by the U.S. Coast Guard, but because of the political turmoil they actually have a chance to make a claim for political asylum, a chance which they never had before. All they have to do is say that someone was killed." Every single allegation, and the allegations were in the thousands, that were made by Haitian boat people who were picked up and brought to the U.S. or to Guantanamo, where we eventually brought them, every single allegation we had to run down.

We actually were able to bring back people to the post. We were in evacuated status and after several months we were able to bring back almost all of our staff as we ratcheted up our boat people, returning refugee, program and then we brought others on board. We had so many TDYers that at one point I think we had 700 people in the mission, with 300 of them involved directly or indirectly with the whole boat people issue. Of the thousands of allegations made of murders and all this stuff not one of them were we able to substantiate. The usual scenario was Jean would allege that he came from the village of whatever in whatever part of Haiti, it doesn't matter, and that the soldiers had broken

Library of Congress

into his house or some people has broken in and they had killed his mother, his father, raped his sister and burned down the house. We would go to the village where Jean was from, we'd find his mom, we'd find his dad, we'd find his sister. We'd ask his sister, "were you raped by soldiers?" and the sister says, "no, I wasn't raped by anybody. Who told you this?" We wouldn't tell them. The parents, "you are Monsieur So and So, you are Madam So and So?" "Yes, yes, yes." "So you have a son named Jean?" "Yes, yes, yes." "Do you know where your son is?" "Le boat. Over there." Overseas or something. "Okay. But you're okay? No one has come and beat you?" "No. Why do you ask us these questions?" Every single one of these cases followed a patten more or less like this.

I don't blame the boat people. I used to tell reporters, if I were Haitian, a poor Haitian, I would do exactly the same thing. They are intelligent, rational people. If they are told, "listen, you want to go to the U.S., the way you do it is you show up and you tell them that your family was killed, they can't send you back," then I would do that.

Q: Did you find where there entrepreneurs who were giving people stories to take, I mean, I'll give you a legend if you pay me so much?

ALEXANDER: There were suggestions that, I have to be careful here, because I have no evidence, even though I heard this many times, there were people, sympathetic to the ousted president, who coached whole boats on what they had to say when they arrived in the U.S. Whether this is true or not or whether this is one of the legends associated with this whole thing I don't know. I mention this because the scenes of these people bobbing around in the ocean really, really bothered most Americans. It wasn't, now that I think about it, unlike the impact that New Orleans had with Katrina right after the hurricane. You saw the sea of Black people, seemingly disenfranchised, poor Black people, just sort of abandoned. I mean, it just looked ugly on TV. It was this same, a similar dynamic. It was heartbreaking, really, to see these human beings bobbing around in the ocean. A lot of them were dying because they were setting sail in these rickety craft, drowning.

Library of Congress

I remember one that, I broke down and cried in my office. A boat, a raft, a Haitian woman taking her child and throwing her child in the ocean. Most Haitians couldn't swim. Fortunately they were close to shore, close to Florida, with the hope that somehow that child was going to get to the shore or be rescued and maybe they can stay. This was the degree of desperation that these people had. The problem was you could not convince anyone. You could not suggest to policymakers or to the glitterati that this was a desperation born of economic deprivation, not political turmoil, that what we were witnessing was the exodus of people from the poorest country in the hemisphere, in the world, a country where the average person lived to be 30 years old. No clean drinking water, no decent medical care. Life was miserable for most Haitians, and that's what we were seeing. We were seeing this misery, sort of the same kind of misery we saw after Katrina, but people were interpreting what we were seeing, what was being shown on CNN, to fit whatever agenda they had. If you were a supporter of President Aristide, these people are fleeing the political terror, murders in Haiti, when in fact they weren't. We never found a case of this sort. I'm not saying that no one was ever killed in Haiti. People are killed every place and I'm sure there were soldiers and others who killed people because they didn't like them, or more often because it was an opportunity to settle personal scores or to do something for personal gain, but the notion that we had tens of thousands of boat people who were out there floating around in the sea because someone had been killed or massacred, I'm sorry. If it happened it was the best cover up in history.

Q: What response were you getting from the State Department on this?

ALEXANDER: The assistant secretary I have to say was, from my view of things, was great.

Q: Who was that?

ALEXANDER: This was Bernie Aronson. This is a man for whom I had worked in Washington before I went to Haiti. This is a man with whom I had accompanied to Haiti

Library of Congress

several times before I served there, and he trusted me. He knew I had no personal agenda. As I used to try to tell people when they accused me, media people, “well you're hiding the truth.” I said, “to what end? I have no dog in the fight. Why would I hide the truth? For what purpose? I'm not Haitian.” I didn't have to go through this with Bernie. He would call me and I would tell him, “I may be wrong, but this is what I believe. This is our analysis. This is our take on something,” and he would say “fine.” He never, ever, ever challenged, never once did he suggest, that I had some other agenda. I didn't.

Q: Did you get any feel from where you were of pressure that was coming down from the Secretary of State or deputy secretaries?

ALEXANDER: Yes, I did, yes, yes.

Q: Because they're the ones who feel the political pressures.

ALEXANDER: Yes, and they were feeling enormous pressure and some of it I saw and some of it I got myself, especially from the Hill. There were senators, congressmen, staffers, who were absolutely convinced that Aristide had been ousted by murderous thugs, that he was a good man who needed to go back and this was going to solve the problem. I had staffers in my home in Haiti accuse me, basically, of being a human rights abuser, because I tried to explain to them, that this could be a problem. Great, Aristide comes back, but you have to realize there is this resistance to this notion here in this country by people with the guns. You've either got to come and kill them, and I don't hear anyone yet talking about an invasion, or convince them, and you're not going to be able to convince them and this is why. This is what happened when Aristide was in office. They didn't want to hear it. That's a bunch of propaganda, that's a bunch of crap; you don't know what you're talking about. And I said, and I would say to them, “do you speak Creole?” “No, but you don't need to speak Creole to understand this country.” I said, “do you think someone could understand the United States if they didn't speak English?” “Well that's different.” I never understood why it was different. You know, people have their agenda.

Library of Congress

I got this firsthand so I knew what my masters were going through in Washington; they were getting tremendous heat. Again, this became a very popular cause. When you've got people standing up accepting Academy Awards at the same time, you know...

They appointed a prime minister, Marc Bazin, but he was viewed as being a puppet of the military and to a certain extent he was. What I didn't know at the time was that there were people behind him. One of his own military officers, Michel Francois, who was a major, was probably the mastermind or the leader of the coup that ousted Aristide. He was a very ruthless man. He is now hiding out in Honduras. He's been indicted in the United States for drug smuggling or something or another. But Cedras, even though he was the head of the military, wasn't a free agent either. He had to respond to these forces within the armed forces and those forces said absolutely and categorically Aristide does not return, that's just not an option. He's just not coming back or over our dead bodies. So the military leadership found itself in a position that it frankly didn't want to be in. I don't think that Raoul Cedras was a conspirator. I don't think he knew about this coup. I don't think he would agree with it. I don't think he would have supported it. As part of the evidence for my feelings I would offer up his magnificent job of providing security for the presidential election that Aristide won. He provided that security mindful, as was everyone else in Haiti, that Aristide was the probable president. Had he not liked Aristide, I don't know if he would have done such a good job of ensuring a peaceful election. Again, this is in a country where during the previous election in '68, they massacred people at the polling stations. So this is a big thing to provide absolute security. It was never my sense that Cedras had any interest in being the president of Haiti. He was quite pleased being the head of the military, and I think that's all he wanted to do, but politics, forget it. It just wasn't his cup of tea. Be that as it may, he as the head of the army stayed as head of the army and I told him on more than one occasion, "I'm sorry, but the rest of the world's convinced that you're the dictator." "Well I'm not, you know that I'm not." "Well then, why don't you have someone else run things?" "Well, that's what we're trying to do, we're trying to find." I said, "or you could have Aristide come back." "No, no, no, we can't do that." I said, "okay.

Library of Congress

You can't have your cake and eat it too. You can't on the one hand try to convince me that you're a decent guy and even though you had nothing to do with this coup, you won't let the democratically elected president come back." "Well, we can't let him come, because he'll kill us." I said, "well, maybe not. Maybe you can strike a deal." "No, no, you don't strike deals with Aristide." Well eventually he did strike a deal. But we'll get to that later.

I think that the rank and file were the ones who basically told their own leadership no Aristide. Aristide comes back we kill you. So there was this stasis. No one knew what to do. The country was under an embargo but somehow they were surviving. And they could have survived for years probably.

Q: One of the things I've heard of during the Papa Doc, Baby Doc and all of that, that the embassy tended to come under the sway of the well to do and to be embraced by the powers that be, or those generally more light skinned.

ALEXANDER: Well, we call the MREs, the morally repugnant elite. We even had a name for them, the MREs.

Q: The morally repugnant elite.

ALEXANDER: Yes, and what a lot of people don't realize is that junior officers in the embassy coined that phrase while Al Adams was ambassador. I think it's important to know, because the embassy saw these people for what they were and created this, which later became adapted by the reporters on the scene while the origin sort of got lost somewhere, but it was junior officers at the embassy who did this and I think it reflects the attitude towards these lighter skinned elites. Yes, there was a lot of socializing with these people; it happens all over the world, especially in Latin America. I served four times in Latin America, there's not an embassy in Latin America where the average embassy officer doesn't seek out someone with whom he feels comfortable, and he or she is much more likely to feel comfortable with a person who either looks like him or her or at least thinks like him or her, which means that the probability of an embassy officer in Bolivia

Library of Congress

being good friends with an Indian out in the countryside is slight or an embassy officer in Port au Prince being good friends or hanging out with a peasant in the wherever is slight. Be that as it may, that doesn't mean that the embassy was under the sway of these people. In fact, to this day the Haitian elites dislike the embassy, don't trust the embassy, generally fault the embassy, ironically, if not perversely, for the invasion of Haiti in support of Aristide, which happened in '95. I think that speaks volumes for this notion that there was some kind of collusion between the elites and the embassy against Aristide. Aristide alleged this and his supporters said that this was happening but if you go and talk to the elites themselves, I think they'll tell you we hate those people in the embassy; it's because of them that we suffered. The bottom line is this: no embassy should be partisan in any country when these things happen, and if you're being accused by both sides of being partisan to, that means that, in point of fact, you were neutral.

Q: You had an awful lot of, I assume, junior officers going out, seeing the poverty and finding out that what they were supposedly doing or had been done, hadn't happened. I would think this would cause an awful lot of cynicism and potential personnel problems in dealing with the officers. Did it?

ALEXANDER: When I was there it was just the opposite. There was an esprit de corps that I have not seen at any post before or after. There was a feeling of camaraderie, we're in this together, of, God, I hate to make it all sound banal, but of adventure. You know, a lot of these junior officers spoke pretty good Creole, almost everybody in the embassy like Haiti and like Haitians. It was a fascinating country, a fascinating culture.

Q: They are a very nice people.

ALEXANDER: Haitians, I've said it to people and they look at me like I'm a little off, but Haitians are the smartest people I ever met, from the most humble peasant to the most exalted MRE. They were extremely talented, intelligent, clever people. Poor, yes, but they weren't poor of spirit. It was a fascinating country with a fascinating culture. It has probably

Library of Congress

the only real, I won't say legitimate culture, but because it had been a colony for such a relatively brief period of time, unlike the rest of the Americas, they had a culture that was unique and rich with great art and music and stories and architecture. I mean, you go and see the Citadel, this magnificent fortress that was built by former slaves up in the northern part in Haiti.

Q: The Sans Souci.

ALEXANDER: Well, the Sans Souci Palace is just below the Citadel. You go to the Citadel and you think, my God, how could these slaves, these so-called uneducated primitive Africans have built what is recognized today, and was recognized as being a militarily perfect fortification? It was a brilliant, brilliant fortification, brilliantly built, brilliantly conceived. These were not stupid people. This was a country that had fabulous cuisine, fabulous art. People were witty, clever. There was a lot about Haiti to like, and I think this contributed to the morale. The Haitians were good to us. Nobody ever bothered embassy people, whether you were on the right or the left politically, whether you were for or against Aristide, the Haitians, I have to say, were gracious, hospitable, and friendly. Rarely did we experience any kind of hostility. I won't say never, but rarely. In the main the Haitians were gracious people. And this helped, I think, enormously. We also had a sense of purpose, a sense of mission. And that purpose was to educate people. Yes, we were being accused of not knowing what the hell was going on but my officers got the greatest delight in saying, "Mr. Wichita Daily," I'm making up the name of a newspaper, "you claim that there was a massacre. I have just come back and I have spoken with this person and that person and these people and I can assure you there is no such thing, and if you would like you can go back with me and you can satisfy yourself." What they were doing was tangible; there was nothing abstract about that period of time in Haiti. Those who were working with the boat people, bringing them back, this was a crisis. It was like a tsunami or something. People's livelihoods had been destroyed because the country was under an embargo. They were fleeing. They were coming back with nothing and they were being helped. They were being met as they got off the ships by U.S. embassy people and

Library of Congress

refugee specialists from various organizations and there was a feeling of accomplishment. It was a great tragedy that had unfolded here and we were dealing with this and I don't think, certainly during my time there, I never, ever, ever had the sense of failure. I had the officers coming to me saying, "I love this job. What I'm doing is important." To this day I still have that whole Haiti bunch. When I run into any of these guys, best tour I ever had, you know? It was the most important job I had in the Foreign Service, I'll never forget you. I actually got letters. I got one from the consul general who was senior to me, because I was an OC, he was an MC, crusty old Foreign Service officer who performed magnificently in this crisis these two years, three years we were in crisis. He wrote me a letter after he retired and he said you know, he said, "of all the bosses I ever had you were the best," and I've looked back over my career and that meant the world to me. Not being told that I was the best boss, but a man that I respected, a man that I looked to and went to for guidance, he was older and had seen a lot of things, would pay me this compliment. I cite this as an example; I think that that was a very special time in all of our lives. I think we knew that we were participating in a short blip in the history of the U.S. Foreign Service, but a significant blip. Significant in the sense we were getting a lot of attention. This was newsworthy. It was being talked about and eventually the country was invaded so yes, you can't just pass it off as being some anomaly. There was this feeling that we were involved in something important and so all of this contributed to high morale.

Q: Was there the feeling that this embargo, as it usually did, had a greater impact on the poor rather than the wealthy?

ALEXANDER: Initially there was this feeling, but I think that the embargo affected Haiti more or less equally. If one was disadvantaged by 20 percent, the 20 percent applied equally, whether you were rich or whether you were poor. In point of fact the embargo was more of an inconvenience. I think it probably hurt the Haitians as a whole. Since so few people were members of the elite, maybe two or three thousand, while six and a half million, almost seven million were not. Those people suffered because their jobs dried up and disappeared, there were offshore investments made, there was a famous Rawlings

Library of Congress

baseball factory, all of those things, if they hadn't closed down certainly were closed down during that period of time. All those jobs left Haiti. The embargo had the effect of making what was already a miserable existence in Haiti even more miserable. In fact, on more than one occasion Aristide was taken to task because he kept saying the embargo has to be stronger, and they said, "but Mr. President, this is impacting your people. They're losing their jobs. One of the complaints we're hearing from them when we pick them up, floating around the ocean, the boat people, is that there is no work, so how much suffering, you know, is required here?" He kept insisting, "no, that the embargo be made tighter." To answer your question, I think everyone suffered to a certain extent. The embargo didn't work is the bottom line. It didn't work because it was already a poor country; there wasn't much to embargo, but where it did hurt was in destroying jobs, I think.

Q: Was there any, while you were there, was there any significant relationship with the Dominican Republic?

ALEXANDER: No. The relationship between the DR and Haiti was always a difficult one. Historically, the Haitians invaded and occupied the Dominican Republic for almost 50 years in the 19th century. It was not a benign occupation. The Haitians were rather nasty and brutal and the Dominicans didn't forget that, and never forgave them for that. Today the DR is light years ahead of Haiti economically, politically, socially and they look down on the Haitians. They have to put up with them because they share the same island, but it's an uneasy relationship. Aristide had not helped, because he accused the Dominicans of human rights abuses against Haitians living in the DR; this really upset the Dominicans very much. Their position was that "we have helped Haiti on more than one occasion by taking your castoffs because you have too many people over there and you can't support them and we've given them work and housing and eventually integrated them into our society. We've been sort of an escape valve for some of your problem and now you're going to turn around and accuse us of having human rights abuses." It was truth on both sides but the relationship was an uneasy one.

Library of Congress

Q: What about other countries, particularly Scandinavia, France, Britain and all, were they weighing in there?

ALEXANDER: The French were, the Canadians were. The Scandinavians, no. The French and the Canadians were very much involved in Haiti. The French because Mitterrand was the president and Madam Mitterrand had a particular interest in Haiti and was very supportive of President Aristide. The Canadians to a certain extent were also in support of President Aristide, so they came at it from a slightly different direction. Their approach included an attitude that the U.S. was somehow complicit in Aristide's ouster, so that made for somewhat difficult interactions at times with the French and the Canadians, including the embassies. Their position was to say that the only solution was to bring Aristide back and that's all they wanted to hear. Of course, they didn't have boat people problems. They weren't accepting great numbers of refugees from the country so they weren't burdened by what had happened.

Q: Were they looking at the same things you were and reporting back to their country?

ALEXANDER: Yes, they were. The French ambassador and the Canadian ambassador spent all of their time speaking to Aristide's people. They didn't have the staffs, or appear to have the interest in going out into the country and finding out firsthand, whether there was a massacre. They claimed, it's too dangerous to do that, and they didn't have the ability, the resources. I think they're right, they didn't. But if they were told by one of Aristide's party loyalists that the massacre of the week happened in so and so, it became fact. That was reported back to Ottawa or back to Paris: there was a massacre in such and such a place. I don't fault them for that.

Q: Did you ask, "why don't you send one of your officers out with us?"

ALEXANDER: Oh yes. I was on a first name basis with the Canadian ambassador and the French charg#, we got together all the time, several times a week, spoke all the time,

Library of Congress

on a personal level, particularly the French ambassador and myself. We were about the same age, our spouses got along really, really well. In fact, we took a trip together up to the north of Haiti, we took the kids. We each had one kid. We needed a break from Port au Prince and there was actually a little beach up in the north of the country, took us eight hours to get there; but we drove up there after getting stopped I don't know by how many police patrols and roadblocks and everything else. We spend the weekend up there on the beach just chilling out and trying to pretend that we were in this Caribbean paradise. On a personal level we got along fairly well, but we were responding to different policy imperatives. The French and the Canadians, to a lesser extent, but certainly the French wanted to believe that Aristide was a good guy and had been wrongly ousted and had to go back and that people were being killed in his name and why didn't we understand that? And I was reporting back to Washington, "yes, Aristide was wrongly ousted, but he brought a lot of this on himself and oh, by the way, there's just no evidence of everything he's saying about massacres and rapes and all. We think that this is all hype to try to garner support for his return, but that's for you to decide whether he returns or not." So that's where we were. I don't think that the French were wrong in their interpretations, their analysis of what was happening on the ground; they were reporting based on the best information they had.

Q: Well but, I mean there is this one thing and that is to report that we hear from an interested party that something has happened. If you don't go out and verify it's happened, that's being delinquent in your duties.

ALEXANDER: Yes. But we've all been in a position where we've reported: I am told that, I am advised that, it appears that, it is my sense that. And that sometimes is legitimate, that's all you have. And when you're being, as I'm sure the French ambassador was, I know certainly with Washington, I used to tell the staff, we have to feed the machine, we have to feed the monkey as we used to say. There was this incredible, insatiable need for information in this town, was, still is, between the congress and the executive branch there are no shortage of people who demand information. And I'm sure the French probably

Library of Congress

have the same thing and provided you get it the best way you can so then you finally, eventually when you've exhausted your ability to go and verify with your own eyes you fall back on this I am advised, I am told, a good embassy contact and I suspect that's what the French were required to do. There were only three or four people, French people in that embassy. It's not like I had hundreds and I couldn't keep up with everything that was being told. And then, we would get well, but your information is incorrect. We're told by, and this was from the State Department, we just got a call so and so on the Hill who's alleging that so and so, Nancy Soderberg says that you're dead wrong, that her sources are telling her. Well, I say who the hell is Nancy Soderberg? She's been down here two times, she doesn't speak a word of Creole, I don't know whether she speaks French, if she does-

Q: She was with the UN, I think.

ALEXANDER: Oh, she eventually wound up at the UN, yes, she was one of Tony, Tony-

Q: Lake's?

ALEXANDER: Tony Lake's assistant's, purportedly the relationship went farther than that but that's neither here nor there. She was an intelligent person, I'm not belittling her, I'm just citing her as an example. We had to deal with this stuff all the time and so I imagine the French did too. It wasn't a simple question of reporting what you might have witnessed yourself, it was a question of having to defend what you were reporting. We were constantly being told, basically, you guys don't know what you're talking about.

Q: Did, you mention the French were talking to Aristide people. Were there Aristide people you could talk to?

ALEXANDER: Yes. The fact is that they really didn't want to talk to us, they wanted to tell us, they wanted to accuse us. The view in the Aristide camp and among his followers who stayed behind was that we were in cahoots with the military in ousting Aristide. In point of fact Washington had gotten rid of Aristide. This was the mantra. And I'm sure to this day

Library of Congress

Aristide still believes that George Bush Senior was responsible for his ouster, that the CIA and the Pentagon and the State Department conspired with the Haitian military to get rid of him. I am sure he absolutely believes it, as do his followers, and that the only reason he's back is because Bill Clinton and the Congressional Black Caucus ordered the U.S. military to bring him back.

Q: You mentioned when you and the French ambassador went to this beach you were kept stopping-

ALEXANDER: French charg#.

Q: -by patrols, police. What was this about?

ALEXANDER: There was basically one highway in Haiti that ran from Port au Prince to Cap-Ha#tien, which is the second largest and northernmost city in Haiti.

Q: Yes, there was a big kind of basin there; yes it's up here, up where the Citadel is.

ALEXANDER: There's one major road that goes up there and if you want to go up there that's the road you take. And every 40, 50 kilometers there was a military roadblock which we had to pass through, identify ourselves, and on two or three of them, actually, it got a little nasty. I had talked to the military before leaving on this trip, I had called General Cedras and said listen, I'm going with the French charg# up north, and I don't want any untoward incidents happening because of the French charg#, because they didn't like the French because Madam Mitterrand was clearly an Aristide person and the French ambassador, who had left, he was replaced by Phillip Sells, who was the charg#, who later became the ambassador, he was an Aristide fanatic as far as the military was concerned. And so I didn't want them provoking us or rousting us or causing us any kind of problems, not that they would have done it so much to me because they, you know, Americans, you had to be careful but the French, no, they could do anything they wanted. But at two or three of these roadblocks they gave us a hard time. And, at one point I said listen, we can

Library of Congress

do this the hard way or we can do this the easy way. I can get on the phone right now and call General Cedras. Which I actually did. And I said who's in charge here? I've got General Cedras on the phone. Then they sort of, "oh, uh, well, uh, oh." But much of this was because of the French charg#. We would identify ourselves and they, okay, well. But the moment we said the French charg#, well who's that? That's the French charg#. Then they were, "well you have to get out of the vehicles." And then my guard says no, no, nobody's getting out of anything, this is the head of the U.S. embassy and cleared the way, and there were a couple of tense moments. I can't say they were so tense we were frightened.

Q: Yes, but.

ALEXANDER: But, these had the potential to-

Q: Police things, I know, I experienced this in other countries where basically police, they were shakedown police.

ALEXANDER: Well, that's what they were. That's what they were and these guys were so arrogant and they were so used to having their way with travelers that it was hard for them to back down. It went contrary to their experience.

Q: You have to pay them.

ALEXANDER: Yes, they usually got what they want. Well, that wasn't going to happen here. And that was part of the problem too. But then again, they weren't the most sophisticated people and they hear French embassy and "oh, oh, well they're the bad guys and no French embassy's coming through here," that kind of attitude.

Q: Well, you were there until what, '93?

ALEXANDER: '93. I left in May of '93 when they sent Charles Redman, Chuck Redman, who had been the Department spokesman, later ambassador to Germany; they sent him

Library of Congress

down as the special charg#. This is in response to the Congressional Black Caucus's insistence that the embassy have new leadership. I was perceived as being not anti-Aristide; I don't think anyone ever accused me of that. But I just didn't understand the new reality. The Democrats were now in the White House, there was a push on to get Aristide back, I didn't fully appreciate the new dynamic. I was told that the Caucus, actually I don't know who in the Black Caucus but had actually told the vice president or the president, I don't know who, "that we're not complaining about this man, he's done, we think, a good job so we're not saying he's a bad guy and do something horrible to him, we're just saying that you need a new face in that embassy." So they sent Chuck Redman down. Chuck and I overlapped for about three weeks. Very gracious man, he's a very bright guy, I was amazed at how quickly he picked up the nuances of being in Haiti. He figured out a lot of things very, very quickly which is more than I can say for a lot of the reporters who got in on the Haiti act after it began appearing on CNN every night. So I left.

I had been picked already by the Bush administration, which left office in January, just a few months before I left, to be ambassador to, where was it, to Togo. So as I was leaving I was told that, "you're still going to go off to an ambassadorship, you've done a good job, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." Then I came to Washington and I didn't go to Togo. Togo never did open up and I thought, now I'm getting my comeuppance. But it wasn't anything of the sort. The Clinton administration people were good to me; they said "no, no, we'll just send you someplace else." I wound up going to Mauritius, which actually I found a heck of a lot better than going to Togo. But Haiti dogged me for two or three more years. There were a lot of people who accused me and my former boss, Al Adams, of having been involved in the coup against Aristide, that it was all part of a U.S. plot and that we knew of it. I told people, "listen, I wasn't even in country, I was in country for a month." "Ah yes, but you were the deputy director before you went so you would have been involved in this for a long time." And one person even went as far as to say I was the hammer, I was the guy, they were preparing the coup and they had to wait until I got there and I was the one who actually masterminded the whole thing. And I said, "this is quite fascinating, are we talking

Library of Congress

about the same Les Alexander here because I don't know anything about this." But there were all kinds of conspiracies and again, if you read the books that have been written on that whole mess it is quite clear, depending on where you come down on the dividing line, whether you are for or against Aristide, that there are many, many people who believed and still believe that the U.S. government was responsible for his ouster.

Q: Well, there's nothing that persists more and is more accepted than conspiracy theories, particularly what we do, particularly because you might say almost from the left- I mean, right or left, conspiracy theories abound now.

ALEXANDER: Well, as someone said, they said we find it improbable, we find it impossible to believe that a coup could have been planned and carried out without the embassy knowing about it. With all the apparatus we have in place to intercept communications and find out, that we would not know that this coup was in the making. I never really admitted to anyone before, I'm kind of ashamed that we didn't know. I'm still stunned. How could we not have known? I mean, yes, we've heard grumblings and things but we were caught with our pants down. I remember when the ambassador called me; it was around 10:00 at night. He says "you've got to come down to the embassy." I said "what's up boss?" And he said "I'll be damned, I think there's a coup going on." I said "a coup." And he said, "well didn't you hear the gunfire?" And I said "well there's always gunfire in Port au Prince." But he said "there's more gunfire than usual and we're getting these disturbing signals that someone's moved." And I remember coming into the embassy and looking at him and him looking at me and I said "where did this come from?" And he says "I don't know."

Q: Well, you look at this and it's in the nature, I mean, we've had coup after coup all around the world and often, I mean, the very fact that a coup happens means that the people who should know, that is the head of the government, they've got the security apparatus and all, if they don't then why the hell should the United States know? We can always say there's great unrest and what might happen but in order to be successful you

Library of Congress

have to keep the government that you're couping against uninformed and that means- and we would be a party off to one side.

ALEXANDER: And again I think people find that difficult to understand. We also contribute to this myth, this notion we're behind everything and we instigate everything because I am sure that the station chief and the defense attach# were asked by their respective organization "what, you guys didn't have an inkling?" Well, yeah. They can't admit that they were caught with their pants down; they're in the intelligence business. "So you guys were asleep at the switch." "No, we weren't." "Oh, then you knew." Then they have to start equivocating and this again lends to the impression that maybe they did know or maybe they somehow were complicit. So you're damned if you do and damned if you don't.

Q: Well, without getting into details, how well were you served by the station and by the military attach#s there?

ALEXANDER: I personally, when I was DCM my relationship with them obviously was different. When I was charg# the relationship changed. I had the feeling they liked me, respected me, were trying to do right by me but they also had their own agendas and there were things that I wasn't always told. I can't cite anything in particular, it may have been my own paranoia but the information came right after I left Haiti which suggested to me that they were not revealing to me everything. Whether this was deliberate I don't know. I don't take it personally, I liked both, I had two military attaches, I liked them both, I liked my station chief. In fact, my station chief and I were quite friendly, we used to go diving together, scuba diving, his wife worked for my wife, they were both state officers. We saw each other after Haiti, we went to dinner and stuff and I've run across him on several occasions and was always warm greetings and highest, fondest regards. So I think that he was on the up and up with me.

Defense attach#. The first one, Pat, whom I mentioned, who's now retired, was a real character and I think that it was difficult for him to make the transition with me from

Library of Congress

being DCM to all of a sudden being effectively his real boss, at least on- I think that he, again, never disclosed everything that he should have but again I don't know that for a fact. But we had a good relationship, it was an easy relationship. I mean, it was very courteous, very respectful at the same time it was collegial. We were the same age, we were contemporaries. I knew his sister, we had served together, she was the spouse of an officer I had served with and we had been in high school in France at the same time, he in Paris. So we on a personal level we got along very well and I think this aided in our official relationship but it may have detracted too in the sense that if you get too friendly with people then they-

Q: Well, one of the things that happens, I mean, military attach# is supposed to get close to the military. And I mean, this always leads to, particularly in the Latin American or the Western Hemisphere context where often the military's involved in coups and this sort of thing, but did you feel that our military attach#s were too close, you might say, to the junta with all their 7,000 men?

ALEXANDER: I think they were too close to those elements within the military that were involved in the coup. After the coup some nasty organization called FRAP, which means to hit, was formed, it was made up of active duty and former military, Haitian military people and they went around terrorizing the local population, terrorizing the Aristide people. I did not know it at the time but apparently the guy who was the head of this FRAP organization was a good contact of the military attach#, which led me to ask myself on more than one occasion whether the military attach# wasn't somehow complicit in setting up this FRAP organization as a counterweight to the Aristide people. I don't know that for a fact, I'm not making that allegation because I just don't know it, it's just a thought that's crossed my mind on more than one occasion.

Q: Well then, you went back to Washington in '93. What were you doing?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: I went back to Washington. I sat in AF; they had a little office, a little desk for me as I was waiting to go to Togo. What I didn't know at the time was that the incumbent, the person who was ambassador in Togo who had already spent his three years didn't want to leave. He had one year left in the Service and was trying to convince AF to let him stay at post and just retire out of that, which I think is a very reasonable position. I think they should do that with all ambassadors who find themselves in a similar position but they don't, they have this very mechanical no, three years, time is up. Well I'll be damned, they, he had his supporters in AF and they sort of did it in such a way where they, the DG came to me, Genta Hawkins, and said, "I don't know why they're dragging their feet on getting this guy out of there, I suspect because he wants to stay in." And I told her, "I've heard that's basically it. I don't blame him." She said "you know something? I don't either." She said "let me; give me a couple of days to think about this." And sure enough, two days later she called me up and says "hey. How would you like to go to Mauritius?" I said "I'd much rather go to Mauritius than Togo." She says "fine." Problem solved. It was political, it's just gone unpolitical, the White House is not interested in it and she says "so why don't you go there?" To make a long story short I had wasted four months or so waiting for this fellow to leave Togo or for the AF to decide when he was going to leave Togo, I hadn't gone up on the Hill, I hadn't...

Q: This is tape five, side one with Les Alexander. Yes, you were saying you were left for four months sort of in limbo there.

ALEXANDER: Yes, while AF was deciding on Togo. And in the meantime Mauritius came open and so I was offered Mauritius which I said fine, an embassy's an embassy and Mauritius is a nice place. But I had to wait another four or five months to get a hearing so I was in Washington until early December or middle of December. So I spent about five months between Haiti and Mauritius.

Library of Congress

Q: Well, I would have thought you would be prime meat for the Haitian people, the Aristide admirers or something to eat up when you were in Washington.

ALEXANDER: I was, it's funny, I thought the same thing, I thought well it will be interesting to see what I go through if, during my hearing if not before because as you suggested, there were, I had my, well I won't say enemies but detractors, certainly, up on the Hill and elsewhere who felt that I had not been carrying Aristide's water and some even suggested that I was against Aristide. It never happened. I was asked almost nothing about Haiti during the time that I was waiting for my hearing and it didn't really come up during the hearing. It was as if I had never served in Haiti for some reason. And it was during that time, as a matter of fact, that I heard from someone that the Black Caucus, now it's coming back to me, that someone in the Black Caucus, I don't know what congressman it was, had talked to Vice President Gore and said we need somebody else in Haiti to take over from Alexander, someone who would reflect the views of your administration and not the last administration and he was there with the last administration. But I was told that whoever it was, and I don't know who it was so I won't name names because I just don't know, but one or two members of the Black Caucus made it absolutely clear, they said we're not saying that he's done anything wrong, we're not here to see that he's in any way hurt or his career damaged or anything or that sort. And that may have been the view, contrary to my concerns or fears that maybe I was being, that I had been seen as being antagonistic to Aristide when in point of fact I had exaggerated this in my mind, that people did not see me this way, that they just saw me as a career Foreign Service officer who was carrying out whatever the policy was as well as one could and that I didn't make any bones but not being crazy about Aristide but you know, I also recognized that listen, this is not a way to get rid of a president. The man was democratically elected; if you don't like the way he's ruling there are other things to do. You don't send out the military to send him into exile. I guess this is why it didn't come up because I wasn't as widely perceived as I thought I was.

Library of Congress

Q: Well, there's another side to this that we know from our experience in the Foreign Service there really isn't much in the way of folk memory passed on. I mean, this is why we're doing these oral histories for one thing. Were you called upon to be debriefed or talk to people going out there or were you used in that way?

ALEXANDER: No, which I found very strange. I really did.

Q: That's typical in this business.

ALEXANDER: No, I find it strange in the sense that I thought I was being somewhat shunned and it really- the point was made when I was walking- I was in the State Department itself walking down the hall and Bill Swing was heading towards me, and this would have been October of 1993. Bill had already been named as the next ambassador to Haiti. And I see him, I recognized him and I said, "oh Bill, how are you?" And he sort of looked at me rather unfriendly kind of way and he said "I'm fine." I said, "oh, listen, you're going down to Haiti. I'm waiting to get a hearing and I've got plenty of time on my hands if you'd, go have lunch, want to talk and ask me." And he looked at me very disdainfully and said "no, no, I've already talked to Al." And very naively, I said "but you know, Al left quite some time ago, a year and a half ago and he went to Peru afterwards but he was held up for a year. I've just left, it's still fresh in my..." "No, no, no thank you." Essentially I was dismissed and he turned around and gave me his back and my wife was walking up the hallway behind me, I didn't realize it at the time, just sheer coincidence and saw this exchange and came up, and she was an FSO, she came to me and she says, "Jesus, what an asshole." I said "what?" She says, "he just dissed you." I said, "I kind of thought so but I wasn't sure and I don't know why." She said, "well, because you're not an ambassador and he's the great, great ambassador." "You think that's it?" She said "no, not really but he's obviously been told that you were somehow politically incorrect or something." I said "yes, that was my sense."

Library of Congress

I saw Bill years later, in fact we became friends living in Miami and playing tennis, and we never really talked about that, but I had a sense that he regretted that. Bill sort of implied briefly, in the very smooth, gentlemanly way, that he did things that he had been advised to do. I wasn't with the program and it wasn't worth talking to me because I had nothing intelligent to say on the subject of Haiti. It was quite clear that nobody wanted to hear what I had to say. Nobody.

Q: I think the real problem in the State Department is that around an assistant secretary you have staff people often who are regular FSOs but who take it on themselves to sort of set the tone. They are one removed from policy, but I think they feel the power and they tend to make judgments based on nothing and kind of pass this on.

ALEXANDER: If that dynamic existed in the Western Hemisphere Bureau, I think it was still called the ARA even in '93, I think that would have come more from the principle desk, Bob Gelbard or another senior level. I don't think I was Bob's cup of tea. In fact, I know I wasn't because I was told later by the assistant secretary, Bernie, after he left that position that he was shocked when he found out that I didn't get an embassy in the Western Hemisphere, that I was going off someplace in Africa. He said to me, "I went and asked Bob Gelbard and I said what's this, he's going to Africa? Why isn't he going?" "Well there's no embassies." Bernie said to him, "well what do you mean there's no embassies?" "Well there are no embassies left." "Why didn't he get one?" Bernie swore to me, he said "I was never consulted," he said "I left it up to Bob to do the personnel stuff, including ambassadors, and he would sort of run it by me." But he said mine got away from him, he said I was partially to blame because I should have taken more active interest, but he said he was stunned and angry when he found out that Bob had not lined up an embassy for me. And I thought, that explained a lot. "I thought maybe you were unhappy with me because of what had happened with Bill Swing and how no one seemed to want to talk to me in WHA" and he said no, that was not me. He said, "you know me." He said, "I thought you did a magnificent job and you were not appreciated."

Library of Congress

I believe Bernie because four or five years later at a chiefs admission conference for Latin America, I was then the ambassador to Ecuador, all the former assistant secretaries going back 10 or 15 years were invited to speak to us. Each one of them made comments about how they saw the relationship with Latin America at the time that, this was '98. Bernie stood up and started saying, "when I was assistant secretary, I took the ambassador to Guatemala to task because he spoke out publicly and condemned the human rights record of the regime at the time. I called him up and chewed him out. I was wrong. I've realized that it was my pride, my false pride. He had done what an ambassador was supposed to do, but he had spoken out on his own, he wasn't instructed to do so. Ambassadors don't have to be instructed to do things like that, that's part of the job." He said, "I'm sorry to see that that apparently that type of attitude still exists. Les Alexander has been shunned since he condemned corruption in Ecuador which led to the ouster of the president. Many people say that he was responsible for that and he should have been applauded, but he was condemned because he did this without instructions. Again, good ambassadors don't need instructions to speak out on things of this sort." I was so shocked. I didn't know he was going to say that. Everyone turned around and looked at me. How did he know about this? I was in trouble with my then-assistant secretary and it was expressly over this issue. He came up to me afterwards and said "we didn't do right by you after Haiti; we should have given you an embassy and now I understand that you're being faulted for what you did in Ecuador and you did the right thing." The then-assistant secretary came up to me afterwards and said "listen, Bernie was right, I want to apologize to you." I said, "boy, what is this, I love Les Alexander week or something?" He said "no, I'm embarrassed, but he's absolutely right."

The point I'm trying to make is that I think Bernie was quite sincere and this was his way of making it up to me, after not having been more actively involved in where I went after Haiti. That also led me to believe that I wasn't being shunned by Bernie Aronson, the assistant secretary, but others in the front office who, for whatever reason, had a beef with me.

Library of Congress

Q: Okay. We'll pick this up the next time when you're off to Mauritius. I haven't asked, but it'll be part of the next session if you could talk about why the Africa Bureau was willing to look at you.

ALEXANDER: They weren't willing to look at me. They weren't happy about my going there.

Q: Okay.

ALEXANDER: But we'll talk about that.

Q: Well, we'll talk about that. Great.

Okay. Today is the 16th of November, 2005. Les, first place, let's have the dates. When did you leave Haiti?

ALEXANDER: I left Haiti in the end of May; I believe it was, some time in May of 1993.

Q: Alright. Let's talk about Mauritius and how did this come about. You've already said that you slipped through the cracks of ARA.

ALEXANDER: Yes, I did. I wound up actually being nominated, President Bush, the father, had nominated me, to go from Haiti to Togo but as things turned I never did go to Togo. The incumbent stayed and I found myself on the way to Mauritius. This caused two or three months extra delay in my hearing and everything else in Washington and so I wound up in Mauritius at the end of the year. In fact, two days after I got to post in December we had an enormous hurricane, from what I was told one of the worst that they had had in memory, beat the residents up pretty bad. So that was my introduction to Mauritius and it was probably the most tumultuous experience I had in my sleepy time there.

Q: Well, in the first place, give somebody who's outside the system a feeling of how you get what's considered a sleepy but good post like Mauritius. It's an ideal place to put

Library of Congress

somebody who's getting ready to retire, or someone who has just come from a very hot spot, but can you talk about your reception within the bureau and how you felt about it?

ALEXANDER: My very, very strong sense was AF didn't want me. Despite my knowing the then-assistant secretary and his Foreign Service wife personally. We'd served together, we had a personal relationship.

Q: Who was that?

ALEXANDER: It was George Moose. I don't think, certainly in the front office, it was a personal thing. I do think it might have been slightly personal with others in the bureau and understandably so. I had never served in AF and, as we both know, getting ambassadorships is tough enough. Then seeing your embassies go to other people, especially in AF which is constantly robbed for embassies, for ambassadorships. People spend their careers there, pay a lot of dues, a heck of a lot more than the ones who hang out in the cafes in Paris. So to see, an outsider from their perspective, come in and get an embassy of any sort is probably distasteful. The first one I was in line for, Togo, wasn't a bad embassy as far as West African embassies go, but then Mauritius, as you suggested, is sort of a sleepy, small place. It's kind of Hawaii relative to anything else in AF, relative to anything that anyone has as a matter of fact. Mauritius is a very, very pleasant place, extremely prosperous, a beautiful, beautiful resort island, very popular with multimillionaires and with the British royal family. If you've been there you would understand why. It really is Hawaii in the Indian Ocean. It's the First World: great roads, drinkable water, great food, beautiful beaches. It's paradise. How I received that embassy, I'm not certain. I think it was in part because of AF's reaction to me getting the Togo assignment. The then-director general, Genta Hawkins-Holmes had visited me in Haiti during the really bad moments. She had been my predecessor once removed in Haiti and knew what a tough assignment that was and I think she felt that I had paid all the dues I needed to pay to go to AF or anyplace else. When my predecessor left Mauritius, the White House decided that they didn't want that post anymore so it reverted to the career

Library of Congress

service. It came open abruptly and she was the one who proposed switching me from Togo to Mauritius and I said, "fine by me, I don't care." She suggested this in part because she wanted to save it for the Service before the White House changed its mind and in part because she thought I deserved a nice post after what I'd just gone through. So that's how I got there. That being said, I was not an AF hand and I went from Togo to a very, very desirable post and I think this just irritated the folks in AF even more. Be that as it may, I wound up in Mauritius.

Q: This is about '93 you say?

ALEXANDER: This was '93.

Q: What was the state of play in Mauritius itself and U.S. relations?

ALEXANDER: I don't think we had much of a relationship with Mauritius. It was somewhat off the radar scope. If you look at a map of Africa you'll see that it's parked out there far enough in the Indian Ocean that it doesn't get that much attention. It doesn't provoke much attention because it is successful, relatively speaking. I would say that the relationship was benign. The Mauritians had no beefs with us; we had no beefs with them. The only issue being the Mauritian claim to the Chagos Islands and Diego Garcia, where we have a large naval facility as part of the Chagos chain of islands out in the middle of the Indian Ocean. When Mauritius was granted independence from the British, one of the promises was that eventually Mauritius would acquire the Chagos. This was rather peculiar given that there was no historical reason for that. It was because Chagos was administered out of Mauritius when Mauritius was a British colony.

Q: Explain what Chagos, what they were.

ALEXANDER: They're a chain of very, very small, tiny little islands; I don't know whether you could even find them on a map. They're in the Indian Ocean, southwest of Sri Lanka. We have a very, very large munitions facility located there and pre-positioned ships that

Library of Congress

are stocked with all kinds of gear including munitions to be used during times of conflict. In fact, Diego Garcia has played a very, very vital role in our war on terrorism in Afghanistan and our involvement in Iraq, both during the first Gulf War and during the most recent one. So it's a base that is vital to U.S. interests, principally because we can store munitions there. There's nobody around for 1,000 miles so we don't have to have the concerns that we might have if we had a similar facility located on the mainland of Africa or someplace in the Middle East where it would be more vulnerable to attack and if something were to happen it would incur tremendous casualties. Those are concerns that are mitigated by the isolation of the Chagos and the physical isolation of Diego Garcia, which is a tiny, tiny island. I flew there with my British counterpart and with the Mauritian foreign minister. Actually it was probably the only initiative that I ever came up with during my time as ambassador to Mauritius.

The Mauritians would periodically raise the issue of Diego in the United Nations and try to reassert their claim to it. I thought one way to get them to slow down or to back off of their position was to actually let them see the facility. No one in Mauritius had ever been to the Chagos or to Diego Garcia other than the original inhabitants of the island which had been forcibly removed and sent to Mauritius. Certainly none of the Mauritian government officials had ever been there. I thought that if they saw the facility they may slow down in their pursuit of their claim because it's not what I think they think it is. After a long drawn out battle with my British colleague who didn't think this was such a good idea, we flew the foreign minister and a few other Mauritian officials over Diego Garcia so they could see that this was a tiny island. More significantly they could see that there were no storage bunkers of the sort where you could store nuclear weapons. This had always been a concern of theirs and others in the region that we were really storing nuclear weapons there. As we sought to explain to them if you know anything about the security of nuclear weapons, Diego just won't cut it, because we don't have the necessary land mass to secure these weapons as I understand it. I'm no expert on securing nuclear weapons, but I'm told that you have to have three perimeters and the people have to be able to get

Library of Congress

to the nuclear weapons sites and all this other stuff. Anyway, to make a long story short, Diego clearly would not provide the kind of security that one would need. So by flying them over this little tiny island and letting them see from the air, that there was nothing hidden down there, this helped to alleviate some of their concerns. When we landed we were received by the governor of the Chagos, a British navy commander who was dressed up in all his colonial mufti; it was really quite a spectacular sight with the old fashioned hat, sort of like King George with the plumes and everything else; it was really splendid. Actually I was quite flattered and pleased that they had the sense of mind to do this kind of thing, because it made the Mauritians feel that they were indeed honored guests and that this was a serious trip and that this wasn't some dog and pony show. They were given free reign, they were taken everywhere. I don't think Diego's larger than five square miles. It's absolutely flat. I mean, I think it's one foot above sea level. I might be exaggerating a bit but it's just a little piece of land parked out there in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Anyway, after they were able to go all over the place and speak with people, including Mauritians who were working there, the equivalent of FSNs, Foreign Service Nationals or local nationals, I don't know what they called them, most of them were Filipinos but there were some Mauritians. I think the Mauritians were satisfied that there no nuclear weapons, and perhaps more significantly, even if the British were to return them to the Mauritians, the islands are so far away from anything that to provision this island would cost a fortune. I think any thoughts they had of converting the facilities there into some kind of tourism facility, they did the arithmetic and I think they realized that it probably wouldn't be, given the technology of the moment, cost effective. Just keeping enough water, making enough water from seawater, we got some figures from the folks there, I don't remember what they were but they were astronomical. I spoke with the foreign minister on the plane on our trip back to Mauritius about what we did there and back on a Navy sub chaser, a P-3, which is also very interesting, but as we spoke it was clear-

Q: That's an airplane?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: It's an airplane.

Q: It's an Orion, I think.

ALEXANDER: It's an Orion, yes. Well there are two the Navy used to use; anyway, I don't know what they do now. They had S3s, which were carrier based and they had P-3s which were land based but basically both were for the same purpose of search and rescue and finding subs. I mention this because it wasn't a commercial aircraft, it wasn't a comfortable aircraft; it was a working naval aircraft. It also helped to reinforce the point that this isn't some cushy little island. Even though it was a pleasant island, it looked like a small town in Florida which had been transplanted to the middle of the Indian Ocean, even down to U.S. street signs. In fact I asked the British why, because they own this. They said, "yes, but you guys operate it so we pretty much let you decide what side of the road to drive on and what the road signs look like."

As we were speaking he said "I had visions of our eventually getting this and turning it into some tourism thing. We wouldn't be able to do it, it would just cost too much." As a result, the Mauritians really put this issue on the back burner. Again, I don't know where it stands now with them now, I don't know if they're still bringing it up. I have no idea, but that was probably the only worthwhile thing I did the two-and-a-half years I was in Mauritius.

Q: Well what about the people from Diego Garcia who were displaced. Were they well received and settled in Mauritius?

ALEXANDER: Those folks were called the Ilois. The name comes from isle in French, island. The Ilois were removed to Mauritius. They were given a rather large amount of money to help them resettle in Mauritius and to help them integrate into the community. They were not- well, no one is from Mauritius per se. The major ethnic groups of Mauritius are first and foremost East Indian of Hindu and Muslim persuasion; the Creoles who are a mixture of African and French or British, sometimes with a dollop of East Indian blood

Library of Congress

thrown in. The East Indians who come from what is now India and Pakistan comprise roughly 70 percent of the population. 20 percent is comprised of Creoles and the Creoles are essentially a mixture of African and European, and they can range anywhere from blonde haired, blue eyed to fairly dark even though there were very few truly African looking people in Mauritius. They comprised 20 percent. And then the 10 percent is made up of Chinese and Europeans, French and British, who have been on the island forever. The Ilois didn't fit comfortably into any of these groups and were kind of excluded. They were also excluded because they were not educated and Mauritians in the main are very well educated. They had different customs, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. They very quickly went through the money that they were given and they occupied the last layer of the social strata there. The men turned to drink. The men were reputed to be fast and when I was there, their lot was a rather miserable one. They were always asking for more money and the Mauritians in turn were always asking the British and us for more money to give to the Ilois and the response was always the same. They've been here for 25 to 30 years. They were given a phenomenal sum, millions and millions of dollars, I don't what it would have worked out to on a per capita basis, but it was an enormous sum of money and that's it. If they haven't integrated that's your fault, Mauritius, that's not our fault, and they're not going back to Diego so forget it. That's pretty much where it was when I was there.

Q: Mauritius, of course, is one of our first consular posts. It was a whaling- I did a history of the consular service and Mauritius figured-

ALEXANDER: Prominently.

Q: Quite largely in our early, back in, very early 19th century.

ALEXANDER: I'm impressed because you're absolutely right. There are so few people in this country and so few Americans who know anything about Mauritius. Mark Twain knew Mauritius, went there, and described it as a paradise. There is some debate among stamp collectors about the most valuable stamp in the world. Some people claim it's-

Library of Congress

Q: The Mauritius Blue Penny.

ALEXANDER: Yes, the blue something of another of whatever. I can't remember what it's called now. Anyway, it is a toss up between the Guyanese stamp and the Mauritian stamp, which one's the most valuable in the world. The other interesting thing about Mauritius which most people don't realize is the Dodo bird came from Mauritius. The Dodo bird has been extinct for 300 years, but the expression dodo still occupies a place in our vocabulary in various forms or another. It's rather interesting because if you go to Mauritius you'll see these statues of the Dodo, and they even have little stuffed animals for kids. I mean, this is a creature that no longer exists but it captured the imaginations of so many people that we've all heard the expression, dumb as a dodo, or dead as a dodo.

Q: Well, talk a bit about the relationship with the French.

ALEXANDER: Reunion?

Q: Reunion is close to there, but I think of these two entities, one being French and the other British. They used to change hands all the times during the Napoleonic Wars.

ALEXANDER: They did, they did. In fact, I think his name is O'Brian, the guy who wrote all these books about-

Q: Patrick O'Brian.

ALEXANDER: Patrick O'Brian, exactly, all his books about the Mauritius command and all that. In fact I think they recently made a movie with Russell Crowe, Master and Commander, even though it doesn't take place in Mauritius, that's from that epoch and that conflict.

Reunion and Mauritius are culturally close. While the Creole on the two islands is somewhat different, in fact it's difficult for the two people to understand each other's Creole

Library of Congress

which I find rather extraordinary considering their common history and their proximity. They both do speak a French Creole. The cuisine is familiar, somewhat. It's much more East Indian in Mauritius, but there are ethnic East Indians in Reunion so they are familiar with the cuisine. One frequently travels back and forth just to get away for a change of scenery. Mauritians used to go to Reunion to catch a flight somewhere else. They could fly directly from Mauritius to almost anywhere, but sometimes the connections were easier out of Reunion. Most of the time they went just to get a taste of Europe and the people from Reunion would go to Mauritius to lay on the beaches, which were far superior in Mauritius. So there was this back and forth between the two. TV signals from the islands reached one another so people on both islands would watch both TV stations. Other than that actually there wasn't that much going on between the two. They were very much two independent places. Reunion is a territory of France, as you know, and has a very distinct French identify. Mauritius is far less French despite its having once been a French colony.

Q: Let's talk about the Mauritian government and your relationship with them.

ALEXANDER: I had an easy relationship, all in all, with the Mauritian government. The first prime minister, Anerood Jugnauth, was far older than me. I was 45 or so and he was 65, at times going on 75. An intelligent man, but very somber and for some reason the chemistry between us, there was no spark. He was friendly and would come to the 4th of July reception and I never had any conflict with him of any sort, but I don't think either of us was particularly enamored of the other. I probably didn't help because I gave an interview within six months of my arrival, in which I described Mauritius as a mouse on steroids. I meant it as a compliment because for an island nation of a little over a million people it was an enormously successful country by any measure and especially if measured against the countries in the region. It was my intention to compliment Mauritius and say despite your being small you've got some economic bulk and you have political clout because people respect you. You're a firm democracy, a transparent democracy. Somehow this got turned around in the prime minister's mind and he thought I was suggesting that the island was trafficking in drugs or steroids. I explained to the foreign minister, I said please don't

Library of Congress

take this so literally, it's just an expression. I said, "do you remember the movie The Mouse That Roars? I said I could have used an expression like that." The prime minister couldn't get this image of the mouse out of his head, which I'm told later he translated into rat, and then the steroids. He didn't manifest any open hostility but I think after that I wasn't one of his favorite ambassadors.

On the other hand the leader of the opposition, who became the prime minister halfway through my tour, liked the analogy, understood it immediately. He had spent a lot of time in London. His father was the first prime minister of Mauritius after independence and we were the same age and we had a chemistry that was just absolutely terrific. We used to socialize all the time; he was always over at my house. We were neighbors, we lived within a kilometer of one another, or I was over at his place, and he would consult me on all kinds of things, often on internal policies that had nothing to do with U.S. policy. But, if I thought I had an intelligent opinion on a subject I would offer it. We got along really, really well and I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say we liked each other very much. I feel comfortable speaking for him because I was told this by many, many people.

His name was Navin Ramgoolam and came over to my house I think a day or two before taking office because he had heard that I had installed a satellite dish, which was true. The government was furious that I had gone and done this. I installed it so that I could receive TV signals from somewhere other than Mauritius and so that I could watch an occasional baseball or football game or something. I was getting the feed from the Armed Forces Network and also from South Africa. The Mauritians had a very strict policy on controlling information. It was a democracy and the media was fairly free to do its work but outside influences the prime minister didn't like. When I installed this satellite dish it was the first satellite dish that anyone had in a residence, I understood that he got quite upset, even though he was leaving office. The deputy prime minister summoned me, called me in and said, "we understand you have a satellite dish at your residence." I said, "yes, it's sitting on top of my roof; it's pretty hard to miss." "Well you know that's against the law." I said, "yes, I know it's against the law." He said, "well then why'd you do it?" I said, "the law doesn't

Library of Congress

apply. I can put it on top of my residence whatever I want. I can put 10 satellite dishes; you know that, I know that." I said it's not a question of the law or invoking anything. I said, "I'm allowed to communicate and people are allowed to communicate with me at my residence or at my embassy any way I want, you know that so what's the problem." He said, "well, the problem is the PM's a little upset because he doesn't want anyone to have these satellite dishes." I said that's the PM's problem. And I said, "I've never understood that because you're so open on so many fronts, which I think is why Mauritius is so successful and such a model, particularly for Africa. Yet on this one particular thing about international TV is tightly controlled." He said, "well, you know what his real concern is?" And I said, "what?" He said, "most people here are from what used to be Pakistan and India. We have similar tensions between the Muslims and the Hindus and periodically these tensions explode and people get killed." And it was true. Over the years they would have riots. He said, "he's so afraid that if people start putting up satellite dishes they're going to start looking at TV from India and from Pakistan and this is going to get them all riled up and they're going to go out." I said, "that may be, but they may watch other TV too and it may have the opposite effect. You can't control information, and to the extent that you do you're going to limit your people's advancement. Information brings knowledge and knowledge is translated into all kinds of success, so I'm surprised." He said, "I tend to agree with you, but again, I'm only deputy PM." I said, "I don't know if the new government's going to take a new position." As it turns out, the new prime minister, just before taking office came over to my house and he said, "I understand you have a satellite dish." And I said, "yes." He said, "can we come over and watch?" I said, "yes, of course you can." I gave him the remote control and he was going through all the channels, he said, "oh, this is great, this is fantastic. As soon as I take office I'm going to liberalize this, I think everyone should be able to have access to this." I said, "are you really going to do that?" And he says, "yes." I said, "well, I understand the PM has this concern about tensions." He said, "that's a legitimate concern, but we've had these riots in the past even though people haven't been able to watch TV and I would like to think that Mauritian people are mature enough where being able to watch a soap opera from the old country is not going to go out and start race

Library of Congress

riots.” As it turns out he was right. Now the Mauritian government itself, which controlled the major TV station, I understand, offers cable service to compete, you know. So the point is, they're in the 21st century.

Q: By the way, we're talking about '93 to-

ALEXANDER: '96.

Those kinds of difficulties and they were not frequent but they happened. They happened during my tour and it was usually between the Hindus and the Muslims or between the Muslims and the Creoles. Certainly during my time, there was never any open conflict between the Creoles and the Hindus where people would be killed. I never quite understood at all what provoked these. I mean, I understood that there were differences, but they seemed to be set off by the most bizarre things: neighbors arguing in some small village and that somehow spread. Word spread that the Muslims were being slaughtered by the Hindus in the north, but there was no way of knowing when these types of explosions would take place.

Q: Did we have any American firms, because I understand Mauritius is very much into manufacturing and that sort of thing. Do we have any interests in that?

ALEXANDER: Ralph Lauren, Tommy Hilfiger and some of the other clothing manufacturers, including Lands' End, L.L. Bean all had operations. I shouldn't say operations; they all had product lines that were manufactured in Mauritius. One of Mauritius' great industries is the textile industry and they made a lot of clothes for very well known U.S. designers. Americans didn't own these factories; they were all owned by Hong Kong companies, but they would take orders from, let's say Ralph Lauren and they made millions and millions of shirts or trousers or whatever for Tommy Hilfiger or whoever. We had other investments on the island; but for the most part Mauritians preferred to deal with either the French or British, since the wealthiest people in Mauritius were the Europeans. There was a very small Franco community as it was called and to a lesser extent the very,

Library of Congress

very small ethnically British colony that remained behind. They had that natural affinity and connection to France. The French were always finding ways to keep the Americans out, and then the Indians preferred to deal with companies in India and the Chinese with companies in China. We didn't have that much of an economic footprint in Mauritius.

Q: What about Madagascar? I mean, there's the big red island sitting there across the straits or whatever they're called. Did that play any role at all?

ALEXANDER: Madagascar was a favorite site for Mauritian overseas investment. The Mauritians in turn as their labor became more expensive they began investing in Madagascar and actually building textile factories to take advantage of their even cheaper labor. I think they were recognizing that eventually Mauritian labor was going to be priced out of the market; they saw China coming on line and I think they read the tea leaves and figured they would never be able to compete with the Chinese in this game so let's take our money and our know how and find some place close by and that was Madagascar. Other than that, I mean politically, no one cared what went on in Madagascar as long as it didn't affect the Mauritians' investments there. Certainly Madagascar projected no power in the region; they were too poverty stricken to do that.

Q: Did you see Mauritius gearing up to move into the high tech field and all that?

ALEXANDER: Yes.

Q: That's kind of the next phase after textiles.

ALEXANDER: That's a very insightful question. I think Mauritius saw Singapore as its model. High tech, financial; they had a very strong offshore sector there and they were trying to build up their stock market and they were trying to build up their credentials as an offshore tax haven, banking, cum financial center in the region and they were having some success.

Library of Congress

Q: During the time you were there were sort of roaming terrorists a problem or was it a concern?

ALEXANDER: Not so much in Mauritius. We also had the Comoros. I was accredited to the Comoros and at the end of my tour we closed our embassy in the Seychelles and I took over the Seychelles as well. I was very concerned about Comoros. Number one it was called the Islamic Republic of the Comoros and we'd already had a taste of the future, with the '93 World Trade Center attack in New York and other attacks on U.S. interests that seemed to be principally inspired by or caused by Muslim radicals. I always had the sense that in Comoros we were vulnerable to that kind of problem. Even though the embassy in the Comoros had been closed the year that I arrived in Mauritius and I was accredited to the Comoros, there remained behind a Peace Corps contingent of some 35 to 40 Americans. I was concerned for their wellbeing and from whatever quarter they might have been threatened by Muslim fundamentalists or others. As it turns out we did have, on my watch, a problem in the Comoros that didn't directly affect the Peace Corps volunteers, it might have at some point, but fortunately it didn't go that far, and that was the invasion for want of a better word, of the Comoros by the French mercenary Colonel Bob Denard. He had taken over the Comoros in an earlier life and actually been the prime minister for two years, married a Comorian and ran the place for a couple of years, but this had been many years before, 15 years, 20 years before. So in '95, Bob Denard shows up in the Comoros leading a merry band of mercenaries, old French paras and Belgium paratroopers and white South Africans and they take over the Comoros. Again, Washington raised so much hell with Paris because we had reason to believe that the French were somehow if not complicit they had foreknowledge of this and so after a week Bob was told by the French to give it up, it ain't gonna happen this time. He was arrested and forced to stand down. Well, the incident came at a rather fortuitous time for me because just the month or so before I had, using my NSD 38 authority-

Q: Excuse me, could you explain what the NSD 38?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: The 38 authority gives the chief of mission the power over the size of his mission. Not so much to expand it, but to decrease it. In fact, we are told when we go out to look at the size of our missions because some of them are surprisingly large around the world and to ask the hard questions; do we need this many agencies at post? Do we need this many people? Are we doing this efficiently? I think this has become even more of an imperative in the world in which we're living in where embassies are attacked and destroyed and people are killed. You don't want to have more people out there being exposed if you don't need them. So the NSD 38, this National Security Directive, gives chiefs of mission the legal right to send people home, to close down certain activities if, in his or her judgment, these activities are, well there are certain guidelines. Anyway, using those guidelines I used my authority to say I want the Peace Corps out of the Comoros and I used as justification our inability to provide sufficient security. They were simply too far away from any embassy, especially my own, but even the nearest embassies on the mainland were just too far away, there was no way to get them out of the Comoros in times of trouble. Those troubles could have been a tsunami or a hurricane or a volcano blowing up; there could have been local unrest, some kind of health epidemic, cholera epidemic. The point is, they were vulnerable and there was no way we could get to these people in a reasonable amount of time and save their lives. That being the case, I said I want them out but I got all this resistance including from the State Department, which surprised me. I spoke with the office director who explained that the director for Peace Corps Africa had called the front office of the State Department African Affairs Bureau and had managed to find a somewhat sympathetic ear there as well. In my conversations with my masters in the AF Bureau I got the impression that they thought I didn't know what I was doing. I had not served in AF and, as I said this has got nothing to do with service in AF, in fact, my immediate post before that had been Haiti and we had evacuated that post twice, it had a very African feel to it in that regard, the kinds of troubles we had there and people who had told me this is like Liberia what you're dealing with. To get to the point I said, "listen, trust me, this is not a question of knowing Africa or not knowing Africa, this is just a common sense issue from where I stand. If someone gets hurt, I'm going to be

Library of Congress

blamed. No one's going to stick up for me. My authority has to be commensurate with my responsibility; I'm responsible for these people, therefore I have the authority over these people and I want to exercise that authority and send them home, because I cannot assume responsibility for people that I'm just too far away from. Well after the Bob Denard incident all of a sudden I'm really a smart fellow and yes, of course they agree with me 100 percent and blah, blah, blah and we'll have them out of there in no time. So we closed the Peace Corps down.

What really bothered me about all of this exercise was not so much that my judgment was being questioned because I wasn't known to AF, but it was my motivation, my intentions that were being questioned. As I tried to explain to people I said listen, for my own personal convenience I would prefer that the Peace Corps remain, because when I go to the Comoros I'm met by the Peace Corps director, I'm taken to the Peace Corps headquarters, which gives me a base of operations, which I'm not going to have if I send them home. I'll have to go directly to a hotel, I have no one to meet me. It's a very awkward arrangement for me. So for very selfish reasons I would prefer the Peace Corps stay, but, I'm not going to be selfish and keep them here for my personal convenience knowing that I can't take care of them if something bad happens to them. So that bothered me. I found that rather extraordinary. I was also bothered by the fact that the AF Bureau would side with the Peace Corps against its own ambassador. I mean, you look to Washington, you look to your masters to back you, to support you and for them to get on the phone and tell you we think you're wrong or please don't do this. I wasn't terribly impressed with the AF front office as far as this particular thing goes, But maybe there was something that I wasn't aware of; maybe they had reasons for taking this position.

Q: It's always difficult working with the Peace Corps. This is true of any organization, they don't like to pull out of places. FAA has a place in Nairobi, they don't want to get out of it no matter how dangerous it is. What was the Peace Corps doing in the Comoros?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: Little micro projects. They were building wells all over the place, or working with the villagers to build wells because they had no running water so to speak. It's one of the poorest countries in the world. When you get into that category of the poorest, Niger or Chad or Mali? The Comoros has got to be in there. It's at that point where it's going back in time five or six hundred years. They were doing simple projects like that, but they made a world of difference to folks living in the Comoros. Regardless of what they were doing, I just didn't feel it was worth dying over.

Q: What was the government of the Comoros doing when it wasn't being taken over by mercenaries?

ALEXANDER: They were constantly flying to Paris seeking handouts, seeking some kind of French largesse. The Comoros is comprised of four islands, one of which is a French territory. The French just took it. It's called Mayotte. They have a naval facility there and they told the Comorians they weren't going to give it back; it's ours and if you want it, come and take it. It's just ridiculous because the Comorians can't take it back. Deep down inside I don't think they want to take it back because it's convenient to have it there because they can send illegal or undocumented workers to work there, and documented workers to work there and they send their remittances back to the other three islands. It also provides them with a source of help in the case of cyclone or some other natural disaster; the French navy is close by and they can provide some assistance. At least that's the thinking of the folks in Moroni, the capital of the Comoros. For the most part the country is so poor the government does nothing and provides no services, but to its credit it's not one of these leeching governments, it's not an oppressive government's either. It doesn't built fancy ministries and put all its officials in Mercedes Benz, which is so often the case on the Continent; it doesn't do that either. Everyone is poor. So the few shekels that the government officials had they used to fly to Paris, essentially to beg for money. They also send a lot of people to France to work, legally or illegally. What spares the Comoros some of the great dysfunctions of the Continent, of the mainland I should say, is the very

Library of Congress

small population. I don't think there are more than five or six hundred thousand Comorians, so international assistance can keep them afloat and does barely. It's a manageable population, which is not the case with some of the other failed states on the mainland, millions and millions and millions who just, that dynamic fortunately doesn't exist.

Q: Did the Seychelles come under your jurisdiction while you were there?

ALEXANDER: It did at the end of my tour. The last few months of my tour we closed the embassy down and we took over the Seychelles. I was not accredited to the Seychelles because I was leaving and didn't want to go through that; it just was nonsensical. I sent my DCM there to be the charg#, so to speak, to show the flag and to let the charg# who was at the post know that it's our ballgame now, it's no longer yours, thank you. I said, "the ambassador can be the first one to present his credentials when he arrives." There was some debate arguing that it would be easier if I did it so that the government in the Seychelles got used to this, but I just didn't want to be bothered. We took it over and really did nothing there until I was gone.

Q: Back to Reunion. Do we have anything on the island or were you reporting on it?

ALEXANDER: No, it was one of those strange little Foreign Service quirks. Reunion is a French territory, might even be a French department, even though I don't think so, I think it's just a territory. The point is the consular work in Reunion is done out of Paris, which means that the folks in Reunion could not come to Mauritius to renew visas. Not that French citizens needed them, but if they had them for whatever reason they couldn't come to our post to do that. We couldn't provide any kind of consular service to them. There was one case where even the embassy in Paris wanted us to do it, but we couldn't because we weren't accredited to France. We had no work in Reunion.

Q: How about counselor case? You're sitting on this island paradise, which usually means some American citizen is going to screw up. Did you have any problems?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: No, no, we didn't. It was too wealthy, we were just simply too far away from everything. Basically the only way you can get in and out of Mauritius was with a very expensive plane ticket.

Q: That's a great thing.

ALEXANDER: Yes. We just didn't have that problem.

Q: Did you have a lot of particularly wealthy tourists come in? Sometimes the white settlers can lead a rather dissolute life. Was that happening?

ALEXANDER: Yes, yes, that happened among the European Mauritians, the Franco Mauritians for the most part. In fact, the analogy to Kenya is a good one because they had somewhat of the same mentality, having been to both countries. They had lovely homes on their sugar plantations and they spent much time talking about the good old days as they sipped gin tonics looking over the ocean. It was very much a colonial plantation kind of existence. They really never adjusted to post-independence and continued to maintain certain attitudes. They were a dying breed, but their kids often adopted many of the same attitudes. They spoke a very bizarre French that no one speaks anymore in France, and they had very bizarre ideas about their place in the world. Most of them were convinced that they were the descendants of French nobility, which they were not. They fabricated these origins, many of them. I think a lot of them sincerely believe. They didn't realize that their great-great-great-great grandfathers had fabricated these noble roots, even though there were a few whose families came to escape the French Revolution. For the most part, they were descendants of French settlers, not necessarily noble. It became very important to them that they be noble. I don't know why, but that was part of their shtick, their psyche, you know: I'm the descendant of so and so and so and so. If you went and looked them up you'd find out well, there's no nobility there. They were a queer lot, friendly, many of them.

Library of Congress

My wife and I got to know many of them; in fact, sometimes I had some rather interesting interactions. I remember one night having dinner with one of these very old French Mauritian families and the hostess said to my wife, "you speak French very well." And my wife said, "thank you. And she said, "you know, you speak French almost as well as we do." And my wife stiffened and said, "who is we, madam?" She said, "well, we." She said, "pardon me, but I speak French better than you do." I was so surprised because my wife was not an arrogant person, but in point of fact her French was absolutely native, it's 5/5. She was raised in France; she went to school from the first grade until the eleventh grade in the French school system. Her French is absolutely native as any French person. She later served in Paris and frequently had problems because the French would get confused thinking she was one of the FSNs representing her boss. She'd say, "no, I am the counselor of embassy, I'm not the FSN." "No, that's impossible." Well our host, rather indignant, responded, "well how can you speak French better than us? We're French." My wife said, "but you're not French, you're Mauritian." "Yes, but we're French." "No, no, you're Mauritian and your French is French Mauritian, it is not French French." The evening ended rather abruptly and we left. I happened to agree with her because my French wasn't quite as good as hers. My French, because I had spent so many years in France growing up, was also better than the average French Mauritian. But I cite this as an example of this isolated world that they lived in. I had French, French friends, from France who were not Mauritians, were either assigned to the embassy or working there, who used to make the same observation. They'd say, "we meet these people and they insist on telling you they're French; they're not. They speak the most bizarre French we've ever heard; sometimes you can't even understand them." But again, they lived in such splendid isolation they were convinced it was just yesterday they left the old country.

Q: How big was your embassy by the way?

ALEXANDER: It was small. There were roughly 40 of us if I remember correctly. By the time I left I think we were down to 30 or 32.

Library of Congress

Q: Was there much of a consular business there?

ALEXANDER: No, very little because we had a tiny American community. There were very few American tourists and very few Mauritians asking for visas to go to the U.S. There were a few, mostly students and business people. So consular work was part-time for one of my officers. The consular section was open three days a week for three hours or four hours or something.

Q: Did you have trouble finding something to do?

ALEXANDER: I did, yes. Yes, absolutely.

Q: I was just thinking, after Haiti, it's nice to decompress for about six months-

ALEXANDER: Exactly. It was fine for six months and then I realized I didn't have a job. Even running off to the Comoros periodically, I really didn't have a job. I suspect that, even now that we have the Seychelles, the ambassador still doesn't have much of a job. That's one of the reasons why I scaled down the embassy. I cut back on the staff in Mauritius and closed down because I said there was no work for us. We really shouldn't be here, certainly not in the numbers that we are.

Q: Was the French embassy interested in what was going on there?

ALEXANDER: They were. The French had a very large footprint in Mauritius, in the area. It had been a former colony; they had a billion dollars worth of investments in Mauritius. They had a very large Franco Mauritian community, these folks that I was telling you about. While they might have spoken rather archaic French, many of them had French passports, so they required a considerable amount of servicing. The French ambassador and his staff were much busier than we were. That post was a much more important posting for the French than it was for us, too. My colleagues were relatively senior, they went on to European embassies after that. The French DCM went on to be the number

Library of Congress

two at the UN, which certainly wouldn't have been the case with my DCM, so that was a much more important post for France than it was for us.

Q: I take it then, other than chiding you on getting rid of the Peace Corps, the African Bureau didn't play much of a role or have much interest in what you were up to?

ALEXANDER: No. No, they were very supportive, as was the EUR Bureau, when I came in with a request to take the Mauritian foreign minister and a few others to the Chagos to see Diego Garcia. They were absolutely magnificent. The British resisted the idea at first and AF weighed in along with EUR saying it might not be a bad idea because the Mauritians were constantly bringing this up in the United Nations and it's a minor irritant, but it's an irritant nonetheless. EUR weighed in with the Brits and the Brits finally said okay, let's give it a shot. Other than that I had very little to do with the AF.

Q: Well then, '96, whither?

ALEXANDER: '96 I went back to ARA, to Western Hemisphere as it's called now, WHA. I went to Ecuador as ambassador; back into the frying pan. It wasn't violent like Haiti, but it was certainly volatile.

Q: You were there, this would be '96 to '99?

ALEXANDER: To the end of '99. During my three years there I had five presidents or maybe six, I'll have to do the count. One of whom, Ecuadorian folklore would have you believe I was responsible for having ousted. Ecuador was a very different kettle of fish because we did have some significant interests there, economic and political.

Q: Let's talk about '96 when you went out there. What was our interest there and what was the situation sort of political/economic in Ecuador before you went out?

ALEXANDER: Economically I think our major investment in Ecuador was in the oil sector.

Library of Congress

Q: In what?

ALEXANDER: In the oil sector, in the petroleum sector. Ecuador has petroleum. It doesn't have what Venezuela has, but it has it's a successful oil exporter. American oil companies spent a lot and invested a lot in that sector. We're also, not surprisingly, Ecuador's largest trading partner. The trade back and forth, when I was there, was over a billion bucks a year. There was money there.

Politically, just before I arrived, in '95 Ecuador went to war with Peru over a border dispute.

Q: Not that border that we were a guarantor for?

ALEXANDER: Exactly, exactly.

Q: Brazil and who was the other one?

ALEXANDER: Chile. But this was a continuation of a dispute that went back 200 years and which had led, counting that war in '95, to four wars with Peru. The one in '95 was of some concern to Washington because it had all the makings of a modern war: jet aircraft and guided missiles and all. This wasn't some little dispute as you see in other parts of the world with AK-47s and a lot of people get killed and there's a lot of misery. This was warfare as it's understood in the United States. Not on the scale of the kind of conflict we might have, but it was a reminder to Washington that we do have countries in South America, like Argentina and Brazil and Chile and Peru that are armed to the teeth and capable of projecting power, causing misery and conflicts in the region, which is something that just did not suit our interests. This shot of MiGs, which is what the Peruvians and we had, the Ecuadorians had Israeli jet aircraft, Kfirs, these clashes and shooting down airplanes with guided missiles. It made us realize that this is not some little dispute between two mini states out in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

Library of Congress

Tensions were high. Tensions were really high when I arrived because the fighting had stopped but the dispute had not been resolved. The four guarantor states actually had military troops stationed in the disputed region, and a lot of people don't know but we had U.S. forces stationed in the jungle between Peru and Ecuador. So when I arrived we had troops in the area.

Q: Who were these troops and how did they get there?

ALEXANDER: We sent them. We, the other three guarantors, the Chileans, the Argentineans and the Brazilians; the U.S. contingent was the largest one. We had troops and helicopters.

Q: They were part of a peacekeeping, of the guarantors?

ALEXANDER: They were part of a guarantor peacekeeping operation but they were in the line of fire. We didn't want to keep U.S. forces in that area indefinitely; it was costing money and we just didn't want to do it. So it was in our interest to try to resolve this dispute, preferably once and for all before it became an even larger problem for the region. While Peru had this ongoing conflict with the Ecuadorians, they were also having a border dispute with Chile; the Chileans were having a border dispute with the Bolivians and of course, the Argentineans had never forgiven us nor the Brits for the Malvinas the Falklands. So this touched a very raw nerve in a lot of places and it was in the interest of a lot of people to try to get this border dispute fixed. So this was the dynamic when I arrived in '96.

Q: What sort of government did Ecuador have when you arrived there?

ALEXANDER: It had a democratically elected government. It had a president and a congress. No prime minister, which might have been part of the reason why they've changed presidents every few months. At least it seemed that they were changed every few months. I presented my credentials to the outgoing president who left office a week

Library of Congress

later. The incoming government had already been elected and they took over and they were in office from August until January when they were-

Q: I take it this is the type of government that if you didn't have a vote of confidence you're out?

ALEXANDER: No, no, it was a system much more like ours. They had a congress, but it was a unicameral; one house, not two. The ruling party had nothing to do with the election of the president, just like here in the U.S. You might have a majority in the congress and the president might be from the other party. The same in Ecuador.

So when the president took office, he represented a large party; but not the majority party. The president who took office right after I arrived, was in power until January, when he was ousted in a bloodless coup, essentially led by the congress but it was a coup. It wasn't done on a vote of no confidence; the congress convened and ruled that the president was mentally unfit and the military forced him from office. He went into exile in Panama. The president of the congress, ignoring the constitution, said, "I'm the president now," despite the fact that there was a democratically elected vice president. The vice president's problem was that she was a woman, and nobody wanted a woman president, so the president of the congress connived and manipulated and had himself appointed as president. He stayed in office until '98 when they had a presidential election.

Q: Well, what did you see as your task when you got there?

ALEXANDER: My principle political goal was to lend our efforts to those of the guarantor states in resolving the border dispute with Peru. This was our number one political objective. We had, equally as important, other missions including keeping Ecuador from becoming a haven for drug traffickers or a producing country. It was bordered by two major producing countries, Columbia and Peru. It had been spared that nightmare, but the pressures were always there. Economically, again, to protect and defend substantial U.S. investments in the country, which wound up being one of my biggest headaches, because

Library of Congress

the government was so corrupt. They were always extorting U.S. firms and that was a chronic nightmare for me. Headache I should say, not nightmare. I was very, very busy there.

Q: Let's talk first about dealing with the government. The United States was very happy that we could point to Latin America as being a place no longer with coups and dictators and this sort of thing, and all of a sudden you have a congressional coup shortly after you arrive. What did we do about that? Did we just sit back and say well gee, that's your problem or what?

ALEXANDER: We did the usual: we condemned the congressional coup; we didn't quite describe it as that. I should perhaps provide a little bit more detail to help understand Washington's reaction. I arrived in August. The new government, the government of Abdala Bucaram took office in August of 1996. Bucaram was a very colorful man. He had been the mayor of Guayaquil; he'd been forced out of the country once before and exiled, accused of being corrupt while he ran Guayaquil, which is Ecuador's richest, largest city. The job is not unlike being the mayor of New York, but maybe five times more important than being the mayor of New York, because there are only two major cities in Ecuador: Quito and New York. So if there were two major cities in the U.S., New York and Washington, this is like being the mayor of New York.

He was a very controversial, very clever, very charismatic man, but he had a big mouth and provoked a lot of people. He came from a prominent family, his sister had been married to a former president of Ecuador, and both of them had died in an airplane accident in the early '80s. It was alleged at one time that the CIA was responsible, but this is the typical Latin American thing, to accuse the gringos and the CIA. Bucaram came into office as a populist, but his cronies immediately set about doing what all the governments before him had done: stealing everything that wasn't nailed down. They began extorting money from U.S. companies and making life difficult for U.S. companies, particularly in the oil sector.

Library of Congress

Bucaram had appointed as his minister of energy a man who was at times almost psychotic: threatening people, physically assaulting people. It was alleged he had even killed one or two people. Whether that's true or not I don't know but he was an extremely aggressive, confrontational man. In late September or early October, within a few weeks of my arrival, he had summoned to his office at the ministry of energy a couple of local representatives from one of the U.S. oil companies, and I really don't remember which company it was; I want to say Texaco but I'm not sure, I just don't remember because we had several. It's alleged that he physically assaulted them, struck them with his fists. They came to the embassy and said, "we were assaulted by the minister of energy. He's screaming, yelling at us." To make a long story short, "what's his problem?" "We don't know." So I said "this is totally unacceptable," and I went to see him. He was somewhat aggressive with me as well.

He gave me somewhat of a different version, but left me with a very distinct impression that indeed he'd roughed these guys up. I made it absolutely clear to him that on my watch this was not going to happen again and if it did there would be very harsh consequences. He said, "well what are you going to do, beat me up?" I looked at him and I said, "would you consider that to be a harsh consequence?" He said, "your beating me up?" And I said, "me personally beating you up? Yes." I looked at him and I started laughing. I said, "why are you speaking this way? You're a minister, I'm an ambassador. I'm not coming over here to personally threaten you. You should be in a different point in your life, we're the same age, you know." He says, "well, I'm that kind of guy. I mean, if you're personally threatening me." I looked at him and I started laughing, because I didn't know what to say. I thought psychologically this is not a bad approach this guy is taking, because it's the last thing I expected. I was also laughing because unbeknownst to him the last thing I was concerned about, even though he was a fairly well built guy, the last thing I was afraid of was him physically. It just never crossed my mind. I think in part because I'd had the good fortune of having done karate for ten years and even though I hadn't kept it up I was 46 years old, still physically in decent shape and the last thing I was concerned about was

Library of Congress

mixing it up with this man. It just seemed so absurd I didn't know what to say. I don't think in the last 20 years that someone actually raised the suggestion of physical combat, so I started laughing which was probably the best thing to do because he started laughing. I don't think he was laughing for the same reason. It kind of broke the ice in a way. If it comes to that yes, we could trade punches, and even have a duel or something, which seemed to amuse him. I said, "really, I don't want to talk about consequences; I just don't want this to happen because it's unnecessary. If these people are doing something to you that so angers you that feel the need to strike them, call me. Strike me." He says, "I can't strike you, you have diplomatic immunity." I said, "I'll waive the immunity." What I was trying to do was make him laugh and lighten it up a bit. But I said, "if you have a beef that drives you to that point that you want to physically assault somebody than obviously that's a pretty strong beef and we should talk about it, but whatever beef it is you're not going to solve your problem by physically assaulting executives of U.S. oil companies because then you will force me to do drastic things." Then we get back to, "Like what?" I said, "you don't want to know like what. It doesn't matter." He said, "but like what?" And I said, "alright." Again, he's kind of laughing, so I'm laughing. I said, "do you have an apartment in Miami?" He says, "as a matter of fact I do." "Alright, we won't let you go to your apartment." He says, "My wife wouldn't be too happy about that." I said "okay." He says, "I have to think that. That would be pretty drastic. Would you really do that?" I said, "yes, absolutely. Absolutely I'd do that, take away your visa." He says, "alright, okay, alright. Well the next time I have a problem I'll call you." So that resolved that problem.

The reason why I went through this little story was that I left thinking, "is it my imagination or is this guy off?" The DCM says, "no, this guy's clearly got some kind of a problem." I said, "why would they make a guy like this a minister of energy?" "He's a childhood friend, best friend, close friend of the president." There were a couple of other crazies like this, maybe not as violent as this guy, but we were constantly having problems like this with the government. Yet they weren't anti-American. It wasn't that they disliked us and they weren't seeking to provoke us. This was the kind of government they had; it was a bunch

Library of Congress

of bully boys, coupled with the president's very often aggressive, provocative speech insulting people and, you know, daring his opposition to take him on and stuff. It caused a lot of concern.

By November, by the end of November I went to him, actually he came to me.

Q: This is the president?

ALEXANDER: The president, came to the house for drinks because I was getting increasingly fed up with this, so he came to my house one afternoon. He said, "I know you're unhappy." I said, "I'm really unhappy, but let me tell you something. If you keep at it the way you are, they're going to toss you out on your ear. I wanted to have this talk with you. Thank you for coming to the house. I'm flattered, a president never comes to an ambassador's place." He said, "oh, you know me, I don't stand on protocol." I said, "fine, I'm not going to stand on protocol either. I'm going to tell you as I see it. You don't want to pick a fight with the U.S. government. You've got enough going on here internally. Your opposition is going to bring you down and you're giving them every excuse. You're going to look to us to help prop you up because you are a democratically elected government and you know that's our mantra, you don't bring down democratically elected governments, but I can't help you if you can't help yourself. And if you're sitting there antagonizing American businesses herparticularly these oil companies, because they have a lot of clout in Washingtonthere's not going to be much sympathy if someone decides to bring you down. There's not going to be much sympathy for you in Washington. Yes, we'll mutter the right words, but without conviction. And, you don't want that. You want us in there saying the right things. If you want me to help you, you have to help yourself." And he said, "I hear you, I hear you. What is it that you want me to do?" So I actually gave him a written list, with about 10 things on there that I felt that he had to do. His unwillingness to sign intellectual property agreement, bribery, corruption, things that could have been done and should have been done. Nothing was done.

Library of Congress

I called him mid-December and said, "I'm still getting the same complaints, I've seen no movement on these things." Finally around the beginning December, I was in Ecuador's third largest city, Cuenca, speaking to the American-Ecuadorian Chamber of Commerce in Cuenca and I made a speech in which I essentially went after the government. I never mentioned the president, I never mentioned anyone, but I spoke of corruption and I cited specific cases. Well, this hit the news that evening. I thought it might, but I wasn't quite sure. I remember saying to the staff before I delivered the speech, "this speech might even get me thrown out of the country because it's provocative. I don't want to change the government, I don't want to go after the government, I want to change their behavior. So let's keep that in mind, let's look at this speech again, because it is provocative. It is certainly the most provocative speech I've ever given and it sounds like an attack on the government. I don't want to attack the government," so we removed all references to the government. But people read between the lines, and it hit the news that night. Every TV station ran it and it started this ball rolling. The opposition said, "this is a national disgrace, the American ambassador is right, these are corrupt bastards." Of course, they were hypocrites because every government they had was corrupt. The government responded and said, "he makes all these allegations but he doesn't go into great detail." So then the press started calling for actual names. I said, "no, I'm not going to do that." "How do you expect the government to?" And I said, "I don't think I'm talking about anything which is news to anyone in Ecuador. You've been subject to this kind of predatory corrupt behavior on the part of government officials since God knows when. It's not important that I go into more detail it's not my job to tell anyone in Ecuador how to run their government. I made reference to certain things that had happened to U.S. companies and I want to leave it at that."

This went on and on and the government's response more or less, "he's full of you know what and this didn't really happen" and the press came back, "if this really happened why can't you tell us?" I said, "because I get my information from different ways. Some of those ways, frankly, would reveal certain sources and information which I'm not at liberty to do,

Library of Congress

so I can't do this with you." They dropped that, but they kept after the government and they kept citing me. Then it went around in the opposition circles that what I was really saying was that we have lost faith and we want a change of government and that's what they used as a justification to start this congressional coup. They threw the guy out. My masters in Washington, namely the assistant secretary, was furious with me.

Q: Who was that?

ALEXANDER: It was Jeff Davidow. In fact, he called me up the day that the president was tossed out, fled into exile and said, "what have you done?" Those were his very words. I said, "I've done nothing, Jeff, but my job." And he repeated, "what have you done?" And I said, "I've done my job." "What do you think your job is?" I said, "my job is to defend and protect American interests in this country, including commercial interests. These people were predatory, extortionists and I denounced them. Now, what the congress has done, that's a different issue." "Yes, but you made it possible." I said, "Listen, if you're telling me I'm responsible for this man's behavior and for his being in exile, I'm sorry, I reject that notion." Jeff was a very, very decent man, one of the most intelligent FSOs I had ever met and I was really kind of surprised because he was clearly angry. I'd never seen him angry, when I knew him before, my time there. He was clearly upset. There was something here I just didn't understand. So I called the principle desk, who just happened to be my predecessor. I got a rather funny reaction from him. Again, I'm only guessing; I can't accuse him of anything, because I don't know that, and I have no reason. We were friends more or less, served together.

Q: Who was it?

ALEXANDER: Pete Romero. We had served together and we were personal friends. After I hung up the phone I wondered if Pete, who was my immediate predecessor, if he put some bee in Jeff's bonnet and somehow convinced Jeff, but why would he do that? As best as I can figure, and this is from thinking about it over the years, that Pete got

Library of Congress

phone calls from people in Ecuador who were unhappy with the change in status quo and maybe it was felt that I had been injudicious. Maybe I was injudicious in my going after the government because I didn't clear my speech with Washington. But as I told them later I said, "I'm sorry, but I'm the ambassador. You pay me to make these kinds of judgments and I'm not in the habit of clearing my speeches, unless I am talking about U.S. policy." "Well, didn't you have a sense that this might be controversial?" I said, "yes and it's one of the reasons why I decided not to clear it with you. Had I asked for clearance I would have never gotten it, because it goes through 50,000 people." I said, "I'm sorry, but I have the authority, I'm also willing to accept the responsibility. I take responsibility for what I did, but you have plausible denial and, if that's what you're looking for, you had nothing to do with this, you didn't. I'll take my lumps," and my lumps I did take because Jeff didn't talk to me for the next year. I was made to feel persona non grata. Had I had it to do all over again I would have done it.

Q: Were you sort of reputed to be the person who pushed this revolt?

ALEXANDER: Oh, yes, responsible for this man's ouster. I'm not going to be naive. Had I not denounced him as obliquely as I did, I think he had a good chance of surviving. At least, if not his full term, certainly many more months if not another year or two. He was such a volatile, aggressive man, I cannot predict with certainty that he would have survived his entire term, but at the same time I have little doubts that it was my action more than any other that brought him down. His opponents were gunning for him anyway and they seized on this catalyst as the excuse or the pretext. I had a sense that it might be used that way. I didn't really think that it would go that far, but I would be a liar to say that the thought hadn't crossed my mind before delivering the speech. But again, we were dealing with people who were causing U.S. businesses absolute nightmarish scenarios with their outrageous claims.

If you're an oil company, or any company for that matter, and you've got \$100 million business going in a country and a minister comes to you and says give me a million dollars

Library of Congress

or I'm going to shut you down. You say well wait a minute, let's do the math. We've got \$100 million invested and they're asking for a million. However, if I give them the million, the U.S. government's going to send me to jail, because this breaks all kinds of laws. This was the position that our companies were finding themselves in. Not only the oil industry; we had Proctor & Gamble, Colgate; these are household names in the United States who had factories making toothpaste or whatever. They were being extorted in various ways by the government and by allies of the government; sometimes people in the private sector closely aligned with the government. They were being extorted; they were being sued under something called the Dealer's Act for tens of millions of dollars. There were 12 U.S. companies who were being sued from anywhere from \$20 million to \$100 million each and under Ecuadorian law they were clearly going to lose. But these were the most egregious kinds of lawsuits.

Q: These were shakedowns?

ALEXANDER: They were shakedowns, exactly. This was all going on when I was there and Washington was breathing all over me. I was getting frequent calls: you got to do something, you got to do something. This was the responsibility part which Washington loves to do. When they've got a problem, Washington always wants to tell its embassies what to do and that's what Washington does. Washington, in a very practical sense, is usually some FS-2 or some GS-15 who comes up with an idea that somehow becomes a policy and some senior level, DAS or somebody, signs off on it without giving it much thought and so this is Washington telling you what to do. To make a long story short, I didn't really have anyone giving me any advice on how to resolve these problems but everyone was looking for solutions. Again, Management 101. If I have the responsibility, I have the authority. And my authority is equal to my responsibility, I will exercise that authority and I will act in a way that I think I should.

I would like to say, in my defense, that we destroyed those cases, sent the lawyers packing. Some of the cases were settled, literally, for pennies on the dollar because I

Library of Congress

terrorized everybody and I used everything at my disposal. I will take away your visas, I'll send you to jail the moment you get off the plane in Miami for shaking down businesses. I'll do this. It was all nonsense, a bluff. Well, some of it wasn't a bluff, some of that stuff we were legally authorized to do, or could have done or could have sought authority to do. But we solved the problem. Part of it was solved by getting rid of the government which was, again, not my intention. But we were dealing with a very troublesome government. On top of that, I was concerned that, to the extent that the government radicalized the political scene, we were raising the stakes in this dispute with Peru. While President Bucaram went to Peru, Fujimori seemed to like him, I was so afraid that the opposition was cynically going to seize on what seemed to be an emerging friendship between him and the Peruvian president, and say this man's a traitor and he's selling us down the river to Fujimori and we have to act and that they might use this to go at it again with the Peruvians. There were a lot of vested interests, on both sides of the border, in a conflict. Conflicts require airplanes and a lot of people made a lot of money on both sides of the border selling airplanes and munitions and rockets and everything else to the armed forces. There were an awful lot of folks who wanted them to go at it again and they were doing everything in their power. That's a story that maybe we can pick up on in the next session on what happened with the government that succeeded him. My biggest headache with them was to keep them from going out and buying arms for personal gain, but clearly that would have provoked another war and an even bigger one than before.

Q: Okay, we'll pick it up then. By the way, I have to add that I have an interview with Maurice Bernbaum, who was there from '60 to '65 as ambassador. And the president at one point was Arosemena?

ALEXANDER: Yes. Who supposedly peed in his flower pot.

Q: Well, not only that but apparently some-

ALEXANDER: In the ambassador's flower pot.

Library of Congress

Q: *Yes and he was a drunk.*

ALEXANDER: He was a drunk. He just died last year.

Q: *Yes. At one point there, he got drunk at a banquet with all the high officials, either at the American ...*

ALEXANDER: At the American ambassador's residence.

Q: *... and he started castigating the ambassador and everyone else. And Bernbaum said, "he's drunk, let's not take offense." So, such is life in Ecuador.*

ALEXANDER: He, the president, actually, if it was true. that he actually peed in the plants, the flower pot at the then-ambassador's residence? He said, "I peed but I peed in the rose bushes." I said, "you really did?" He said, "yeah, I did. I'm an old man, I had to pee." He was quite a character. He was thrown out. He was thrown out of office by the military for disgracing the country or something.

I'm glad you mention this because maybe this is a good point to finish. The military and others were very, very quick to seize on affronts to the national honor as pretexts for doing things that they wanted to do anyway. Bucaram was kind of wild; he wasn't a drunk, quite to the contrary. I don't think he drank any alcohol. He was actually a very physically impressive man, a very athletic guy. But his behavior, the things he would say, I was concerned that the military or others were going to seize on his remarks and, as they did with President Arosemena, use that as a pretext to throw him out of office, to do a coup, and eventually it happened anyway, ironically, based on my remarks, not on the presidents remarks.

Q: *Well, we'll pick this up the next time. We've talked about the departure of President-*

ALEXANDER: Bucaram.

Library of Congress

Q: Bucaram. But we haven't talked about sort of the consequences thereafter. You were saying that you were at odds with the assistant secretary over this, but you said that the corruption had gone down. The shakedowns had pretty well stopped. Then we're going to talk about the problem of the border dispute and how so many people had financial stakes in this border dispute. And we'll pick that up.

Alright. Today is the 21st of November, 2005. Les, what was the border dispute all about?

ALEXANDER: Some time in 18th century, 17, pick a day, 1790, 1780, I don't know, Peru and Ecuador's border was demarcated by someone, the Spaniards. From the best of my recollection it was done, according to the Ecuadorians, arbitrarily.

Q: It was sort of administratively.

ALEXANDER: Exactly.

Q: You know, I mean, the governor of this and the governor of that.

ALEXANDER: Got together and said.

Q: Yes.

ALEXANDER: It probably would have ended there except, as time went by, the Ecuadorians were increasingly peeved by their not having physical access to the Amazon. Again for reasons I don't quite understand, this really bothered them. Some argued that it was because they suspected that there was oil somewhere in the region where they claimed that the border should have been. There may have been some kind of mineral wealth. Whether it was as benign as offended honor as something as pragmatic or as mercenary as oil reserves, God only knows. Ecuadorians weren't talking. To make a long story short, they didn't like where the line was drawn. Now, I do understand the sentiment, because I heard it repeated so much, what really bothered the Ecuadorians the most was

Library of Congress

their believing firmly, it was part of their creed and credo, that they were an Amazonian nation, just like most nations in South America. If you look at a map of South America, Ecuador is one of three that doesn't have access to or doesn't touch on that Amazonian region. This seemed to really bother them. The Peruvians, if I might speak for them, were perfectly satisfied with where the line was drawn. This is where the border was established and the Ecuadorians have to live with it, that's just the way it goes.

Over the next 200 years, the two countries, periodically went at it, and ostensibly over this border. The last time they did was in 1995, just before I arrived, and, as I think I mentioned already, this shook up a lot of people, including Washington, because the clash had all the earmarks, all the appearances of modern warfare, with missiles and jet planes and all this, and this was a little worrisome. We generally don't think of Latin American countries as having those kinds of belligerencies.

Q: Suited up militarily-wise.

ALEXANDER: And heaven forbid they were able to buy jet fighters from countries other than the United States. They were able to, in our view, misbehave.

So when I arrive in 1996, the following year, this was a matter of some concern to Washington and I don't think I'm being hyperbolic when I suggest that this was probably my biggest political objective was contributing to once and for all, a final resolution of this longstanding dispute between the two countries. To that end we combined our efforts with those of my colleagues in the Brazilian embassy, the Chilean embassy and the Argentinean embassy. The four nations, we were the guarantors, the real guarantors-

Q: This goes back to the 1940s?

ALEXANDER: Yes, we were the guarantors back to the early 1940s to an agreement that was drawn up at that time that those four nations. Brazil, Argentina, Chile and the U.S. would work to guarantee what had been thought of in the early 1940s as being

Library of Congress

the final resolution. It wasn't the final resolution, because again they went at it most recently in 1995. So we worked very closely with those embassies as well as with Luigi Einaudi, the now deputy secretary general of the OAS (Organization of American States). I don't remember Luigi's official title, but he was appointed by the State Department to be Washington's man to work with all of this. He was well liked and respected by the Peruvians and the Ecuadorians, most important, and by the guarantor nations. He spoke fluent Spanish; well he spoke a half a dozen languages fluently. Luigi was the consummate diplomat and worked like a dog to help bring this thing to resolution and the four nations working with Luigi were able to eventually prevail upon the Ecuadorians and the Peruvians to settle this dispute once and for all. I would have to credit Luigi with coming up with, or at least initiating the idea that the Ecuadorians could save face in all of this and the Peruvians could go along with the face saving measure without giving up any territory by agreeing to let the Ecuadorians have some kind of, slightly more than symbolic access to the Amazon. Without going into all the details, a rather creative formula was agreed upon by which the Ecuadorians would have access to the Amazon and the Peruvians would have the border as they saw it, the integrity of that border undiminished and the Ecuadorians would be given a tiny believe it was one square kilometre piece of land in the area, over which they had sovereign access. Anyway, the formula worked and both countries agreed to it and a treaty was signed or a peace agreement, whatever we choose to call it, I don't recall what the term of art was in 1998 in October when it was signed but it was signed. And Fujimori went, and the recently elected president of Ecuador, Jamil Mahuad, Luigi, of course, and three of the four presidents of the guarantor countries, I believe were there. Washington sent the assistant secretary for Latin America. And that was the end of that.

Q: Talk a little about some of the dynamics as you saw it. Who was pushing for what? Were there other parties within either country that were trying to stir the pot or to bring out peace or something?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: I think there was a combination of all those elements, it really was sort of a rotten pot of characters, some good, some bad. On the Peruvian side and again, I'm speaking now as a former ambassador in Ecuador, so my view of things on the other side of the border obviously are colored by where I was, but my sense was that the Peruvian military wanted to have at it again. In other words, they were looking for an excuse to ignite this whole border dispute so that they could have another crack at the Ecuadorians. The reason for that was that the Ecuadorians, much to everyone's surprise, especially the Peruvians, stuck it to the Peruvians in '95. They had planned for this conflict for years, their *raison d'etre*, was to defend the homeland against an attack from Peru. They gamed over a period of years, they figured out exactly what the Peruvians would do and they had it down cold. So when the Peruvians indeed attacked, the Ecuadorians were well prepared for their attack. The aircraft came over and shot down their aircraft and pretty much humiliated the Peruvians. Humiliated them to the degree that Peru is considerably larger in terms of population, wealth, etcetera, etcetera. It just wasn't expected that they would be beaten as they were by the Ecuadorians. So they were itching to go back at it.

There were some in the Ecuadorian military that wanted to have another crack at them, too, figuring that they did really well in '95 and would do well the next time. I think more sober heads in Ecuador thought they got lucky. They guessed what they were going to do, the strategy, the tactics were, right on the money, but the Peruvians aren't stupid and they're not going to repeat what they did in '95. They're now doing what the Ecuadorians did as a lead up to that and they're going to be prepared this time, better prepared. So we better think twice before we get ourselves in another armed conflict with them because the sense is that this time the outcome will probably be different. What was fueling their very legitimate fears about Peru's ability to hurt them in the case of another armed military conflict, and what also vindicated their sense that the Peruvians were planning for this thing much better, was that Fujimori authorized the armed forces to go out and buy a considerable number of very sophisticated, in relative terms, aircraft, MiG 29s.

Library of Congress

Q: Pretty impressive.

ALEXANDER: Yes, extremely competent aircraft. The only thing that, in the theatre that could have stood up to that would have been F-16s, F-18s. In other words, this is the top of the line fighters. They picked up 25 of those and they picked up another 12, 15, 20 F-25s, some kind of a bomber, bomber-fighter, whatever, but I do specifically remember the MiG 29s. They really elevated the arms race, so to speak. The Ecuadorians came to us and said, "you've got to sell us F-16s." I have to say, I was in favor of that proposal. I went to Washington and I said, "if we're going to maintain a balance of power or balance of terror or whatever it is, we've got to allow the Ecuadorians access to aircraft that can compete with these MiG 29s. The Peruvians are going to be emboldened enough at some point to go ahead and use those things. We may have a really big mess on our hands because I don't think the Peruvians are going to just stop at exchanging fire somewhere out in the jungle. This time they may actually go after Ecuadorian cities, particularly Guayaquil, which is the largest city, and inflict considerable economic damage as well as killing civilians. They may go after other strategic targets as well, like dams and things of that sort. In other words we're talking about a rather nasty situation here." Jeff Davidow, the assistant secretary wasn't convinced and now that I have the advantage of hindsight Jeff called it right. He said, "listen, I understand your argument and it's one that's shared by others here, myself included, that we not do anything to either by commission or omission to encouragement either side to do anything precipitous. But, what you're talking about here goes to a larger policy of arms sales to Latin America. We sold F-16 to Venezuelans, but right now, it's our policy not to sell any arms of that sort anywhere in Latin America. We're just not going to get involved in that kind of thing." I thought, okay, he has to look at the bigger picture and I think he was right. It forced me to go back to the Ecuadorian military and say there's no easy out here, but you're not going to get F-16s. What we've got to do is find a way to get the Peruvians not to use the MiGs they've purchased.

Library of Congress

While this was going on, I find out that the then-interim president and some of his henchmen are secretly planning on buying MiG-29s as well to the tune of some \$500 million U.S. I went to the defense minister, who was a friend of mine, and I say, “listen, I need to know. I'm not asking you to be a traitor or to give up national secrets but, if you guys are planning on buying these things, there are a whole bunch of issues here that you ought to think about, not least among them is I'm hearing from other sources that this is just some pretext to make a bunch of money on the side through the so-called commissions.” Well, he hems and haws and he gets back to me in a few days and he says, “all I can say is that decisions are being made that don't seem to have military considerations as part of the overall equation and I have reason to believe that maybe your suppositions, your concerns, your fears about other motivations may be at play.” In other words, what he was saying in so many words was that they have a lot of people who are encouraging the president to go ahead and get these things. Not for military reasons, but because they want to make money.

I went to the president who denied it. I went to one of his very, very close confidantes, another gentleman in the palace with whom I played tennis and I said, “I know you guys are planning on doing this and I know you're doing this because you're going to make some money. And I figure based on other arms sales that have happened here, you're looking at about 50 million bucks in commissions, maybe 10 of you are going to split. That's a lot of money, five million bucks each. If you do this, I guarantee you, I promise you, none of you will ever get to spend a penny of it, because by the time I'm through with you, you'll either be dead or in jail.” I was bluffing because I couldn't make that happen but I was totally earnest when I said it. I felt so strongly about this, I was so concerned, so disgusted. There was no doubt in my mind that had they acquired these aircraft, the Peruvians then would have had the excuse that they needed to go at it again. They could say the Ecuadorians are now arming, we've got to have a preemptive strike because it takes time to get these things in. You get them in the pipeline, but by the time they're delivered and the pilots are trained and all this other stuff, you're talking a year or two at

Library of Congress

least, which is more than enough time for the Peruvians to find out about it and to get a jump on them. So I had no doubt, absolutely none, that Ecuador's acquisition of these sophisticated aircraft would have led to another conflict.

Number two; I had no doubt that the reason why the Ecuadorian civilian leadership and some military were looking at the acquisition of more sophisticated aircraft was for money, money in their own pockets. Number three, and this may sound strange given that I was the U.S. ambassador, not the Ecuadorian one, I still felt that this decision was morally wrong for economic reasons. Ecuador did not have the wherewithal to spend a half a billion dollars on military aircraft that it didn't need. For those reasons principally I started calling up the senior military leadership. I called five generals and frankly I threatened them. I had no authorization from Washington, because again, as I had learned years before, if you ask permission to do something, number one you'll never get it and number two, you get a bunch, with all due respect, FS-2s making decisions that senior management ought to be making and I just said I'm not going to go through that. And if, to use a somewhat vulgar expression, when the shit hits the fan, then the finger would point to me anyway. So I figured, I'm going to be an ambassador and do what I'm supposed to do and use my good offices to try to do good.

So anyway, I called these people and threatened them. I'm taking away your visas and those of your wives. One thing I did know about Latin Americans, if you've got two shekels to rub together, if you're a prosperous businessman or a senior government official, having access to the U.S., particularly in Miami is terribly important.

Q: Particularly for the wives.

ALEXANDER: I was just going to say that. And if you have a wife it's absolutely essential that you be able to go to Miami, to go shopping. That was something I had used effectively on other occasions. If you want to really get somebody go through, calling the wife up and saying we'd like you to bring your passport by. We want to look at your visa or the visas

Library of Congress

of your kids, I guarantee you, every one of those guy in every instance we're talking about wives and not husbands being the spouses of policymakers because they were too macho to have women in those kinds of positions. In every single case we got what we wanted because they just didn't want the grief. I had one of the consular officers call the spouse and say, "please bring your passport by, we need to look at your visa," to make the point. And all of a sudden I found a bunch of rather surly, uncooperative, and in one instance rather belligerent, general officers calling up and very sweetly saying, "oh, I absolutely agree with you, that I'm sure there's some way we can handle this without going out and busting the bank and buying these fancy toys."

I never did tell Washington what I did. When I look back on my Foreign Service career, I don't think I did much of anything which is probably true of 99 percent of us. One moment that I will forever remember, as I look back on my career, I take great pleasure and pride in is when the then-acting foreign minister, who happens to be now the foreign minister of Ecuador, said to me, "no one in this country will ever really know what you did for us, but I do. I was there the night, until 5:30 in the morning, in your residence with the general staff as you convinced them not to go to war. I'm also aware that you put the fear of God into them on the acquisition of those MiGs, which never got in the public, but there are those of us who had some knowledge of that who were just terrified and happened to agree with you that that would have been the worst thing. But I know what you did and want to thank you on behalf of my country.

Q: Did you have any contact with whoever was our ambassador in Peru?

ALEXANDER: Absolutely, Our ambassador in Peru was Dennis Jett, a very good friend of mine. Dennis and I had served together immediately prior to taking up our new posts in Lima and Quito. We would bring our country teams together. And because one of the problems as we were told with our predecessors was that the embassies, understandably so, the embassy in Lima, represented the Peruvian government's point of view and the embassy in Quito did the same for the Ecuadorian government's point of view during that

Library of Congress

1995 conflict. It got to the point where our leadership in Washington didn't know really what's going on. You work for us; you don't work for your host government. We need a somewhat more objective assessment. Whether they were giving objective assessments or not is not for me to say; I wasn't there. I read the stuff, but I didn't know. As I was reading I wasn't in a position to judge whether it was objective or subject. This was the observation made to the two of us, to Dennis and myself before we went to post. So I said to him, "why don't we do this? When we get to post, why don't you bring your country team up to Quito, your core guys and the DAT, the defense attach#, the political counselor, people who are involved with this border dispute, bring them up to Quito, you stay with me and the political counselor stays with my political counselor, the DAT, we'll work that out and then we'll come down and see you or we'll go down first and then you come, it really doesn't really matter the order." We both agreed that one way to keep the two embassies from going at it, from representing Peru and Ecuador and representing the U.S. government was to get the two country teams together and for the two of us to emphasize the fact that we all work for the same government. We don't work for the Ecuadorians, we don't work for the Peruvians, we work for the U.S. It worked. By working with their counterparts, we began communicating. Dennis and I, which apparently wasn't done before. We wouldn't send cables, even first person cables without clearing with the other. I would call him up and say, "I'm going to send this to you in draft before I send it up to Washington. Let me know if this causes you any heartburn." Sometimes I would put him down on my cable, cleared embassy Peru, Ambassador Jett or vice versa. The point is, we trusted each other and we acted like we were part of the same team. We worked together as did our staffs. I think we were able to give Washington a better, broader and less parochial sense of how we saw things on the grounds. I think it helped, I really do.

I think it was easier for me and my country team, to analyze what the Ecuadorians were up to because we had better access. Dennis was dealing with a very difficult man in the form of Alberto Fujimori. The chemistry between the two was not good. Fujimori didn't like Dennis' predecessor either. Fujimori was Fujimori.

Library of Congress

Q: He's still a factor right now as we talk. He's where?

ALEXANDER: He's in Chile, he's in Chile.

Q: More of less in house arrest or something?

ALEXANDER: Yes, I guess so. The Chileans refused an extradition request from the Peruvians. In addition to Fujimori, of course, we had his henchman, the famous-

Q: Nogales?

ALEXANDER: Montesinos.

Q: Vladimiro Montesinos, yes.

ALEXANDER: He was the Rasputin of that regime. That guy had a finger in every pie and if half of what they say about him is true, he was a rotten, corrupt bastard who profited in every sense of the word from this border dispute. So Dennis had to deal with a situation that was intrinsically much more complicated than what I had to deal with.

I did find Fujimori a strange, strange man. He has a reputation for being a very dictatorial, rigid man, the guy who went after the shining path and killed the guerillas and all that stuff. When I first met Fujimori, it was during one of the periodic conferences we had out in the jungle at the joint military command of the four guarantor nations, MOMEPE (Military Observer Mission Ecuador Peru). I introduced myself to Fujimori and I can't remember exactly what I said to him, but it was something light, it wasn't too serious and he came back with a quip of his own and I went back at him again and then he said to me, he says, "how'd you get here?" I said, "I came by helicopter, presumably the same as you." He says, "but we're on the Peruvian side of the line." I said, "yes, we are." He says, "you have a visa?" And I said, "do I have a visa? For Peru?" And he says, "yeah." "I said no." He said, "well?" I said, "do I need one? What do you mean? Are you sure that I'm in Peru?" And

Library of Congress

he started laughing. I knew that he knew we were in Peru but, according to Ecuadorians it was a little uncertain since this area was in dispute, but for some reason that amused him. From then on every time he saw me at one of these get togethers he'd say, "do you have a visa?" The point is, the reason why I bring this up is he had a strange sense of humor. I think with him you could establish a rapport if you teased. For some reason he seemed to like that.

The president of Ecuador, the one who was sent into exile in Panama, Bucaram, did this very, very well. I think that's one of the reasons why Fujimori liked him and one of the reasons why a lot of people say that the Ecuadorian military did not like Bucaram. They felt he was too friendly with Fujimori and cynically, some people suggested that this was one of the reasons why Bucaram was thrown out of office. Why the military was so happy to see him go and why they colluded in his being ousted after only six months was expressly out of concern that he might sell Ecuador short because he was charmed by Fujimori. I kind of think it was the other way around; Fujimori was charmed by Bucaram.

Q: When you arrived there again, I think you explained it before but, when you were dealing with this potential war, renewal of the war, what was happening on the ground?

ALEXANDER: And the Chileans.

Q: The Chileans had troops on the ground there, what was the general feeling? What were they going to do if fighting started?

ALEXANDER: They served two or three roles or purposes. One, again, they were called MOMEPE, they were an observation mission. They were there to observe. Their presence was intended to dissuade either side from doing something untoward. Their presence there was also to be witnesses to any egregious behavior. Both sides complained bitterly. There were well over 1,000 complaints, official complaints from the Peruvians, from the Ecuadorians about each other. The MOMEPE had to go through and log all this and run it down and find out who did what. Sometimes it took on characteristics that were just

Library of Congress

absurd, funny. Sergeant So and So's dog crossed some line and pooped in somebody's trench or something and they did it on purpose. Things of that nature. Many of them were more serious than that. I think a lot of the so-called provocations were not deliberate. Some of them were, clearly, but I think many of them were just flying a helicopter over a jungle which makes it hard to tell exactly where you are at all times. You might stray 100 yards on one side or the other side and this was generally the kind of thing they complained about. But anyway, the troops from the four guarantor countries were there in part to witness this kind of behavior, to document it, to find fault, which they never did, and rightfully so. There was a somewhat more pragmatic and possibly cynical reason for having them there. If you've got troops from the four guarantor nations parked in between two belligerent parties and they start going at it well, it's going to be hard to be hard to start shooting without killing some of these people. The idea was even though it was never, ever articulated, it was sort of understood and spoken about in hushed whispers, that, before the Ecuadorians start shooting across the border of the Peruvians start shooting across the border, they've got to stop and think about what happens if we kill, you know, 10 Chileans or 10 Argentineans or 100 Americans or something? Whether or not MOMEPA mission actually stopped that kind of activity or not, I don't know.

Q: This has always been the basic idea. You put these people in between.

ALEXANDER: Yes.

Q: There were Brazilian troops there too, weren't there?

ALEXANDER: Brazilian. In fact, the commander of MOMEPA was a Brazilian general. I have to say I was very proud of the U.S. military because our doctrine is usually, we have to be in charge. I think very wise men in the SOUTHCOM (Southern Command) in the Pentagon and elsewhere said, we'll have a colonel there. He'll head our thing and he will report to the general. I think it went a long way towards creating a very, very good relationship among all four militaries. And again, when you talk about the Chileans and

Library of Congress

the Argentineans and the Brazilians, you're not talking about nations, you're not talking about NATO. These guys were sort of, I won't say natural enemies but they all have their histories.

Q: Well, they all kind of have their own problems.

ALEXANDER: Their own problems, their own axes to grind with one another. It was a great exercise in American diplomacy, because it made the Brazilians feel good and why not have a Brazilian general head the thing? Brazil had the largest force in South America. It's the largest country by far in South America and this dispute was taking place in South America so, the Brazilians were happy. The Argentineans and the Chileans didn't have any great beef about Brazil being in charge. And what could they say? If an American officer and his men were going to report to the Brazilian. They got along really, really well. They had great respect for one another. I won't say they had a lot of fun; it wasn't much fun being parked out in the middle of the jungle somewhere. But, they got along very, very well, amazingly so.

Q: Well, you were saying that you got involved later on where there was a possibility of a war. What was that all about?

ALEXANDER: August of 1998, after two very intense years of negotiations trying to bring this thing to resolution, people were getting tired. The guarantor nations were getting tired of an expensive undertaking, especially for the U.S. All these helicopters and flying in and out and having men on the ground; it was costing us some bucks, it was beginning to add up. The four guarantor states were getting a little tired of Peru and Ecuador, and said we've got to bring this thing to closure, it's not doing you guys any good, it's not doing us any good. In that period of time the Peruvians went off and they really upped the ante by buying these MiGs and all that, which didn't endear them to anyone in the guarantor capitals and we knew that the Ecuadorians were really struggling with this. It was hard to

Library of Congress

keep them from going out and doing the same. We prevailed upon them not to do it, but this thing had to be brought to closure sooner rather than later.

In August of 1998 there were some incidences in the disputed area and it really doesn't matter who provoked whom but both sides were within minutes of shooting again. It started with a very small scale patrol stumbling across another patrol, a few shots were fired, nobody was killed but the tension started going up very, very quickly. Almost immediately, within a matter of minutes, hours if not minutes, both sides started amassing men right in the disputed area, moving everyone up to forward positions, to such a degree that they were within yards of one another. They could yell over to one another, sort of akin to what the trench warfare in World War I where they sometimes yell over to one another, it was that close. The situation was that tense. I don't remember the day, I can't tell you, it was the 28th of August or the 16th, but the defense minister and the general staff came to my residence about 10:00 at night and they said, "we think that tonight all hell's going to break loose. We're of the mind to go ahead. We have to defend ourselves. We know we're outgunned, we're outnumbered. We can't wait until they attack us. We may have to start even though we know we're going to take it in the neck." And I said, "no, no, no, you don't want to do that, that's what they want you to do. Don't give them any excuse." The whole evening we were at my house going through this and they were getting reports saying the Peruvians have just gone across our lines. I said, "check again, it may not be true." To make a long story short by 6:00 in the morning no war had started. I think the Ecuadorians were beginning to calm down and their reports and their concerns and their fears that the Peruvians were coming across the border had not been realized. But it was so tense and I understand that the Peruvians were going through some of the same dynamic on their side, the Ecuadorians were going to blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. They didn't go at it. That was probably the closest they had come since '95 and I'm happy to say a few weeks later they did sign the agreement. That was sort of the last, the last possible moment to go ahead and blow up the work of the preceding two years and have another war if someone wanted it badly enough. Neither side had the clear provocation

Library of Congress

that they would have need to explain why they started this conflict. So we were able to avoid it and in October the peace accord was signed.

Q: Were you able to pull troops out then, our troops?

ALEXANDER: Yes, yes. We pulled them out shortly thereafter, everyone packed up their tents, literally, and went home.

Q: I would have thought there certainly would have been the equivalent to a war party in Ecuador. There almost always is, taking advantage politically to show their opponents they're weaklings and all that.

ALEXANDER: We avoided some of that. There were certainly prominent politicians who were constantly stirring the pot, calling the Peruvians names and talking about defending the honor of the homeland and all that. Yes, that existed. A war party per se? No. I think one of the reasons was because of the internal political turmoil in Ecuador, the change of governments they went through, we're talking from '95 to '98; four presidents, five presidents by the time they signed. Between the president who was in office when they first went at it in '95 and the guy who actually signed the agreement in '98, they had five presidents. So you're talking about in the space of three years, three-and-a-half years having five presidents, this was not a stable country. Now granted, one of the presidents was only in office for a week and that was a woman, Rosalia Arteaga, but the point is she was still president for a week. This kind of political instability did not give any particular party in Ecuador a chance to get on that kind of footing, to identify themselves, wrap themselves in a flag and say we're the war party and those dirty bastards south of the border have to pay. The volatile, very fluid political situation in Ecuador just really didn't permit that type of activity.

That being said, there were still prominent politicians who accused the government of betraying Ecuador and selling out and all this. There were those who tried to make hay of this issue, but they didn't succeed. Part of the reason was because of pressure from the

Library of Congress

U.S., to a lesser extent the other guarantor states, but principally from us. Certain phone calls, certain conversations and certain politicians saying, "we don't appreciate this and we've spent a lot of money and a lot of time trying to help you out of your mess and we expect some cooperation, if not some outright gratitude, for helping you out of your mess because we have no doubts that if the Peruvians come across the border they're going to kick your butt. And while we're on the subject, your butt's not going to be able to flee to Miami while all this is happening because we're going to take away your visa and that of your wife." So fortunately we didn't have too much of that dynamic to deal with.

Q: Did you feel that there was pressure on the Ecuadorian government from neighboring countries?

ALEXANDER: No, no. In fact I think, with the exception of the guarantors who were actually involved, the only country that would have really been in position to comment was Colombia and the Colombians weren't talking. They had their own problems with the FARC and everything else and heaven forbid that they start lecturing people about peace when they had a civil war that had been going on, it's still going on, for 30 some odd years. The other neighbors were Peru, Brazil, and Venezuela. They were going through their trauma with Chavez coming, and all that, so no. The Latins sort of have this gentlemen's understanding that they don't seem to be too prone to criticize one another openly because they might be in position tomorrow.

Q: Talk just a little about the officer corps of Ecuador, where they come from and how do you see them at this time?

ALEXANDER: The senior officers were from the middle class, mixture of white and lighter cholos, people of mixed heritage. The sergeants and enlisted men tended to have more indigenous blood. The military was widely respected in Ecuador among all the classes and I think in part because they reflected to a large degree the people of Ecuador. You could look at the army and you saw Ecuador reflected in that army at most of the ranks. They

Library of Congress

were very professional, very well trained, very serious. After having taken over the country, as virtually every military did in Latin America at one point or another, they gave up power and subordinated themselves to civilian rule, with some conviction. I think they prided themselves on that even though they continued to dabble in politics and try to influence politics. Their relationship with the people of Ecuador, I think, was very, very good.

One thing I couldn't help but notice in Ecuador that really impressed me, this wasn't the case in most other places I'd been to in Latin America, if you saw a soldier or two walking down the sidewalk, if you were in Guatemala, particularly if you were an indigenous person, you stepped off the sidewalk into the street and let the soldiers pass. Not in Ecuador; it was the other way around. The soldiers would step into the street and let you pass. They had a good rapport, a good relationship with their own people; they didn't abuse their own people. The Ecuadorian military didn't make people disappear to the extent that you saw in some of the other places in Latin America.

Q: What was the connection between the Ecuadorian officer corps and the troops?

ALEXANDER: My sense was that they had a well disciplined army with a very well developed esprit de corps. The officer class took care of their men. They made sure they were well garrisoned and that included their families. They were taken care of. You didn't find people saying, "I'm an officer so I'm entitled to all this and you're just a lowly enlisted man so whether you and your family eat is not my business." It was something that I think most Americans could relate to when you look at our own military. Our military's generally widely admired and respected by the American people and I think the Ecuadorians felt the same way. They looked at their military much as we look at ours. This is our army, they belong to us.

Q: Is there anything else we should cover in Ecuador?

ALEXANDER: It was a frustrating assignment because again, they couldn't keep a president in office. During my three years there I had to deal with five different presidents.

Library of Congress

It's kind of hard to do your job when you don't know who's going to be in charge. But all in all it was a good assignment.

Q: What made you feel that this peace accord between Ecuador and Peru was going to last?

ALEXANDER: I can't speak for the Peruvian side, but on the Ecuadorian side I think it was a great maturity on the part of the political leadership and consummate realism on the part of their military. The politicians had every reason to see this dispute resolved because they knew that the alternative was unacceptable. It's one thing to go and shoot up a bunch of jungle real estate where nobody lives or few people live. It's another thing to have to contemplate a city of almost two million people with high rises and all the trappings of a modern city such as Guayaquil is, bombed, reduced to rubble. That just was something, or Quito, the capital, or any of the large Ecuadorian cities; it was just something that I don't think any politician wanted on his or her head.

The other thing that the politicians realized was as long as there was a dispute with Peru, a dispute that could and probably would lead to a conflict like the one they had in '95, Ecuador would have to have a fairly large standing army. A large standing army creates another set of headaches for you if you're a civilian politician and that is well, you've got a powerful modern army sitting here and if they don't like what I say what's stopping them from moving against me? This was always the threat of something like that was always there in the air. I think they were getting tired of that. It's expensive, too, it's a drain on their budget.

The military for their part had done really, really well in '95. They'd upheld their honor, their training. They'd vindicated years and years of maneuvers, but they knew that it was just a matter of time before the Peruvians would come and do them in. Not because they were better warriors or better people or anything or smarter or more courageous, simply because the mathematics. The logic of the situation was such that the Peruvians being

Library of Congress

bigger, having more money, having more troops, it was a matter of time before they would stick it to the Ecuadorians. So the Ecuadorian military knew that if we make peace we still have our honor. The last conflict we had with these people, we beat them, we can take that to our graves and no one can take that away from us. I think they were also getting tired because living in a state of constant belligerency. There were always things going on down there on the border. I can't think of a comparable situation; it was more tense than what we went through in the Cold War. I mean, there were moments in the Cuban Missile Crisis but that kind of thing was not an every day situation. Imagine something akin to a Cuban Missile Crisis that goes on for eight years, for 10 years, for 20 years. I think it was that kind of pressure that the Ecuadorian military was feeling and it was wearing; they were getting tired of it.

Q: Was oil bubbling up in the disputed area of anything like that?

ALEXANDER: No, no. No, they never did find oil out there. To this day they still haven't found any oil there. There's been no discovery of diamond fields or anything of that sort. Again, I think that may be one of those myths. There may be truths to it too, that there is great mineral wealth out there, but no one has found it, which would suggest to me that it was always a rumor, a possibility but it wasn't that one of the two or both governments knew for sure.

Q: You left there when?

ALEXANDER: I left there in July of 1999.

Q: When you got back, did anybody sort of debrief you on what you'd done or not? I'm sort of exploring the historical sense of the State Department when you passed the baton on and all that.

ALEXANDER: No, not really. I think in part because my predecessor, had become the acting assistant secretary. When he left Quito he went to Washington to be the principal,

Library of Congress

deputy assistant secretary and became the acting assistant secretary when Jeff Davidow left and he became very briefly the assistant secretary. He got a recess appointment in January of 2000, or 2001, I think it was.

Q: Who is this now?

ALEXANDER: Peter Romero. So Pete had been my predecessor, he'd kept up on things Ecuadorian, knew the issues since he'd been there and so we didn't have much of a brief or debrief. My successor had served in Brazil a few years before; she was a consul general in Guayaquil when Pete was ambassador. I tried to speak to her but all she wanted to do was talk so I gave up after 15 minutes and thought maybe she knows it all.

Q: There is something in the Foreign Service culture in a way, but people don't want to know too much from the person whom they're succeeding because they want to get out there and feel they've done it all themselves.

ALEXANDER: I think you're absolutely right. I think almost all, I would say 95 percent of us are guilty of that. I've done it myself, I've absolutely done it myself and I should have known better because I worked for a man who was not that way, Al Adams, my ambassador in Haiti, my first tour there. Al would speak to anyone and did speak to anyone, from the most junior to the most senior and he used to always tell me, you get the best information from the strangest places. He said often you'll find that the junior officers know more about what's going on than the mid-level officers do and they know more than the senior officers do. Al was very, very good about that. As a result, he really was knowledgeable about Haiti. I don't know whether he did this when he went to Peru. He left Peru about the time I was arriving in Ecuador. But I tried to talk to my successor.

Q: Who was that?

ALEXANDER: Gwen Clare. In fact she called from Brazil where she was a consul general I think in Sao Paulo when she had been nominated. In all due respect to Clare, she just

Library of Congress

yapped a mile a minute. I was trying to explain and eventually I thought well, I wasn't really interested in what she thought about Ecuador because I was there and she was talking about her time five or six years before that. I thought well, maybe you have kept up with everything and that's what you're trying to demonstrate. She was very pleasant, but maybe that was what she was politely trying to tell me, I don't need to hear because I know. My sense is from what she did after she arrived was that she didn't know as much as she thought she did, but that's for someone else to decide.

Q: Well in '99, whither for you?

ALEXANDER: Strange, I was slated to go to Guatemala, but there was a change. Pru Bushnell, who had her embassy in Kenya blown up, decided, for reasons that no one in the Western Hemisphere Bureau understood, to go to Guatemala. I may be wrong, but if I remember correctly, she didn't speak Spanish and never served in Latin America. She wanted to go to Guatemala and, given what she went through in Kenya, give Pru what Pru wants. Pru wants Guatemala, so she went to Guatemala. I understood. I said fine, I mean, what am I going to say? I'm not entitled to embassies, I'd already had two.

So then I was picked to go to Venezuela, to Caracas. SOUTHCOM wanted me to go to Caracas because Chavez had just taken over and the people at the Pentagon went into State and said we think Les Alexander would be great with this guy Chavez because we've seen him deal with the military in Ecuador and he seems to understand this mentality and we think it's a good choice. So WHA said okay, we'll send him to Caracas. But again, Madeleine Albright had Donna Hrinak, a good friend of mine, we'd served together in Brazil, Donna was the ambassador to the Dominican Republic, she was slated to go to Brazil and at the last minute the White House said no, we have someone for Brazil. What do we do with Donna? I understand that the Secretary herself said, I want Donna to go to Caracas. I didn't know the Secretary, Secretary didn't know me. So I got a phone call saying well, you're not going to Caracas. I said okay.

Library of Congress

Then I said, what do I do? I had to leave post. We'll find something temporary. The temporary was diplomat in residence. I said, "okay, I'll do that but I want to go to Miami." They said, "we don't have any diplomat in residence in Miami." I said, "create one, come on." So they called around and they got Florida International in Miami to take me. I was there all of a month when the DG called me and said, "you're going to Bogot#." And I said, "no, I'm not going to Bogot#, I don't want to go to Bogot#. I'm in the middle of a divorce. I have a very young child. I'd like to spend some time with her and I cannot have her visit me at post in Bogot#. I'm sorry, I don't want to do that." He wasn't very nice with me and I don't blame him, looking back on it but from where I was, it made sense. I was supposed to go to Guatemala. Then I was supposed to get Venezuela. Both of them I lose, and I'm smiling, saying fine, I understand, the needs of the Service and blah, blah, blah. Then I'm told, you're going to Bogot#, which was a tough assignment. I had just come out of, well, it wasn't a shooting area, but it was tough.

Okay, I had my little restful period in Mauritius, but before that I paid my dues in Haiti. I don't mind going to a tough place. By that time it was clear Venezuela was going to be tough with Chavez, but I didn't want to go to a place where I had to have bodyguards all the time. I think more than anything it was my fear that I would not be able to spend time with my young daughter and that was very important to me.

Q: How old was she?

ALEXANDER: At that time she was seven.

Q: Oh yes.

ALEXANDER: And so I said no, I can't do it and the DG got a little terse with me and I can't blame him. At the time I was angry with him. I thought, you know, son of a bitch, I've just done these things for you people and you take these other two and now you want me to go to Bogot# and I'm giving you attitude and you're giving me attitude. Then I got

Library of Congress

a phone call from the assistant secretary, Pete Romero who asked for a favor. "Since you don't want to go to Bogot# and the other two places you've lost, I understand your frustration. Do me a favor: can you go to Haiti?" I said, "I don't want to be ambassador to Haiti." I was already charg# there during that really nasty period and I said, "no, I don't want to be ambassador to Haiti." He said, "no, no. I don't want you to go there permanently, our ambassador is leaving suddenly, six months before his tour ends, and we need to find somebody. This is a critical time. Could you go to Haiti for maybe six months or so during which we'll also find another post for you." I said, "okay." I wasn't happy about that. I'd only been in Miami two months. I'd just started this dip in residence thing, but he said, "don't worry about that, we'll get you out of that but you'll be doing us a great service if you go to Haiti and if you do your usual sterling work I'm sure that all be worth your while." So I said okay.

So I went to Haiti, did what they wanted to do, which is basically have a good, clean transparent election, which we did, and I upped and quit. I got tired. I just sent in my resignation and just said, I don't want it anymore. So I got phone calls saying you're not serious? I am serious. I'm tired. And I was tired. I wasn't so much tired of the Foreign Service. I was in the middle of a very bitter divorce from my Foreign Service spouse, I was missing my kid and I just said the heck with it. I've got to get my priorities straight.

Q: Well, let's talk about Haiti. You were there, when?

ALEXANDER: The second time?

Q: Yes.

ALEXANDER: I went there January 3rd or 4th, something like that until around June the 1st of 2000.

Q: What was the situation when you got there?

Library of Congress

ALEXANDER: It was nasty. They were killing journalists and political opponents. They were gearing up for legislative elections and, later in the year, for presidential elections. We had to have the legislative elections first; they had been postponed for a year and a half and without legislative elections you couldn't have the presidential elections. Washington said, "you've got to do everything in your power to see this thing gets organized." And I said, "wait a minute, guys, this is Haiti. I went through this election business back in 1989 or 1990, getting Aristide elected and this is even worse." "Yes but you're got to do it. And oh, by the way it has to be fair and transparent, we don't want anyone killed." They always kill people during elections in Haiti. And I said, "is there anything else you want me to do while I'm at it, go to the moon?" They said, "no, if you do that we'll be happy."

Well, we did it. How we did it I don't know. Combination of luck and I guess the fact that I had been there and had the experience. I knew what to expect. USAID did a really great job in organizing all the stuff that we had to organize. I had a good staff and we did it. In fact, after it was over the assistant secretary said to me, "I'll be honest with you, I thought if anyone could do it, it would be you but we didn't give you very high odds of succeeding. We kind of figured that something was going to go wrong." But he said, "you guys did great."

Q: Was your friend Aristide still there?

ALEXANDER: Aristide was there, he was not in power per se.

Q: What had happened to him?

ALEXANDER: As a condition of returning him on the backs of the U.S. military in '95, we said you're going to finish the term you started in February of 1991, your five-year term and when it's over, that's it. You don't run for re-election. You step down and you let somebody else take over. He didn't want to do that, but he did. He stuck to the agreement.

Library of Congress

He finished up his presidency in '96 and one of his protégés was elected president, Rene Preval, who had been his prime minister when he was president the first time. Rene Preval became the president and Aristide moved back to his private residence, which was a new residence, by Haitian standards a rather comfortable residence which raised a lot of questions about where did the money come from. Be that as it may, he remained very much the power behind the scenes. He was the power broker, the man that you had to get the nod from to do anything. Preval tried to be his own man to the extent that he could.

Q: This is tape eight, side one with Les Alexander. Go ahead

ALEXANDER: I would say that President Preval tried to be his own man but he didn't really have a power base. His power base was Aristide's power base and so Aristide continued to assert enormous influence over the affairs of state. It was pretty much a given that Aristide was going to run again after that interlude that we required him to step down. He was going to run for and be president once again, which is exactly what happened. When I first went there in early 2000, I resisted going to see Aristide, even though my masters in Washington said you have to go see Aristide. The deputy secretary, Strobe Talbott, said to me two or three times, "you have to see Aristide." The funny thing is, Sandy Berger didn't even want me to go to Haiti because he had heard from other sources that Aristide and I didn't get along, which was half true. I had talked to Aristide in the past, knew him before he was president. I didn't like Aristide, that's true, but I think that what got to his ears was somewhat of a distortion that I absolutely despised Aristide and I was just going to cause trouble when I went down there. So anyway, he had to be convinced and Strobe convinced him that he had talked to me and I was a career FSO and I would follow instructions, which I did. But the one thing I resisted was going to see Aristide. No sooner did I get down there I started getting phone calls, "when are you going to go see Aristide?" I said, "I don't know." Who is Aristide really? He's a private citizen." "Yes, but you know he's the power behind the throne." I said, "be that as it may, he's a private citizen. Why does the head of the U.S. embassy, have to go see a private citizen? You're making Aristide a power broker." "No, he is a power broker." I said, "I know that, you know that,

Library of Congress

but we don't have to give the impression that he's somehow the president already. But I'll get around to it." I was so pressured eventually I did go see Aristide. We had a very nice conversation. He was a very genteel, very polite, pleasant person. It was clear, before I went to see him and after I went to see him, that yes, Aristide was Aristide and he was the man to beat in the presidential election later on that year.

I do think that Aristide helped make the first election, the legislative elections, a successful election. I think he did send word to his partisans to call for no violence, no nonsense; we have to have a clean election. In fact, he and I talked about it. I said, if the election is tainted then your election and what appears to be your certain victory in the presidential election will be tainted. So it's not in your interest to do this. After I left they indeed had the presidential elections, he went on to win that and then he got chased out of power by the former military and others who didn't like him.

Q: How stood the military when you were there the second time?

ALEXANDER: The military had been disbanded, that was a condition that he imposed on us. We said you finish up your term, he said fine, but I want the armed forces disbanded. Haiti doesn't need an army. They've been nothing but a source of trouble, coups and we just don't need an army. So the U.S. disbanded the Haiti army and the result being that there was no army when I went back the second time. There was a police force. Aristide obviously miscalculated when he disbanded the military because he had several thousand unemployed soldiers with plenty of time on their hands and one hell of a beef and as it turns out, they were the ones who threw him out of office. Not that the violence wasn't visited upon him, but certainly upon others and they're the ones who went into Port au Prince and he had to flee. The question in my mind is, had he found a different solution to deal with the military would he have remained in power? I don't know. But there is no army, there's some talk about restoring the army. I don't think they're going to restore the army. I think what they'll try to do, if anything, is integrate those soldiers who are still young enough to be integrated into the police force. There were some, myself included, who

Library of Congress

felt that they should have created a gendarme. Some sort of a paramilitary, para-police, that would have resolved all the beefs, all the gripes of what they call the petit soldat, the little soldiers. Yet at the same time it would have given Haiti what it so desperately needs, and that is a force for public order. Such a creature doesn't exist. You've got a police force that's corrupt, abusive and there are no checks and balances. Before, the army was more powerful but there were some checks and balances. Now, the crime in Haiti has just gotten so out of hand that it's the Wild West. It's crazier than it's ever been.

Q: Did you have a feeling that Haiti had disappeared off the radar of U.S. politicians or not?

ALEXANDER: Oh absolutely, absolutely. I think the Clinton administration; once they put Aristide back on the throne they immediately began to distance themselves from him. There was just too much out there indicating that Aristide was not the guy his supporters had tried to convince Clinton that he was. Domestic politics, particularly pressure from the Black Caucus, I think Clinton felt compelled to put Aristide back on the throne. After he did that I think he said that's it. I've done what you people want; I've got other things to do. And they kept an eye on Aristide. There were certain people like Tony Lake who felt a certain, not loyalty to Aristide, but a certain commitment to him. But Tony was no longer the national security advisor and so his influence on the situation was very, very limited. Sandy Berger just wanted Haiti to be quiet. Basically, no boat people, nothing so explosive as to raise questions about why we invaded Haiti on Aristide's behalf. As it turns out, a lot of Aristide's critics felt vindicated because Haiti became what it was accused of being under the opponents of Aristide. It became among other things a dysfunctional state, a little narco country, all the things which the Black Caucus said it was when Aristide was in exile. Aristide comes back and becomes president and all of a sudden our Coast Guard and our DEA and everybody else is pulling out its hair because Haiti is involved up to its eyeballs in drug trafficking and Aristide is abusing human rights left, right and center. Didn't we invade Haiti to bring this guy back? And wasn't he Mr. Democracy? And what

Library of Congress

happened here? I think a lot of people had a lot of egg in their faces, but as long as Haiti was relatively quiet and didn't make the front pages it was okay.

Q: Had the boat people business but pretty well stopped?

ALEXANDER: Yes, yes. The boat people business stopped for two reasons. We stopped it, physically stopped it, we just put so many cutters out there between Haiti and the U.S. and just made it impossible for them to get anywhere. Once Aristide was restored there was no way that human rights advocates, immigration lawyers who were advocating for the rights of the Haitian boat people, didn't have legs anymore to stand on, legal legs. Aristide was restored, he was synonymous with democracy, therefore boat people couldn't be fleeing persecution because Mr. Democracy was back in power. The argument was gone and the justification for letting them in was gone and so taking to the seas so that you could claim political asylum if you made it, wasn't going to work anymore. You had to now go back to the old fashioned way, getting in the boat and sneaking in, you know walking across the beach, Pompano Beach or Hollywood or Miami in the middle of the night, and hoping you didn't get caught.

Q: Were you seeing any improvement in the economy of Haiti?

ALEXANDER: Absolutely not. When I went back the second time, I left in '93, Aristide was restored, we invaded in '95, Aristide was restored to power, I came back in, I left in, around June 1st, 1993, I came back the 4th or 5th of January, 2000, so that was what? Six-and-a-half years. It was a poor country when I left; it was the Fifth World when I came back. I was absolutely stunned at how much the country had degenerated in such a short time. Absolutely miserable place. Not that it was a paradise when I left in '93, but when I first saw Haiti in the '80s it was a Third World poor country, but there were still a lot of beautiful houses and decent restaurants. In the '90s, especially after we clamped an embargo on the country as a consequence of Aristide's being ousted, the country very quickly went to the dogs; it never recovered. I haven't been back since I left in 2000. I still read Haitian

Library of Congress

newspapers and get information all the time and talk to people, and I'm told that if I thought it was bad when I left in 2000, I wouldn't recognize it now. I do know that the crime has gotten just insane, absolutely crazy.

Q: Well then, you resigned or retired in 2000?

ALEXANDER: 2000, officially July the 1st 2000.

Q: What have you been doing since?

ALEXANDER: I was living in Miami. I went there again as a diplomat in residence. I already owned a house in Miami which I had bought the year before, so I went back to Miami and started consulting. I did okay, I mean, I didn't set the world on fire.

Q: I hear this again and again, "then I went into consulting." What, in your case, did consulting mean?

ALEXANDER: It meant advising U.S. business. It's funny, a lot of large corporations have international divisions, but if you ever talk to the vice president of international of the ABC Corporation, in most cases I find the person doesn't speak a foreign language. Really, they might have served two years in the London office or the Paris office, that's the extent of their overseas experience. They don't really understand much of the international spectrum, not all of them but a lot of the ones who don't hire expertise. Latin America, I hate to slander Latin Americans, particularly since I really love Latin America but let's face it, the corruption is just off the charts in most countries. If you've got, I think we spoke about this the first day I came in here, if you have a \$10 million or \$15 million investment and some minister or some other functionary comes to you in a position to interfere with your operations, saying, "unless you give me X, I'm going to shut down your operation or make it impossible," and again you've got a \$50 million investment, what do you do? You start looking for people who have ideas on what to do, so there was work for people like me. That may be a sort of a melodramatic example, but that's what I think a lot of us do

Library of Congress

when we get out of this business. I didn't want to go and work for a corporation; I didn't want to be a corporate man. I'd been a Foreign Service officer for almost 30 years and the only other work experience I had before that was a couple of years with DoD, so I had been very much an organizational man and I just didn't want to do that anymore. I just didn't. So I had my little consulting business for a couple of years and then I moved back to Washington because my FSO ex-wife had been assigned to Washington and I wanted to be able to spend time with my kid, which was always paramount and a very personal reason why I left the Foreign Service. So when my ex was assigned here I immediately moved here. I had a house here which I'd bought years before and I moved into my house and I gave up my little enterprise in Miami with absolutely no regrets. I'm here probably for another year or so then I'll go back to Miami and probably pick up where I left off.

Q: One of the problems of Foreign Service life is that when a couple splits, and they have children, and if one of them is on the Foreign Service circuit, what does the other person do?

ALEXANDER: Suffer, that's basically what they do. I think it's especially true for the male spouse, because in the U.S. in 99 percent of the cases the mother still gets custody of the child despite joint custody, in our case, joint parental responsibility. You still have to have a school parent, as they call it.

Q: Sure.

ALEXANDER: In almost no case would a judge in any state of the union award custody to the father. It just doesn't happen. I don't know if it will ever happen. Then again, maybe that's the way it should be, I don't know. That's the way it was and I had to deal with it. I tried to argue that I'm in a position to stay home, ironically, and take care of the kid and provide a stable environment, the mother's traveling all over the world, but the judge didn't want to hear it. Mom is mom.

Library of Congress

Q: Can you give me a feel for the politics as it pertained to Cuba and to the rest of Latin America down in Florida?

ALEXANDER: Oh yes. Oh, absolutely. The Cuban community in Florida is a very accomplished, very admirable community in a lot of ways. I come across Cubans all over Latin American, some of them were the official Castro Cubans, others were those who had fled. I had never come across them in large numbers until I lived in Miami and they very much run Miami. We used to jokingly call, my Cuban friends used to call Miami, Havana of the north. And it's easy to feel, particularly in certain parts of Miami, Dade County, that you're in Cuba or a suburb of Havana. Enormously dynamic community, really, really dynamic community, extremely impressive people, hard working, serious, ferocious determination. Again, there are so many Cuban success stories it's just amazing.

Q: Did you feel the American dynamic was working there and the next generation coming up was beginning to get away from this the Cubanness?

ALEXANDER: Yes and no. In fact, I would say that the first generation, unlike other immigrant groups, they would have been my age, are already enormously successful. Even in the Foreign Service, I've got two or three Cuban friends who have been ambassadors, one is the standing ambassador to one of the most important countries in Latin America. He came to the U.S. when he was 11 or 12 years old. So it's not the follow-up generation, it's that generation that's already enormously successful. They've got congressmen, senators now. A funny thing about the Cubans; they became "American" in quotes, very, very quickly, but they retain a certain Cubanness and part of that is this notion that it's their very Cubanness that keeps them together unlike let's say Italian-Americans who came over. They didn't flee the old country, they left the old country. Cuban Americans were tossed out, fled and so there's a beef there, there's a gripe. They can't go back. They can't go and visit unlike almost every other group. They're kind of like the Africans who were brought to the New World against their will. They couldn't go back. The Cubans in a sense had ironically and perhaps perversely, a dynamic that's not unlike

Library of Congress

the African experience. They were cut off from where they came from. So near, yet so far away. This created an anger and a frustration that I think is just as real today as it was in 1960 and 1961, that heat is still there. If you're talking about a 16 year old Cuban, born in Miami Dade or New Jersey or New Mexico or Minnesota, no. I don't think they have it. But if you're talking about a Cuban age 30 or over, that heat is there. And that may be part of the reason, part of the problem that we have.

Our Cuba policy doesn't work. Obviously it doesn't work. I mean, Fidel is still there. Charles de Gaulle was the president of France when Fidel took over, just to give you perspective. He's still there and he's still laughing at us. I think the problem is, I happen to agree with the Cuban Americans, the Cuban community, the biggest beef, as much as I like Latinos, the biggest beef I have with my Latin friends, is this thing that they have for Fidel. They all admire Fidel and like Fidel because he thumbs his nose at us. I tell them, I say, "none of you would ever, ever, ever tolerate living in a regime that has been around as long as his regime has. You people went through all your trials and tribulations in the '60s and the '70s and the '80s to rid yourself of dictatorships, military regimes, of Somoza, whoever, yet when it comes to Fidel you turn a blind eye. You applaud him because he's anti-gringo. The son of a bitch is a dictator of the worse sort yet you admire him. What does that say about yourselves, that you're so professionally anti-American that he can do anything as long as he's against the gringos." It suggests to me a very pathological view of the U.S. more so than a great admiration for Fidel. There is something in the Latin character that they have been so pathologically conditioned to dislike the U.S. that this dysfunctional state called Cuba is held up in high esteem in their eyes. But part of the problem is the Cuban American community because they have been, I hate to say it, pathological in their approach. They have personalized this to such a degree that there is a natural clash between the rest of Latin America and the Cuban community, all over the persona of Fidel. What's supremely ironic in all this is that this is the way we do our foreign policy. We personalize it.

Library of Congress

Q: *I know it.*

ALEXANDER: We've done this since day one, since the inception of the republic. We either demonize someone like Saddam or Noriega or we beatify them like an Aristide. We seem to always do this, we can't help ourselves. Our policies hang on an individual so they rise and fall with that individual. We get ourselves in all kinds of trouble all over the world because we can't get out of that habit.

Q: *I'm reading a biography of Alexander Hamilton and it's brought home by Thomas Jefferson, who fell in love with the French Revolution, and it's worse. Here is this so-called saint of Monticello and he's talking about bring on more guillotines just because he couldn't rid himself of that love for sort of a change in France.*

ALEXANDER: Yes, he lived the life of an American nobleman.

Q: Yes.

ALEXANDER: Well.

Q: *One of the questions on this, were you seeing Chavez in Venezuela as becoming the new idol of the anti-Americans?*

ALEXANDER: Yes, yes to a certain extent. Fidel is getting old, he's not going to be there forever. He just doesn't have the physical capacity anymore to project his personality on the scene. And Chavez is trying to fill his shoes. Chavez will not fill his shoes because Chavez is not Fidel Castro. This is the 21st century, but he does have resonance in a lot of quarters in Latin America and he has figured out, like Fidel did, that he will garner a lot of support simply by thumbing his nose at us. I think the persona of President Bush has helped him. I hate to say it, he's the commander in chief, but I don't think Bush has helped much because we make this a contest of personalities and he makes it even easier for Chavez. I think we handle Chavez extremely stupidly.

Library of Congress

The night that the coup was successful, at least for a few days, where he was actually thrown out of office, and the head of the poches met with our ambassador, I think it was a very unwise thing to do. Chavez is absolutely convinced that we were complicit. Anyone who knows anything about U.S. foreign policy knows that that's giving us too much credit. There may have been certain sympathies, but the notion that we could successfully plan that kind of a coup is, well, unfortunately we can't. I wish we could sometimes, but we can't. But he's convinced that we were behind it and it's hard not to blame him when he sees the ambassador meeting with the poches and our rhetoric has done nothing to convince him otherwise. So now we've gotten into some pissing contest which is great for him but for us it's-

Q: He can only win.

ALEXANDER: Yes, he can only win. We've lowered ourselves to his level. The discourse is now the most pedantic, vulgar, silly, nonsensical one. And he wins at that game. I think the best thing we could do is just completely ignore the man. The notion, and again, creating this bogeyman out of Hugo Chavez, serious people imagining that he really is in a position to project power in Latin America is so nonsensical as to make me wonder who's running our Latin American affairs. Anyone who knows Latin America would know that this is nonsense. Chavez can't do anything to us outside of Venezuela and even in Venezuela he still has to sell his oil and he's still going to sell it to us. He's got too many CITGO gas stations in this country to risk an open break with the U.S. The damage we could do to him is infinitely greater than what he could do to us, yet we engage him. We should just ignore the man and we should privately go to him and say, "we screwed up, we're sorry. You go ahead and you do whatever it is, we're not going to do anything to you, mea culpa." He won't believe us, but if we just leave him alone I think eventually people will get tired of Chavez and he'll be tossed out on his ear like every other tin pot would be dictator. But no, we give him stature.

Library of Congress

Q: Yes.

ALEXANDER: We give him a much bigger stage than he would have ever had.

Q: *Well, on that happy note, I guess we can end this at this point.*

ALEXANDER: Alright. Thank you.

Q: *Thanks.*

End of interview