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

AMBASSADOR FRANK ALMAGUER

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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INTERVIEW

INTRODUCTION: PERSONAL BACKGROUND

Q: Today is 23 January 2004. This is an interview with Frank Almaguer, and I will spell it, A-L-M-A-G-U-E-R. This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training and I am Charles Stuart Kennedy, who will conduct this interview.

Q. Do you go by Frank?

ALMAGUER: I do go by Frank. For the record, my full birth name was Francisco Obdulio Almaguer Ortiz, which included a middle name (after my maternal grandfather) and a matronymic; my mother's maiden name was "Ortiz." As was common until recent times, my full birth name was shortened and Americanized in the process of naturalization in June 1962. Since then, my official name has been Frank Almaguer. My original first name, Francisco, is the name of my father, his father and the grandfather before him and is the first name of my son, and now of my grandson, who is at least the 6th "Francisco" in this lineage.

Q: What does the name Almaguer mean?

ALMAGUER: It comes from Spain, probably from the central plateau of the Iberian Peninsula, but its derivative could be French or even Arabic. I suspect that it has both. The "Al" is Arabic. I consider myself to be of Spanish heritage. Many people are confused about my Hispanic heritage because of my light brown hair, green eyes and light complexion; but, in fact, that is common among Spaniards living in the central plateau of Spain. My mother had some French ancestors and that may also explain my complexion. My father's grandparents migrated from Spain to Cuba sometime in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century and settled in eastern Cuba. This migration from Spain to Cuba, the "jewel in the crown" of the then-fading Spanish Empire, was common in the first half of the 19th Century, a result of Spain's failing economy and never-ending wars among the European powers of the era.

My mother had a French grandmother (with a last name of Paniz), but her father had Spanish lineage. That family migrated to Puerto Rico at some point in the 19th Century or perhaps earlier. They settled in Ponce, Puerto Rico, where my mother was born in 1912. Her mother died at childbirth, leaving my maternal grandfather as a young widower with

seven kids, including an infant. As I understand the story, his only brother was living in Cuba; so he proceeded, with his children in tow, to catch a boat for Cuba. By the time my mother was born, Puerto Rico had become a dependency of the United States. Hence, she had full U.S. citizenship and retained that American citizenship all her life despite being raised in Cuba.

That's where I come from: born in Holguin, Cuba on January 1, 1945 of a father and a mother who both had Spanish and some French ancestry — and perhaps Arabic as well. I was the youngest of three siblings, including Beatriz (born 1937) and Miriam (born 1940).

Q: On your father's side — your father and your grandparents — what were they doing?

ALMAGUER: As I understand it, my father's grandparents on both sides settled in or near the town of Holguín, which is a provincial city in the eastern part of Cuba, about 25 miles from Cuba's north coast. Holguin was a commercial hub, surrounded by productive agriculture, including sugar cane. At the time I was born in 1945, Holguin had a population of 70,000 to 80,000 people. I understand that it has grown a great deal — perhaps 300,000-400,000 inhabitants today.

My paternal grandfather, Francisco Almaguer Pupo, had a shop in Holguín where he manufactured and sold horse-riding equipment — saddles, boots and other horse-related paraphernalia. Don't mistake this for meeting the needs of Virginia horse country! At that time in Cuba, horses were essential to farming, for transportation, and for distributing goods. I remember my mother buying milk and vegetables from vendors who would ride on their horses up and down our dusty (or muddy in the rainy season) street selling those products. My grandfather also made other leather products, such as belts and leather-covered seats in the shop next to his house. My paternal grandfather and grandmother — Margarita Iñiguez — had 14 kids; my father was the oldest of them, of whom 12 survived to adulthood. Interestingly, among her many children, my grandmother had four pairs of twins, including three pairs who survived into old age.

My father may have been the first one in his family to graduate from high school or "normal school" (a type of high school that prepared students to teach at the elementary grades). My father went on to become an elementary schoolteacher in the city of Holguin and nearby rural areas. My father never lived further than a mile or less from where he was raised and never worked too far away either. When I was a kid, my father also had a part-time job as secretary to the Masonic Lodge in Holguin. My father and grandfather, as well as other members of their family, were lifelong members of the Masons in Cuba and both rose to the Masons' highest ranks — 33rd Degree. (I am not sure what that meant, but clearly they were very proud of that fact.)

Q: On your mother's side what was their background?

ALMAGUER: I never met my maternal grandfather. He had passed away by the time I was born, but I understand that he was a merchant. I'm not sure what he sold, but I

suspect that he was a wholesaler selling to retail shops in Holguín. He had seven children, of which my mother was the youngest. My maternal grandfather remained a widower throughout his life in Cuba, but depended on his oldest daughter, Florencia (whom we knew as "Nina") to raise the kids. Nina, who never married, was the "patron saint" of the family and the *de facto* grandmother to over a dozen grandchildren, including me. Nina figures hugely in my life, and my wife and I subsequently named our daughter "Nina" after her.

From hearing my mother talk about it, her family in Holguin had very little money. But my grandfather, Obdulio Ortiz, who appears to have had limited education, was an avid reader and was convinced on the importance of education. He made sure that his kids studied. Despite being an immigrant in a poor country and living in a provincial town, he eventually managed to send at least one child, a boy named Cesar Ortiz, to law school in Havana. He also sent another child, a girl named Rosa Blanca Ortiz, to Havana, where she earned a Ph.D. and went on to become a prominent educator in Holguin. This is noteworthy since educating girls probably was seen as less important in those days. His other kids also had some education, at least at the local high school level. My mother, Eusebia, went as far as the tenth grade and then dropped out for reasons that I never knew. But most of her brothers and sisters did manage to complete secondary education. My mother inherited her father's commitment to educating her kids and that became her single biggest priority throughout her life. No one in the Ortiz family (or in the Almaguer family) became rich or famous. But they all worked hard and promoted a culture that valued education above all else. My mother, who passed away in 2000, died with enormous pride in what her children and grandchildren had achieved through good education and her hard work.

There is another aspect of growing up in Holguin that merits mention as it was unusual for a traditionally Catholic society: Sometime in the late 1800s and early 1900s a community of Quaker missionaries from Iowa and Whittier, California, descended upon eastern Cuba. I find this rather fascinating because Quakers (also known as "Friends") are not known for proselytizing.

Q: No, they aren't.

ALMAGUER: I never quite understood how this came to be. Nevertheless, these Quaker missionaries settled in eastern Cuba and founded a number of K-12 schools and Friends Meeting Houses (i.e., Quaker churches) in Holguin and smaller towns and communities in that part of northeastern Cuba. The Spanish name for the schools was "Colegio Los Amigos," or "Friends School." Until Castro's revolution in 1959, the "Amigos" schools in eastern Cuba were seen as among the best schools in the region, alongside some of the better-financed Catholic schools. Public schools were an option, but of much lower quality and thus rarely used by families who could in some way finance their children's education. The Quaker schools and churches in the Holguin area apparently received funding from the Whittier Friends in California and perhaps other Quaker groups in the U.S., including from Guilford County, N.C.

Q: Whittier is where Richard Nixon came from.

ALMAGUER: Yes. In fact, I have heard that there was a missionary family in the early years of the Quakers' presence in Holguin who were related to Mrs. Hannah Nixon, the mother of the president.

At some point before I came along, my mother's family, including my mother, became Quakers. The aunt whom I mentioned earlier who had earned a Ph.D., along with her husband, managed and taught at the "Colegio Los Amigos" in Holguin for many years, until Castro came to power. That K-12 school even had a residential hall for students from the countryside. Her husband, Ramon Morell, was both the principal of the school and lay pastor of the Quaker church in Holguin. I believe that he also oversaw the other Friends schools in the region. That school and church were the center of my family's social life when I was a little kid growing up in Holguin. My father was a dedicated Free Mason, a group that had a checkered history with the Catholic Church. I don't recall that my father was involved with the Quakers, but he allowed my mother to raise their kids as Quakers. My mother was not a strongly religious person. I assume that what she saw in the Quakers was a sense of community and an opportunity to educate her children.

THE EARLY YEARS IN HOLGUIN (1945 – 1954)

Q: So what was it like being a kid and particularly a Quaker kid?

ALMAGUER: My story in Holguin goes from 1945, when I was born, to 1954, when my mother, my middle sister (Miriam), and I came to the United States. As a kid, I thought we led a middle-class life. I knew that we were not rich, but my father was a primary school teacher in a public school and my mother was a stay-at-home mom. Of course, in those days probably 100 percent of the mothers stayed home. And we went to a good school. In retrospect, it is obvious that we were a striving working-poor household. My house, which my parents rented (neither ever owned a house or a car) had no running water, no flushing toilets, no electric or gas stove, or any of the conveniences that today we would consider essential. My mother drew water for both cooking and bathing from a well that was shared with a neighboring house. There was an outdoor privy. Wastewater went down a drain that emptied out on the street in front of the house. The house was a Spanish-era colonial structure. In the U.S. we would call these row houses because the houses are in a row facing the street with shared walls.

The street where we lived, Calle Cervantes, was unpaved at the time but it was a busy street near the center of the city. I remember that in the morning a man would ride on a horse selling milk; another rider would come by selling bread and other goods. My mother would buy big jugs of water for drinking, although I am not sure how clean it was. Around the corner from where we lived there was butcher shop with animal carcasses hanging in the open, covered with flies and other pests. The shop itself was wide open to the street, with no screens, and the butcher would cut meat by the pound and wrap it in newspapers. In retrospect, this scene was reminiscent of the 19th Century or earlier, not of the middle of the 20th Century. Hygiene left a great deal to be desired and

the streets were periodically fumigated to combat mosquitos with gases from unknown sources. It is a wonder that we did as well as we did in terms of our health.

Yet it was pleasant life. We knew our neighbors and the kids in the neighborhood improvised street games. Families in the neighborhood probably had lived in the same place for years, if not for generations. The big social event of the week for us was walking to Holguin's Central Park, named after Holguin-born General Calixto Garcia, one of the leaders of the 19th Century Cuban wars of independence against Spain. We were very proud to be related to him on my father's mother's side. (We were never sure of the relationship, but I now believe that he was my grandmother's uncle from her mother's side.)

The park itself, typical of Spanish colonial design, was a square surrounded by city hall, a movie theatre, some stores and churches nearby. It was the place, at night, where boys and girls went to meet each other under the watchful eyes of the girls' parents.

Q: You walked around?

ALMAGUER: Everyone that I knew walked around the park. I was too young to do this but courtship consisted of the boys walking in one direction and the girls in another direction and surreptitiously winking at each other if they either recognized or liked one another. For kids and families, there usually was some type of music concert in the park. I saw my very first TV broadcast in 1950 or thereabouts in the same park. Cuba was among the first countries in the world to have TV and I assume they were broadcasting some local musical event nearby to promote this new technology. Radio was at the time the main medium of communication and entertainment. My father in particular would sit by the radio to hear baseball games, listen to soap operas, or be entertained by radio musical and comedy shows from Havana.

In 1952, an event happened which, in retrospect, probably was the most formative event of my life: my mother and father divorced. Divorce was rare at that time and in that community. I certainly was not aware of divorces among members of my family or family friends. I remember my parents arguing frequently, but I don't remember the details. Subsequently I learned that my father was seeing another woman (whom he eventually married and remained married to her for the rest of his life). It was a messy situation that brought much unhappiness and uncertainty to my two sisters and me.

My mother found herself in the difficult position of being a single mother in an environment where there was no support network for somebody in that position. I am assuming that her income flow was reduced significantly and she had no work experience. One immediate consequence was that my two sisters were pulled out of our Friends School. My oldest sister, Beatriz, by then about 15 years old, started going to the nearby public "Holguin Normal School" to finish her secondary education and earn a teaching certificate, and my other sister, Miriam, about 12 years old, was enrolled in the local public school. I remained at the Friends School, perhaps due to the fact that my

uncle and aunt waived my tuition costs. As a consequence, I continued in that school through the 3rd Grade, after which we moved to the United States.

At that time, two of my mother's older sisters (Nina and Carmen) — neither of whom ever married — were living in Miami and working in the Miami garment industry as seamstresses. They had moved there in the late 1940s, taking advantage of their Puerto Rican births and U.S. citizenship. (The story of these two sisters — my aunts — merits a long chapter in a separate setting.) It is understandable that my mother, under the circumstances, decided to join them in Miami.

While getting to the United States was not as legally complex for us as it would have been for other immigrants, it nevertheless was a monumental and life-changing decision. After all, from infancy my mother was raised in Holguin, never left the island (or traveled much within the island), spoke only Spanish, and had all of her roots in Cuba. But being able to go to the U.S. Consulate in Santiago to reclaim her U.S. citizenship was the rational thing to do. Soon thereafter she had her American passport.

With regard to my siblings, my mother discovered an interesting quirk in U.S. immigration and citizenship laws in place at the time: my two sisters enjoyed derivative U.S. citizenship; hence, they were considered "natural-born" Americans. So they, too, received American passports. However, the law that provided for this benefit apparently expired on December 31, 1944. I was born January 1, 1945! As a consequence, I was the only one in my immediate family who had to seek immigrant status in the U.S.; I had to be naturalized later on, but unlike my sisters, remain ineligible to run for President.

Q: [Laughter.]

ALMAGUER: My earliest memory of having any contact with the U.S. and with the institution that would play such an important role in my life, the U.S. Foreign Service, was as an eight-year-old kid standing in line at the American Consulate in Santiago de Cuba. This is one of those things that one remembers without really understanding what it meant at the time it was happening. I remember catching a bus with my mother and her brother, Cesar (the one who earned a law degree), in the early morning darkness, perhaps around two or three o'clock in the morning, to get to Santiago, which was about four hours away by bus. I also remember standing in line at the Consulate with my mother and uncle so that my mother could try to secure an immigrant visa for me.

I assume that the process was easier for me than for most immigrant visa solicitors. Nevertheless, it left an imprint: in later years, as I drove pass the long lines in front of the multiple embassies in which I subsequently served or visited, I would often think of this experience and wondered how life would turn out for those lucky enough that day to get their visas.

As it turns out, in the course of the following months, my then 17-year-old sister, Beatriz, had fallen in love with a young man from Holguin and they decided to get married before my mother and her two other children left for Miami. Marriage at such a young age, and

under difficult family circumstances, seems foolish. Among other things, it meant that my mother would not only endure the separation from everything she knew but also that she would be leaving behind her oldest, but still very young, daughter. The good ending to this story is that my sister and her husband (who ultimately migrated to the United States shortly after the Castro take-over of the island) went on to celebrate more than 50 years of marriage and all of their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren are proud Americans today.

Soon after my sister's wedding, my mother (at age 41), my sister Miriam (at age 14) and I (at age 9) landed in Miami (our very first airplane ride) on a particularly memorable day — July 4, 1954. So, every year, when Americans celebrate Independence Day, we have another reason to be grateful for the risky (and probably scary) action taken by our mother to bring us to the U.S. and give us an opportunity that most likely we never would have had if we had stayed in Holguin.

Q: Before we move on to the United States, do you recall what education you were receiving in school – other than reading and writing and math – about Cuba and being a Cuban?

ALMAGUER: I did kindergarten plus the first three years of elementary school in Cuba. It was clear to me even then that there was a great deal of pride in being a Cuban. As I recall, in the history and civics lessons much was said about the pride of being an independent country and about the beauty of the island, as well as the legacy of José Martí and other Cuban heroes.

I did not know much about the United States. I suppose that wealthier kids in Havana had more links to the United States than we did in Holguin. I only knew that it was a very far-away country where they spoke a different language. I remember hearing American music at times on the radio (probably jazz) and sports talk about baseball (known in Cuba as "béisbol") and about players from Cuba playing in the American baseball leagues. We also lived in a school and church environment influenced by American missionaries. Hence, whatever was said about the United States was usually positive. Nevertheless, the United States was a foreign country. Learning Spanish, speaking it correctly, learning about Cuban history and taking pride in "*Cubanismo,*" ("Cubaness") as they call it, was something that was inculcated. I believe that to this day Cuba remains a country where its citizens, despite over half a century of political turmoil and divisions, take the kind of pride in their country of birth that I don't often see in other countries in Latin America. To this day, Cuban-Americans, who love the United States dearly, nevertheless continue to be proud of their Cuban heritage.

Q: Yes, it shows up in American politics. [Laughter.] Do you recall getting comments about the Cuban government?

ALMAGUER: Perhaps I was a bit too young. But I do remember clearly two political events. In both cases I remember them because either I was pulled out of school or my family expressed fear.

One of them was the overthrow of the constitutional civilian government of Carlos Prío Socarrás in March 1952 by General Fulgencio Batista Zaldívar, who had been a military dictator and then president of Cuba in prior incarnations. The first time he overthrew a government — in 1933 — he was an Army Sergeant. He subsequently was president until 1944, when he allowed a couple of civilian governments that were elected more or less democratically to assume office - although I assume that Batista remained a powerful figure behind the scene during that period. These civilian governments were probably ineffective and corrupt. I don't know much about the circumstances leading to the March 1952 *coup* and much of what happened that day took place in far-away Havana. Nevertheless, there were gunshots in the streets (perhaps in celebration). What I recall is my mother sending my oldest sister to school to pick me up and we both rushed home on foot.

A little over a year later — July 26, 1953 — the other major event happened. Not that I remember that day specifically, but that happens to be the day that a young man, Fidel Castro, attempted to take over a military barrack in Santiago, not too far from my hometown. I was eight years old, but I remember people talking about it in the streets and a great deal of commotion. Of course, the attack failed and Castro was imprisoned. But this event set the stage for Castro's subsequent comeback in 1959.

Politics was a big part of what I recall people talked about during my early years in Cuba, and it was usually in a negative way: the bad guys in Havana, the crooks, the thieves, the mafia, just a general sense that politicians were in power to enrich themselves and not necessarily to do anything for the population. Cuba, statistically, was one of the better off Latin American countries in the 1950s. It was among the first to have electricity and telephone service, and some of its educational facilities were among the best in the region. Yet, it is amazing that in this presumably middle-income country, my "middle-class" family (or so we thought) was living with no running water on a street that wasn't paved, with horses and pigs and other animals present in the streets! Despite all the stories of how well off Cuba was before Castro, it was not an easy life for the majority of the population.

Q: Did you get any feel for racial divisions at that time and where you were? I imagine that varied according to the type of work and geography?

ALMAGUER: I'm not too sure that I was conscious of racial divides. Because of my light complexion I do remember that people called me "*el Gringito*" ("little gringo").

Q: [Laughter.] You were a "little gringo."

ALMAGUER: I'm sure that I must have been one of the few blond, green-eyed kids running around Holguín, although I don't remember much about racial differences. In retrospect, it's quite obvious that Cuba was among the most multiracial of the countries in Latin America. Today, Cuba is perhaps 75 percent Afro-Cuban or of mixed race. Clearly, race did play a role. In retrospect, I assume that my family's viewed itself as

"middle-class," despite its financial limitations, derived in part from our light complexion, which facilitated societal acceptance.

What I was most conscious of was class distinctions. There were the elites — perceived by us to be super wealthy. I remember when my mother talked about them she would use a whispering tone of almost reverence towards the few families who at the time probably controlled business, agriculture and social life in eastern Cuba. Then there were the masses, probably the vast majority, who labored in menial jobs where education was not essential. Somewhere in the middle were people like ourselves, who had some education, lived close to the center of the city (I vaguely recall that the poorer population lived in the outlying areas) and held "decent" jobs (teachers, etc.). I assume that there was some class mobility, but not that much, particularly for the darker-skinned population.

Q: What about being a Quaker in a Catholic country, how did that play? How about the Church? What role did it play?

ALMAGUER: I am married to a Catholic, and I used to joke with her that nothing caused me greater fear than a Catholic Church on Good Friday …with processions, with hooded men, with women crying, and the statue of Christ bleeding on the Cross. This was scary for me and quite a contrast from what I saw in my family and church; Quakers are subdued in their display of religion, there were no symbols in the church, no statues of saints, et cetera. I don't remember discrimination based on religion. Cuba was (and remains) a secular society. Even though the vast majority were Catholics, and while I assume that the elites made it a point of donating to the Church, my feeling is that most Cubans did not have strong religious inclinations. In fact, if you go back to the long struggle for independence — and Cuba was just about the last country in the hemisphere to gain independence from Spain — the Church was the ally of Spain. Cuba's wars for independence started in the 1850s, followed by a failed 10-year revolution in the 1860s, and then, ultimately, the war that started in 1898 (which in the United States we remember as the Spanish-American War and the sinking of the USS Maine) and which culminated with Cuban independence in 1902. I suspect that the Catholic Church did not support the rebels or the "*independentistas*." There was not a strong rapport between the Catholic Church and Cuban patriots. Not only did Protestant groups have a role in Cuban society much earlier than in the rest of Latin America (where evangelical churches have grown dramatically over the past 30 years), but groups like the Free Masons were well entrenched and well accepted in Cuban society. This secularism may have played a role later on, when Castro imposed a Communist dictatorship. The Catholic Church probably was not strong enough at the time to defend its interests or promote its anti-communist views.

Q: But you didn't feel that being a Quaker set you off to one side particularly?

ALMAGUER: I don't think so, at least not that it made an impact on me.

Q: Did you or your sisters ever get taken to the big city, to Havana?

ALMAGUER: No. The only time I ever visited Havana — and was not even visiting it — was the day that we took a bus from Holguín to Havana to then catch a flight to Miami. I was from Holguín, a country town, and never left that town (except to go from time-to-time to the nearby beach town of Gibara) until we left in 1954.

GROWING UP IN MIAMI (1954 – 1963)

Q: In 1954 you went to the United States. Let's talk about that.

ALMAGUER: on July 4, 1954, to be precise, we arrived in Miami. My mother, my sister Miriam, and I moved in with my mother's two sisters: Carmen, whom I knew as "Pucha," who was my mother's contemporary in age (Pucha was three years older), and "Nina", maybe 20 years older than my mother. Both worked in the garment factories of Miami, but Nina also was the "home maker," who did the cooking, sewing, and much of the house cleaning. All five of us (my mother, my sister, two aunts and me) lived in a one-bedroom apartment: two double beds in the bedroom and a sofa bed for me in the living room. We lived on 11th Terrace, NE, about 11 blocks from downtown Miami and what seemed to us as an okay neighborhood but, in retrospect, transitioning into a "seedy" part of downtown Miami.

Anyone familiar with Miami today would agree that Miami could be confused for a prosperous city almost anywhere in Latin America. Spanish is spoken everywhere — in fact, it's difficult to get around Miami unless you speak Spanish — and Latin American food, music and culture are prevalent. But in 1954 Miami was an odd Northern city stuck at the southern tip of Florida. Miami was the place where retirees from New York came down to settle or where garment factory owners could find relatively cheap labor among the growing Latin and other working class populations.

Q: Mainly Jewish, weren't they?

ALMAGUER: Most of the garment factory owners and "snow bird" working class retirees were Jewish. While English was the first language in Miami, Yiddish was the second language, and Spanish didn't figure. The garment factories in the Miami-Hialeah area where my mother and aunts worked as seamstresses were all owned by Jewish entrepreneurs from New York. That my mother and aunts worked for Jewish bosses was a daily fact of life. I remember listening to my mother and aunts talk about their bosses, and they almost always referred to the boss as "*el judío*" (the Jewish one). "*El judio*" was synonymous with being "the boss." It may sound pejorative today, but to them that's who their boss was. Since my mother and aunts did not speak much English, I doubt they had much interaction with them.

Q: Was your mother trained to be a seamstress?

ALMAGUER: My aunts were seamstresses, and my mother, who had no significant working experience or marketable skills, almost immediately went to work as one herself. For all of them, this involved on-the-job training and accepting positions at the bottom

end of the production scale. They were what they called "*finishers,"* who ensured that all the buttons were sawn, loose threads were cut and otherwise get the garment ready for the wholesale buyers. *N*either my aunts nor my mother ever made more than whatever the mandatory minimum wage was at the time, and during parts of the year when they would be laid off (as it often happened in the summer, when these factories were operating below capacity), they would collect unemployment compensation — which probably didn't amount to much more than half their earnings during other times of the year.

So here was my mother and two aunts raising two school-age kids, living in a one-bedroom apartment, no English and depending on public transport for everything. I was very conscious of our differences with the majority of the population — particularly because of the language barrier. Nevertheless, I was impressed by the fact that we had an indoor toilet and running water!

Q: Yes, and a paved street in front….

ALMAGUER: The building in which we lived, called the "Pink House" for its garish exterior paint, is now gone and a freeway not too far from downtown Miami, connecting I-95 to the McArthur Causeway to Miami Beach, razed that entire neighborhood many years ago.

Soon after arriving in Miami, I was enrolled at a nearby elementary school and entered the fourth grade. Miramar Elementary was next to a synagogue and across the street from an old cemetery. (That school is also gone, but I am not sure what replaced it.) My sister Miriam, despite being only 14 years old, was assigned to the 10th Grade at Miami Senior High School. Neither she nor I spoke a word of English as we ventured to our respective schools in September 1954, using public transit and no acquaintances to help guide us through what must have been a rather daunting experience.

As far as I know, the Miami-Dade public school system at the time did not have an English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) program or specialized programs for those with learning or physical disabilities. Special Ed programs are of more recent vintage. One of the things that I have often joked about is that I graduated *magna cum laude* from the school for the mentally and physically disabled. I was in the regular fourth-grade classroom for all of two or three days. Then I was called out and taken to a separate part of the school building, where my new classmates were either blind, deaf, or had other infirmities. Some couldn't or wouldn't speak. Anyone who had a limitation of some sort wound up in this classroom. Heaven knows what a mess it must have been to try to teach in this classroom!

Q: Yes. [Laughter]

ALMAGUER: I remember that by the end of the first year in this particular classroom I was being asked to read stories to blind kids in the class. It was there that I first became acquainted with "*Jack and Jill (went up the hill)*" and similar pre-school stories because I had missed all of those years of U.S. education. Even though it was an odd combination

of students, it did provide me with the capacity to learn the language, at least well enough to be considered "normal," and then, the following year, assigned to the regular fifth-grade class.

Despite all of these challenges, my sister Miriam, who was in high school, and I were learning English and doing well academically. On the other hand, my mother and her sisters were working at garment factories where most of their coworkers were Spanish-speaking and where their bosses often conversed in Spanish. Hence, my mother and her sisters never really had an opportunity to master English. Spanish continued to be my language at home, despite the fact that I ceased to have formal training in that language after the third grade.

Q: Did you find, as so often happens, that you and your sister were called upon to help your mother and aunts as interpreters?

ALMAGUER: Absolutely. As a young kid, I was annoyed and embarrassed at having to do that, but, yes, that was one of my roles. I don't know how many times as a young kid I would accompany my mother and aunts to the local Social Security Office to file for unemployment compensation, particularly in the summertime. In retrospect, I know that this experience of helping them deal with the realities of their lives taught me a great deal about hard work for low wages while not asking for handouts. Although they never made more than the minimum wage while supporting two kids in school, they maintained their dignity and their commitment to see us through school. Both my sister and I could easily have ended our formal education in high school but that would have been unthinkable to them. I am very proud of their legacy. Every once in awhile they would have problems paying utility bills and I would be the one trekking over to the utility company to clarify the issue. Further, being the male (even though I was really a kid) placed me in that role — that's how gender stereotyping worked in those days. There is no question that my mother and her sisters were of a generation where the males took care of these things. So, early on they began to look to me to play the male role. By the time I was a teenager, this ritual was a bit frustrating ….but it was part of my role.

Q: Did your family suffer the gap that is one of the elements of so much of American immigrant life: parents who didn't speak the language or understood the culture and the kids who moved on and away from their roots?

ALMAGUER: Yes, obviously. In her last few years, in particular, this was a heartbreaking issue for my mother. Although her own family had been immigrants from Puerto Rico, she grew up in Holguin and lived in the same surroundings for the first 41 years of her life. Yet, by the time that her kids were grown and with families of their own, they were scattered. I was living in Washington or on assignment abroad. My sister Betty (who left Cuba, along with her family, in 1960) was living in Greensboro, North Carolina (where her family moved with the support of the Quaker community there shortly after migrating to the United States). My other sister, Miriam, and her family were living in Charlotte, North Carolina, because of her job as a university professor. My mother, in the meantime, had remained in Miami. In effect, we abandoned her radius of

control and influence. Even though she claimed to understand it, it was very difficult for her.

The Miami-Cuban environment that I grew up in, particularly after ’59, when the Cuban population in Miami began to grow, in many ways was a throwback to the Cuba of the 1940s and 50s. My mother’s friends would say to her, “Well, how come your children are moving some place else? They’re supposed to be with their parents even though they’re grown up because that’s the way it’s supposed to be.” At the same time, my mother and aunts were very proud of what we were becoming: successful and productive members of the “American Dream.” When my sister Miriam was getting close to graduation from high school, I vividly remember overhearing a verbal argument between my mother and a neighbor, who probably was a colleague of my mother’s at the garment factory, suggesting that my sister, now that she was about to graduate, would be a good addition to the pool of seamstresses at the factory. My mother, who I’m sure did not have a penny in a bank account, stood up and said, “Never! My daughter is going to go to college, as will my son.” And by hook or crook, we did.

Q: Did your father play any part?

ALMAGUER: Not really. I always have speculated about this. My father was a gentle, mild-mannered soul. A middle-class individual (not in terms of money but in terms of how he must have perceived himself) who no doubt cared for his kids. The divorce had to do with his falling in love with somebody else. He was not a drinker and the fact that he re-married and stayed married (happily, I think) to the same woman with whom he felt in love until he died, shows that he was a stable person. But he stayed in Cuba. Once we left for the U.S. in ’54, the bonds were broken. I saw him only a few times after that, I’m sorry to say. I saw him in Miami in 1957, when he came for my sister’s high school graduation, and in ’59, right after Castro took over, when I went to Cuba for the summer.

In 1984, by then he was in his 70s, one of my sisters engineered for him to visit the United States for a few weeks. He visited with my wife, my kids and me in D.C. He also visited with my sisters in North Carolina, went to California to visit relatives there and then went back to Cuba. I remember asking him in ’84 why he had not visited with us more frequently and he said: “I didn’t know if I was wanted. Besides, I never would have left my birthplace!” When he died in Holguin a few years after he visited us in the United States, he was living less than a block from where he was born and where he grew up. I suppose that those roots were more important to him than anything else. There is no doubt that he left a vacuum in our lives that I will never fully grasp. When my mother left Holguin with my sister Miriam and me, he could have stopped the move, but he didn’t. While I remember him fondly and certainly was interested in his whereabouts and welfare, we never really had a substantive relationship. I can say without doubt that my mother and my aunts raised me.

Q: How did you find the transition from a Quaker school in Cuba to the American school system?

ALMAGUER: Other than the English language problem, I don't recall that it was a difficult transition. My sister, Miriam, and I have talked about this from time to time. She was in high school, and that, no doubt, was a greater challenge than the one I experienced. It was during that period that she became hooked on mathematics and went on to become a highly successful math educator. She attributes her love of mathematics to the fact that it was a subject that she could do well in despite her limited English language skills at the time and not really understanding or being a part of the social life that goes on in high school.

Q: How did you become socialized in American culture? I assume that you developed school and neighborhood friendships. Were they Cuban immigrants, as well?

ALMAGUER: There were very few social outlets for me to play and learn the things that boys do in the U.S., from playing baseball to learning how to drive. None of the normal outlets were in place. As a kid in Miami in the 1950s, there were very few Cubans or other Spanish-speaking kids in Miami at that time. The neighborhood that I grew up in lacked most amenities, including adequate playgrounds. I remember my very first Halloween "trick or treat" event. I didn't know what was going on but I remember going to a couple of neighborhood bars with a kid who lived across the street from us. I have no idea what I received from the patrons — probably coins.

I was a pretty good kid, despite the few social outlets and challenging circumstances. Going to a nearby movie theater with my sister on Sunday afternoons to watch a double feature was probably the social highlight of our week. This may explain why Miriam and I loved school. In the fifth grade, I reached one of my early goals — I became a school patrol boy! I guess I must have seen a Norman Rockwell painting showing a patrol boy with kids crossing the street and it made me feel "all-American." I even had a badge! By the time I completed sixth grade, I was captain of the patrol boys. That was really important for me. It gave me confidence. While I may not have vocalized it, it must have felt pretty good to think back to two years earlier, when I had no idea what was going on around me in a totally foreign environment, and now, "Hey, I learned to speak English and now I'm the captain of the patrol boys!"

Junior high was a little further out. I had to take city buses; in fact, transfer buses. That school, Robert E. Lee Junior High, is today in a pretty bad neighborhood. It was probably a decaying working-class neighborhood at the time. I'm assuming there was a "bad crowd" but I didn't know them. I probably was considered a "nerd" and the teachers tended to be very nice to me.

Q: [Laughter] Did you wash the blackboards?

ALMAGUER: I loved to do that kind of stuff. Very early on I acquired a love for history, geography, and civics. I probably was the first kid in my eighth-grade American History class to memorize the entire Gettysburg Address, having learned all about the 50 states and their capitals in the 7th grade. I remember my sister and I trying to learn the names of the states and their capitals. The obvious name of the capital of Arizona was "Poynix."

Nobody had told us that "Ph" stood for anything other that P with a silent H, so it was "Poynix." Now I am the proud grandfather to a boy named Phoenix. He would be shocked to learn that there was a time when his grandpa could not pronounce his name right...

I had no idea what I would be doing as an adult, but there was no question that the enjoyment I received from those courses was pointing in certain career directions. In the meantime, I would notice that events such as field trips, school plays, etc., would draw out many parents. The PTA seemed active. I don't recall even mentioning this to my mother and she never participated in any of these activities. She was just happy to see my report cards that showed that I was doing well. My mother, with her limited English and full-time work, would have been uncomfortable attending these events. I'm not sure she would have known what to do. I don't know whether I resented this or not. I probably did, but I never had my mother play the active role in school that my wife or I played later on for our kids.

Q: It's almost tragic that this is so often the immigrant pattern, where the children leave their parents behind and develop completely different lifestyles. They become full-blooded citizens, but the parents, often because of the language and the culture, are left behind.

ALMAGUER: That's right.

Q: Do you recall when Castro came in? That was '59? How old were you then?

ALMAGUER: January 1, 1959, the day that I turned 14.

Q: Do you recall the subsequent events, the flood of refugees into Miami? Could you talk about your own reflections?

ALMAGUER: Castro and Cuba were very much on everybody's lips at the time. In 1957 and '58 Cuba was going through a major civil war and it had become a dangerous place in which to live or travel. Then, on January 1, 1959, Batista and his associates fled and Castro took over within days. There was jubilation in Miami, not only among the few Cubans living there at the time, but also among many Americans and others who shared in the joy that this young man, who commanded the hopes of many, had liberated Cuba from the oppression of Batista. Soon thereafter we began to see the first wave of exiles. This first wave had nothing to do with me. They were, for the most part, well-placed Cubans connected to the Batista regime who moved to where many of them had houses, either Palm Beach, Key West or Tampa. The few new kids my age who were arriving lived in another world, as far as I was concerned. What I often heard from adults around me was that their parents were "big shots" in the Batista regime, many with blood in their hands. That was the common perception in my circle of acquaintances. Furthermore, while we were happy to see Batista go, we had no intention of moving back to Cuba — that's not why we came. Our perception was that most of these new arrivals were people

who would move back to Cuba whenever a more favorable regime took over. Their interest in assimilation appeared to be minimal.

The transformation of Castro from a folk-hero liberator to a Communist dictator was quick. We broke relations with Cuba in January 1961, exactly two years after Castro came power. President Eisenhower's decision, in the waning days of his Administration, was not a surprise. By that time, Castro had already not only declared himself to be a Communist, but also his government had begun the process of nationalizing private-sector investments in Cuba, many of which were American-owned. Hence, we were beginning to see a new wave of migration. This was the large migration of the educated middle class. By the time I was in high school, all of a sudden my classrooms began to change rather significantly. Now there were more Cuban-born students. Those were perceived by my acquaintances as the "good" Cubans. They were people who were victimized by Batista, and now victimized again by the new dictator. Of course, during that time many people assumed that Castro would be a passing fancy; that Castro would somehow be overthrown and that this new wave of Cuban exiles would go back to the island as soon as possible. What continued to make my family and me different from the "new" Cubans is that we never contemplated moving back to Cuba. My future was in the United States. Hence, I felt that I had little in common with this new wave of Cubans in Miami.

The Miami in which I grew up began to change dramatically in the early '60s. By then we had moved to a neighborhood near my high school, Miami Senior High. By the time that I graduated from high school in 1963 that area had become known as "Little Havana." Prior to this influx, the area where we lived was a semi-rundown working-class area. The earlier residents had begun to move to the suburbs, to be replaced by middle- and lower-class Cuban immigrants.

An interesting point is that, even with changing demographics we were still "different." We were immigrants and did not have the experience and background of our "Anglo" classmates, whom we assumed lived in "Ozzie and Harriet" settings. (For those who may not know, "Ozzie and Harriet" was a popular TV sitcom of the late '50s and early '60s, whose perfect family lived in a perfect house in a perfect middle-class neighborhood, white picket fence and all.) Subsequently, when recently arrived Cubans became a growing portion of our school population, we did not identify as much with them, either, since they were recent arrivals and presumed at that time to be temporary residents on their way back to Cuba as soon as the Castro regime was deposed.

With regards to family back in Cuba, I should mention, as an example, the aunt who, along with her husband, led and taught at "Colegio Los Amigos" (Friends School) in Holguín. By the late '50s, they were the superintendents of all of these Friends schools in the region. They had several children, but their oldest daughter was married to a man who (as I understand it) was not only a Castro activist, but also a card-carrying Communist. In family folklore, this son-in-law soon after Castro took over became the overseer on behalf of the Cuban government of the Friends schools. My aunt and uncle and most of their family soon thereafter migrated to the United States. As in the case of many Cuban

families, they came to the United States with the added pain of leaving their daughter behind with a son-in-law who had been instrumental in the take-over of the school they nurtured and loved over a lifetime.

It was during this period that most of my family on my mother's side migrated to the United States. The few who may have stayed behind have mostly passed on. On my father's side, maybe a couple of brothers and sisters may have migrated (there were 12 children in that family, with my father being the oldest), but as far as I know most (including my father) never left Cuba. As far as I can tell, they were apolitical — that is, they never associated with the Castro regime any more than they had associated with the Batista regime. But they were not the kind of people who would pick up and go. Holguin was their cherished home. On the other hand, on my mother's side, almost all moved out. All of a sudden I had aunts, uncles and cousins living in the United States. With a couple of exceptions, however, we were not that close since our formative experiences growing up in Miami had been so different from theirs.

A special mention must be made of my oldest sister, Beatriz (Betty). She turned 17 when we were getting ready to migrate to the United States in 1954. A year earlier she had met a young 20-year-old man, Octavio Manduley, also from Holguin and, with our parents concurrence, they were married in June — a month before we left. Betty and Octavio stayed behind while my sister completed her "Normal School" and began to raise a family of her own. Octavio became a successful salesman of agricultural equipment. In 1960, however, the Castro government confiscated the American company for which he worked — International Harvester — and, subsequently, Octavio, Betty and their two kids (with a third one on the way) migrated to Miami. They were true exiles, but soon thereafter moved to Greensboro, N.C. (under the sponsorship of the Guilford County Quakers and where my sister Miriam studied — at Guilford College). There they went on to lead successful lives; she teaching Spanish in the Guilford County Public School system, and he as a chemist for a large tobacco company. Their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren have grown up as Americans in every way.

Q: While living in Miami after the Castro revolution did you go to other kids' homes and find that Cuban politics was on the agenda?

ALMAGUER: Absolutely. Cuban politics was on the agenda everywhere that I went during those formative years, particularly during the high school period.

Q: Did you get the feeling that these more recent Cuban exiles were sounding you out on where you came from and checking out your credentials?

ALMAGUER: Yes, but like so many others, in a short period of time my family went from being supportive of Castro to opposing him. On the other hand, it was clear to me that I was not going back to Cuba no matter what happened there. The only president that I identified with was Eisenhower. What Eisenhower said was the "spoken word" of God, as far as we were concerned. Whenever Eisenhower went on television I was the translator for my mother and aunts. So, I had a good knowledge of the issues…

Q: [Laughter]

ALMAGUER: …you know, the typical teenager doesn't listen all that much to politicians, but I remember that I did and regularly tuned in to local and national TV news (*CBS News* with Ralph Edwards was my favorite — that was even before Walter Cronkite!)

The other "folk hero" for me at the time was Vice President Nixon, who was a Quaker. My family could relate to him due to the fact that he was from Whittier, California, the home base for some of the Quaker missionaries who went to Holguin at the turn of the 20th Century. This made me an oddball. In 1960, when I was a sophomore in high school, we had a very exciting presidential election. Many of the American classmates with whom I socialized were Jewish kids. The high school club that I belonged to, National Beta Club, was not an elite social club; it was made up of academically high achievers (we would call them "nerds" today). Most of these friends, as well as their parents, were excited about this young fellow named John Kennedy. I was excited about Nixon! That may sound weird today, particularly since so much of what I subsequently did in my career emerged from the brief Kennedy presidency [e.g., the Peace Corps and the United States Agency for International Development -USAID] but, at the time, I was more excited about the fact that a potential future president knew people who my family also knew (at least in family folklore).

Q: [Laughter]

ALMAGUER: A few months later— April '61 — we had the Bay of Pigs invasion. Just before that, people that I knew had cousins or friends or brothers, including my brother-in-law Octavio, who went off to some secret place. Octavio had gone off to enroll in the U.S. Army. It was only with the Bay of Pigs invasion that I realized that he was in training to participate in the anticipated liberation of Cuba. The Bay of Pigs invasion, as we all know, was a horrible fiasco, and to this day I don't understand how the Cuban exile forces could have been placed in a situation where they were thrown onto the beaches with full knowledge that there would be no U.S. Air Force cover to provide backup. The events associated with this episode in American and Cuban history remain a mystery to me, despite the many books that have been written about it. What I do know is that after this fiasco, there was outrage in Miami, including among some members of my family, about how John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy (who was singled out as the "bad guy") had acted during and after the failed invasion.

Shortly thereafter, in 1962, Castro and Kennedy reached an agreement whereby Castro would release most, if not all, of the Bay of Pigs' prisoners in return for tractors. I remember going to the Orange Bowl, where President Kennedy and First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy welcomed the returning prisoners from the Bay of Pigs. It was a very warm welcome for Kennedy. He was the first president of the United States that I had seen in person, and I was duly impressed with all of the pomp and trappings of the presidency. Nevertheless, the Bay of Pigs fiasco left a very strong imprint in among Cuban-Americans that the Democrats could not be trusted. Soon afterwards came the

October ’62 missile crisis, reinforcing the mistrust of the Cubans in Miami for the Kennedy Administration.

Q: Tell me about the Cuban missile crisis as seen from Miami.

ALMAGUER: I don’t remember as much as I should about this singular event. I guess that I was more focused on being a senior in high school and worried about how I would be able to go to college the next year. Somehow I expected the crisis to be defused, as it was.

Q: Did you see or feel the politicization of the Cuban community in Miami, particularly under the leadership of Jorge Mas Canosa?

ALMAGUER: During these early Castro years, particularly after 1960, there was growing consensus in Florida that Castro had to go. I recall that there were a number of political groupings, many associated with former political parties in Cuba. I suppose the conservatives and the liberals, as well as the pro-Batista and the anti-Batista groups, had strong disagreements among themselves, some of which turned violent. But they all shared one common objective: the overthrow of the Castro regime. They also became highly politicized when it came to U.S. politics. Early on, particularly after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, they realized that getting the U.S. government to side with them to help undermine the Castro regime was a political imperative. Names like Mas Canosa did not surface in my lexicon until much later. Nevertheless, Miami/Cuban exile politics was acrimonious, even if they agreed on the ultimate objective of overthrowing Castro. There were widespread views on the means for doing so and periodically these disagreements within the exile community turned violent. During that time, there were incidents of bombings within the Cuban-American community. For example, I recall that a theater in Miami was bombed because it was staging a play written by a Cuban-American playwright which focused on the plight of the poor in Cuba in the years preceding the Castro take-over. Suggesting that Cuba was not a perfect oasis before the Castro revolution seems to have been interpreted by some as supporting Castro. Intolerance for different views on how to resolve the Cuba problem was an endemic problem in Miami of the early 1960s. We often joked in private that my recollection of having grown up as a kid in Cuba with no running water and an outdoor toilet must have been something that we made up because, as the story was told in Miami, everybody in Cuba was doing well and led the good life until Castro came along to muck it up.

Q: Did the Catholic Church play a role there? Was that something that continued the estrangement of the Catholic Church and the Cuban community?

ALMAGUER: When we arrived in Miami in 1954, my mother would take us to church, but the Quaker group that she found was not to her liking, nor mine, because it was a silent group. Eventually, she started going to a Methodist church, and to a variety of Protestant churches, which at the time had few Cuban worshippers. Religion did not play a central role in my growing-up years in Miami, other than as a social setting. I knew that I was a Christian Protestant and I looked with some suspicion at the Catholic Church, but

neither my mother, aunts, nor sisters were strongly religious. We grew up accepting all religions and I certainly had no problems relating to my Jewish friends.

The Catholic Church in Miami became very strong with the influx of Cubans, 99 percent of whom professed to be Catholics, even if they had not been to mass in years. By '60 – '61, one began to see the influx of Cuban priests, who established new or expanded parishes throughout Dade County. Soon, the Catholic Church in Miami started to play a strong anti-Castro advocacy role.

Q: As a high school kid, did you go out with Jewish girls or did you go out with Cuban girls? How did this work?

ALMAGUER: In 1960-63, my social life was influenced by the fact that more and more of my classmates had cars and I did not even know how to drive, much less own one. I depended on public transport for everything and periodically hitched a ride to someone's house. Dating at the time consisted of taking the girl to a drive-in movie [laughter] or to a fast-food place and, other than school lunch money, I had no allowance. Most of my socializing consisted of "hanging out" with my Beta Club friends at someone's Saturday night house party. I did not date because dating not only required a car and some money, but also required some courage. I assumed that most parents of girls that I liked would not be happy to have their daughters dating a kid who was had no money, no car and an accent! In retrospect, I should not have been so self-aware of my status, but I was painfully embarrassed by the fact that I was "different" as an economic immigrant (vs. the presumably more socially acceptable political exile) living with a single mother and two aunts.

Nevertheless, I was determined to "fit in" as best I could. I did many of the things that were typical of high school life in those days: I went to "sock hops" and Beta Club house parties. I went to the football games and school plays, but usually without a date. Today, I understand that kids don't date that much and more frequently go out in groups, but that was not the norm at the time, where dating was the "thing to do" in high school.

What I did, instead, was to do school-related things that I enjoyed. I joined the "Model U.N." [United Nations] program. In my senior year in high school, the *Miami Herald* had a Dade County-wide contest in which students were asked to write an essay on why America is great. I wrote an essay that earned fourth place in Dade County, and I really felt great! That same year, I was nominated by my teachers for the Knight-Ridder Newspapers' "Silver Knight" Award. The Knight Awards were given annually to 15 or 20 kids from across the county who excelled in various categories. The category for which I was nominated was civics. I didn't win, but I was tickled that I was nominated. I liked my teachers, most of whom were terrific mentors. Since my mother never participated in PTAs or other school events, I relied mostly on my teachers to understand what was going on and was motivated by them. In particular, my history, geography and civics teachers were encouraging and they would get me involved in school activities, such as acting as treasurer for the Foreign Exchange Student Program.

Q: Were the teachers Hispanic or not?

ALMAGUER: I don't recall ever having a Hispanic teacher. They were all Anglos.

Q: Yes. I suspect today it's quite different.

ALMAGUER: Oh yes. Sometime back I had an opportunity to discuss the history of Miami High School, Dade County's first high school, located not too far from downtown Miami. It is a historic and beautiful building — classic Spanish colonial architecture — that celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2003. The big metamorphosis appears to have taken place in 1964, the year after I graduated. In '64, for the first time, Miami High School had more Cuban-American kids than Anglo kids, and by the late '60s it was right in the heart of Little Havana and was probably close to 100 percent Latino. When I went to visit in 1983 for my 20th high-school reunion, the principal and staff who greeted us appeared to be overwhelmingly Cuban-Americans. I studied there at the tail end of the school's Anglo-Jewish period.

Q: Did the civil rights movement affect you? Was there much of a black, either Haitian or indigenous black, population in Miami? How did that period impact upon you?

ALMAGUER: I do not recall in my elementary, junior, or senior high school period having a black student as a classmate and I don't recall having black acquaintances, either, despite the fact that the black neighborhood near downtown Miami, now known as "Overtown", began only 5 or 6 blocks to the west from where we lived for the first four or five years of my life in Miami. There was no crossing of that line – and Miami, supposedly, was more Northern than Southern! Kids in that segregated Overtown neighborhood probably lived closer to my elementary and junior high schools than to whatever schools they were required to go. While there were some dark-skinned Latinos, they did not refer to themselves as anything but Latino. I vividly recall noticing two water fountains in public places all over Miami. These were prominently labeled as "Whites Only" and "Colored Only." The "Colored to the Rear" signs were strategically located in all buses. "Whites Only" and "Colored Only" entrances were prominently displayed. Here I was, an immigrant in the United States but I could sit anywhere in the bus and drink water from any fountain only because of my white complexion. As an usher at a fancy downtown theatre during my high school years, I recall seeing a couple being denied admittance because they were black. Years later, as I reflected on this reality that I had witnessed, I asked myself, "How could I have tolerated this travesty? How come I did not forcefully act against this awful injustice?" Perhaps I was only focused on the fact that this demeaning segregation did not affect me directly, even though I was not an Anglo. I suspect that for the vast majority of white kids of that era, and in that part of the country, the issue of segregation was not central to their daily lives and therefore was not part of the conversation. The civil rights movement, which was beginning to gain strength elsewhere, did not really become part of Florida's conscience until later on. The "I Have a Dream" speech happened two months after I graduated from high school and a few days before I entered college as a freshman.

Q: What about part-time jobs?

ALMAGUER: This was an era before McDonalds and Burger King (which was started in Miami). There weren't that many jobs available for teenagers, particularly if one did not know anyone who could help in the job search. The big grocery store that would hire high school kids seemed to hire only friends of the manager, not casual applicants. With no connections, I had a difficult time getting good summer jobs. My sister Miriam did garment work with our mother when she came home from college in the summers. I worked for a while at a Sears warehouse, but once I was assigned to deliver and install air conditioners, I lost that job. It required physical strength that I did not have. I also ushered at a couple of downtown movie theaters for fifty cents an hour. For about a year, I sold newspapers after school, hawking the old *Miami Daily News* along one of the commuter routes near my neighborhood. I even "sold" encyclopedias, going door-to-door, but no one in my neighborhood was buying those. In summary, I did not seem to be able to crack the better-paying, steady summer job market, as I would have preferred. This was frustrating and did nothing to enhance my confidence. In retrospect, I did not know how to sell myself as a prospective employee and I did not take advantage of my teachers' willingness to be helpful because I was too shy to ask.

Q: What sorts of things were you reading at the time? What were you interested in?

ALMAGUER: Biographies, history and geography. I would be transfixed looking at maps and wondering what life was like in whatever place on the map I was looking at. I would go to the downtown Miami Public Library and looked at exotic maps. I loved to do that. I even collected gas station maps that were free and readily available in that era, long before the Internet gave us total access to the world. I did well academically in other subjects, particularly English. It is ironic that I became a "straight A" student in English and took the "Honors" version of the courses, considering where I was at in the fourth grade! With regards to math, chemistry and other "hard" subjects, I did well enough to be "tapped" for the National Honor Society, but none of those subjects would interest me sufficiently to consider them in my career path. On the other hand, my sister Miriam loved math from the beginning and that's she wanted to do. She went on to earn a math Ph.D. and to excel in the math education field.

I was not good in sports. I had few opportunities to play outdoors and I hated Phys. Ed. This was the era before all kids were cheered on despite being mediocre. My phys. ed. teachers throughout my years in school (and Phys. Ed. was required at all grade levels) were interested in their varsity programs and made no effort to help or encourage those students who had limited sports skills. To this day, I look at coaches with suspicion — even though they are now trained to be sensitive to every child, not only the athletic ones. If I was ever bullied or ridiculed — and I was — it was by the phys. ed. teachers and coaches. I found that going to Phys. Ed. class was the most stressful part of my school day.

Q: You mentioned you were in the Model UN program. In view of your subsequent career in international affairs, how did this influence you?

ALMAGUER: I don't recall getting encouragement in any career direction, other than the fact that my teachers (other than Phys. Ed. coaches) were generally nice to me because they knew that I was interested in what they were teaching. I remember buying the newspaper or reading the newspaper that I was selling. I vividly remember that I was fascinated by China and events in Tibet. In 1959 there was an uprising in Tibet and the then young Dalai Lama was exiled. I read all I could find about that event. This was also the period of the Hungarian revolution of '56 and, later on, uprisings in Czechoslovakia. I obviously harbored great interest in world events. Along the way, one of my teachers would encourage me to learn more and would point me to a book or article that I might be interested in reading.

Going back to the Model UN program, while by then English was my primary language for learning, Spanish continued to be the language I spoke at home. I could alternate easily. Nevertheless, I felt a bit handicapped when it came to engaging in oral debates. I was sensitive about my accent. This same issue came back to haunt me later on as I contemplated going into law school. I perhaps had seen too many "Perry Mason" episodes and he did not have an accent. This let me to conclude that becoming a lawyer was not a wise career path for me. While this may sound silly today, it was a real issue for me at that time.

Q: When you were reaching the end of high school, what were your plans?

ALMAGUER: By the time I became a high school senior, my sister Miriam had already graduated from a small Quaker college in North Carolina, Guilford College. For some reason, I did not seriously consider going to Guilford College, even though I probably would have received some financial aid there. I had my heart set on the University of Florida in Gainesville. At the time in Florida, UF was where things happened. Most state leaders had graduated from there and it was, I thought, the most exciting thing to do. In retrospect, I wish I had considered more options, including going to a smaller school where it would be easier to engage with professors and become closer to classmates. I just assumed that I could not afford anything else and that only a public university would give me financial aid. These days, school counselors advise students not to limit their horizons. In those days, I did not hear much encouragement from school counselors to apply elsewhere. To me, the University of Florida was doable. I still would need scholarship funding and loans, as well as part-time work. I never doubted, however, that I was going to go to college away from home. While my mother and aunts were encouraging and Miriam (my sister) had followed a path that I wanted to emulate, I knew that they were not in a position to finance my college education nor could they be participants in the decisions I had to make. They would not have understood the application and admissions process. I filled out all the financial aid forms that normally would be filled out by a parent and merely had my mother sign them.

Q: Did you have any teachers that you might call mentors and turn to them for help?

ALMAGUER: I was in a very large high school — almost 4,000 students and a graduating class of more than 900 students. I was fond of some of my teachers, mainly because they taught subjects that I liked, and they could have been helpful if I had turned to them for help. I just did not know how to ask or even that it was OK to do so. And I did not share with them my personal life, which I kept separate from my school life.

Q: Was your high school focused on turning out people going on to college?

ALMAGUER: My very large high school was renown for its football and basketball teams and elite social clubs. Many of my classmates who were part of that world went on to either Ivy League colleges or to large universities with strong football programs. Those of us who were of lower income and did okay academically would wind up at the University of Florida or at Florida State University in Tallahassee.

Q: What was your mother aiming for you to do?

ALMAGUER: She certainly wanted me to go to college, and she assumed that I would follow my sister's footsteps and go to Guilford College in North Carolina; but I wanted to go to a large university and the University of Florida seemed to be the right place to go. Of course she did not know all the right procedures; neither did I for that matter, but I did apply to the University of Florida. As I recall, I was accepted right away. Regarding the issue of finances, it comes as a shock to people these days that tuition was $113 a semester in 1963! But, that was $113 more than either my mother or I had. Further, in those days, frankly, I did not know other sources of scholarships. In the end, the University waived my $113 tuition and I borrowed from the University $400 per semester for dorm fees, books and meals. Most students these days could not relate to living on $400 per semester, but I budgeted well and kept my expenses to a minimum. It proved to be enough until my senior year, when I had to borrow $500 per semester!

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA YEARS (1963 – 1967)

Q: What brought you to Gainesville?

ALMAGUER: To begin with, it was a Florida state university, which meant that as a Florida resident I qualified for the lowest tuition. Secondly, I knew that a significant number of my classmates were going there, and I wanted a large university experience, for no particular reason. My sister Miriam had attended a small college (Guilford College in Greensboro, N.C. — a Quaker institution) and perhaps I wanted to be different.

Q: What was the university like then?

ALMAGUER: The University of Florida was a big public university. It had approximately 15,000 students, which today would put it in the small-to-medium size category among state universities. UF today has over about 45,000 students. In the '60s, it was 65 percent men and 35 percent women (UF had gone co-ed only some ten years earlier). I would guess that 90-95 percent of the students and faculty were white and the

majority of the other 5-to-10 percent were mix-race Latinos. By the time I arrived at UF, integration of the Florida university system was the law, but few blacks attended the large, previously all-white state universities. Florida A&M, a historically black college, was probably the choice of most black students in Florida at that time. In addition, there were relatively few U.S.-based Latino students. Latinos whom I encountered at UF for the most part were not U.S. residents; rather, they were Latin American students coming to study in the United States, particularly doing graduate studies in agriculture and related sciences. UF maintained a strong connection to Latin America, particularly in the agricultural area.

As I began to learn about university life, I discovered how central fraternities were to social life on campus. In this large, impersonal environment, I certainly could not, and I did not, aspire to join a fraternity. Therefore, I devoted a great deal of my time to studying. At the same time, I did participate in some Student Council activities. I did not run for office but was appointed to fill the term in the Student Legislative Council of someone who represented my dorm area and had resigned. Nevertheless, 95 percent of Student Council members were fraternity and sorority members. Without that type of affiliation it was impossible to run in an open election. The fraternities and sororities stacked the deck in favor of "Greek" slates.

Q: What were you pointed towards?

ALMAGUER: I was required to go through the university's mandatory liberal arts courses for the first two years, the so-called "C" (for Comprehensive) courses — I wish they still required these courses that exposed students to the gamut of arts and science knowledge. This included courses in the humanities, philosophy, English literature, history, math and sciences. They even required all students to attend a writing lab where every week we composed a story within the allotted 90 minutes. Parenthetically, it was in one of these writing labs in my freshman year that I learned that JFK had been shot a few minutes earlier.

I also assumed that I would continue in my junior and senior years to pursue a political science major, with heavy emphasis on international relations, history, geography, and those things that had interested me for a long time. I never varied my intended major, although I should have been more sensitive to what I needed for a career and a job. A major in economics or business administration may have been more practical. Nevertheless, it turned out okay in the end. Not every liberal arts major is as fortunate as I was.

Q: How did you find the social life there?

ALMAGUER: As I noted earlier, UF social life centered around fraternities and sororities, and to belong to one of those you had to be well connected, as well as have a source of income to cover the social life associated with these fraternities. The second element of social life at the university was the athletic program, particularly the football program. Steve Spurrier, who went on to win the Heisman Trophy in 1967 and become a

famous college and pro-football coach, was the UF football team quarterback in my last two years there and we had championship teams in just about every varsity sport. The varsity teams were the constant talk of the university community. I was not athletic at all, so I studied. The mandatory two years of liberal arts courses required a great deal of reading, as I recall. An occasional movie rounded out my social activities.

Q: Did Florida have an ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps) program? Most land-grant colleges had those.

ALMAGUER: ROTC was mandatory for all male freshmen and sophomores. The University also required Physical Education for all students during their first two years. As a freshman and sophomore, I did ROTC in the classroom early on Monday mornings and in the field on Thursday afternoons. More often than not, we would march around the field for two hours. Every once in a while we would be taken to a firing range to do target practice with what must have been World War II-vintage rifles. I spend lots of time on weekends polishing my boots and cleaning my uniform. The classroom part was interesting. It covered the history of warfare, military values, map reading and other military subjects. It was quite an investment of time and energy. I never thought much about why we were required to take ROTC. I just accepted it despite the emerging anti-war movement (which did not hit the University of Florida until much later — in the late '60s). After the mandatory two years of ROTC, one could volunteer for a third and fourth year, plus summer training. Those who completed that program graduated from college as Second Lieutenants. I did not do it, in part because I lacked the athleticism that I saw in many of those students who enrolled beyond the second year of ROTC. But I didn't try very hard, despite the financial inducements and scholarships offered by the military. In retrospect, I am surprised that I didn't consider the option more seriously. In those days we had a draft, and the lottery system established later on was not yet in place. Hence, I could have been drafted almost as soon as I graduated. I just didn't think it would happen.

Q: Did you have jobs while you were in school?

ALMAGUER: I had some part-time jobs, mainly at the bookstore stacking books, at the medical center filing papers and doing inventories, as well as a substitute desk clerk at the Student Union hotel. In the summer of 1964, I managed to get a job at the New York World's Fair flipping hamburgers. While the money that I earned there disappeared quickly because I had to pay rent and buy meals, this was my very first trip outside of Florida and it was a great learning experience. I even got to see former presidents Herbert Hoover and Harry Truman — both quite old by then, as well as the sitting president, Lyndon Johnson. That was exciting. During subsequent summers in Miami, I managed to get a few part-time jobs at local warehouses as a shipping clerk. These gave me a bit cash for incidental costs at the university.

Q: Let's talk about your mother and sisters at this time.

ALMAGUER: Both of my sisters migrated to North Carolina. Once Miriam finished college, she stayed in North Carolina to teach, get her graduate degrees, marry, and start a

family. My older sister, Betty, and her family also migrated to Greensboro, North Carolina, and started a new life there, where she taught school for most of her adult life. By the time I graduated from college both of my sisters and their families were well situated in North Carolina, where they remain to this day. My mother and her two sisters in Miami never quite mastered English. Even though my mother made it very clear to us that we were home in the United States and that this was our country — and she did everything in her power to give us the skills to become good American citizens — she herself was never able to make the leap. She would take the bus to Greensboro (airfares were prohibitive at that time) when she could, but she did not want to move from Miami. She no doubt felt isolated in North Carolina, without Spanish television or radio and the inability to leave the house she was visiting. (My mother and her two sisters never learned to drive and never owned a car.) She probably hated the emptiness around her when my sisters and their husbands were working and the grandkids were busy in school. In the meantime, I was away in college and would only visit for Christmas and summer breaks. I essentially had left after 1963. When I graduated from college and, subsequently, when I completed my stint in the Peace Corps, my mother harbored the notion that I would somehow return and settle in Miami, where (in her eyes) I "belonged." Nevertheless, she accepted reality. Ultimately, as my two elderly aunts retired and moved in with my sister Miriam and her family in Charlotte, N.C., my mother rented a small apartment near downtown Miami. She came to accept this transition, but always with deep sadness that we were not there. Phone calls and periodic visits, including her yearly visits to North Carolina, were not even an approximation of what she grew up believing in — that the children never left for more than a few blocks from where they were born and from where they grew up. She lost a marriage, a lifestyle, and the physical presence of her two sisters and her three children, as well as grandchildren. She enjoyed a brief marriage with an elderly gentleman who had come from Cuba with the Mariel Boatlift. Sadly, he died within a year or two of their marriage, victim of lung cancer. My mother was a very lonely person with a thirst for life (including travel) that was never fulfilled. In her declining years (she died at 87 in 2000), my sisters found a managed-care facility halfway between Greensboro and Charlotte, but there, too, she felt isolated.

Yet her pride in what her children had accomplished was immense. The day after the Director General called (in October 1998) to inform me that my name would go to the White House as the State Department's nominee to be the American Ambassador to Honduras, I called her to share the news, and her response was, "What took them so long?"

Q: [Laughter.]

ALMAGUER: This might be a very typical mother's reaction, but given how we got there, she just assumed that her children were special and deserving. I am glad that she lived long enough to see my two sisters achieve high professional standing as educators and to see me become Ambassador. I'm so sorry that she was never able to visit us when we were in Tegucigalpa, living in the Ambassador's Residence. By then she was too frail. She died the first year that I was Ambassador. In fact, I flew back to Tegucigalpa from

her funeral just in time to celebrate our first Fourth of July as Chief of Mission. My mother led a sad and lonely life, and everything she did was for the kids. For that, we are eternally grateful to her and to our two aunts who make it possible for us to succeed.

Q: Well, this is the great untold story of the United States. We think of the success stories, but behind them usually there are parents who have given up a great deal, and it's not just given up, but also there's the gulf that comes from the children moving ahead and into society, whereas they are trapped in the life the children left behind.

ALMAGUER: Exactly.

Q: This was the period when we became very much committed to the war in Vietnam and when many social aspects of life in the U.S. began to change. Let's talk about that.

ALMAGUER: I think it's fair to say that to the vast majority of students at my university, to the degree that they invested much thought on what was going on in the world, thought in terms of the good guys vs. the commies, who clearly were the bad guys — and we cheered for the good guys. There was not much debate over these issues. For most students at the University of Florida of the mid-60s, Vietnam was seen as one of the dominoes that had to be protected. Nevertheless, by the time I became a senior — this was '66 to '67, when we were beginning to see body bags returning from Vietnam — we began to see an interesting dialogue, primarily led by professors who were increasingly disturbed by how the war effort was going. Nevertheless, Vietnam seemed far away.

If we look back at the 1963 to 1967 period, those were transformative years throughout the United States. It was the height of the Civil Rights movement. It was the emergence of questions about the Vietnam War. And there was a social revolution that we saw emerging as the United States moved from the "sleepy '50s" to the more tumultuous period of rock music, civil rights, the women's lib movement, and other socially transforming events. Birth control pills entered the market during that time, contributing in part to the sexual revolution.

The University of Florida at the time, unlike Berkley and more progressive Eastern Seaboard universities, remained a Southern campus. We read about events going on elsewhere, but our campus did not emerge from the '50s until much later. During my time at Florida men would go to football games wearing suits and ties; women had dorm curfews and wore skirts to classes. "Proper" attire was expected in most places, and long and facial hair in men was not common. The issues that concerned the Student Council were issues that now sound a quaint, like lifting curfew for women during weekends, allowing women to go to class wearing pants — not even blue jeans, just pant suits — those were not yet allowed. Granting women on campus (which made up about a third of the student population) a bit more freedom of action was a significant student body issue. There also were debates about campus growth: the campus was expanding rapidly and there were concerns about the impact that would have on the fragile ecosystem in this part of Central Florida. While not labeled as such, this reflected an emerging

environmental movement. Nevertheless, the University of Florida community was not at the cutting edge of what was happening in America at the time.

During my senior year, more than a year before the 1968 elections (in which most of us assumed that Lyndon Johnson would be easily re-elected), former Vice President Richard Nixon and incumbent Vice President Hubert Humphrey made their way to the university to speak (separately) at a campus event. As fate would have it, both were destined to run against each other a year later. I witnessed both speeches and neither stirred much passion. They received the typical (for that time) polite reception.

Q: What about the Civil Rights Movement? Were blacks on campus active?

ALMAGUER: As I noted earlier, there were very few blacks on campus in the mid-60s. In thinking about my growing up years in Florida, and until I left the state in 1967, I interacted with very few African-Americans. I already have talked about race relations in Miami while in school there. I don't recall seeing a black student in any of my classes, and when I reached the University of Florida, that trend continued. There may have been a handful of black students because by the mid '60s, university systems throughout the South had been ordered to integrate. Some were integrated by force (as in Mississippi and Alabama), while others, like the University of Florida, met the requirements of the law but did not engage in active "affirmative action" programs to ensure more black representation. Affirmative action programs were still in a future that had not yet arrived in Florida. While the University may have been passive but in compliance with the law, the process of integration was also slowed by what I would call self-segregation. The African-American young men and women who broke the invisible barriers of segregation in institutions like the University of Florida were unique and courageous. They were the ones willing to encounter difficult times and *de facto* discrimination. In the Florida university system, Florida A&M, as I noted earlier, remained a vibrant campus for black students and many, if not most, preferred to go there rather than risk unpleasant situations elsewhere.

By the time I entered college, in September 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had just delivered his moving "I have a dream" speech, which I remember watching on TV. I graduated from the University one year shy of his assassination in April 1968. Yet, I don't recall, throughout this critical period in American history, seeing either a public demonstration or some other type of manifestation on campus of what was happening outside our university gates. Sadly, race issues did not appear to capture the interest of the student body, consumed no doubt by the sports craze surrounding our highly-regarded varsity teams. The University of Florida in the mid-60s continued to be an oasis in which world issues, including the growing anti-Vietnam War movement, did not dominate campus life. On the other hand, integration in Florida did not meet with the virulent opposition that we witnessed in Mississippi, Alabama and other states of the Old South.

Q: Were there any fundamental Christian groups, particularly representing the rural hinterlands of Florida?

ALMAGUER: We had all denominations represented on campus; the Newman Center for Catholics, the Hillel Center for Jewish students, and many others, as one would find in just about every campus across America. I would guess that the biggest grouping, and no doubt most influential, was the Southern Baptists. They had strong links to campus through the fraternity and sorority system. Clearly, being white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, and particularly Baptist, were key elements to being an important figure around campus.

Q: Did the Cuban exodus have any influence on your university?

ALMAGUER: By the time I left Miami in 1963, the Cuban exodus was beginning to have a major impact in Miami and Dade County [Florida], but it had not yet spread to the northern part of the state, or to the university in Gainesville. UF was a large campus and the presence of Cuban-American students was not all that evident. By the time I graduated in 1967, the Cuban student population had grown significantly and, no doubt, grew even more in subsequent years. Cuba and Cuban politics did not appear to hold a special interest on campus.

Q: Were there demonstrations for other issues?

ALMAGUER: There were very few of any consequence. A social issue of some controversy involved the plight of migrant workers in the Lake Okeechobee area of central Florida. The expanding sugar-cane industry (a result of the embargo on Cuban sugar) led to an influx of migrant workers from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Haiti, and Jamaica. Their treatment was the subject of some media exposés, including reports on health and sanitary conditions, low wages, and poor treatment, which led these workers to become modern-day indentured servants. The Cesar Chavez-led farm workers movement in California during that time also served to put a spotlight on the plight of migrant workers in Florida. The large UF agriculture programs led to more interest on the subject than most other contemporary social issues. I remember signing a petition, along with hundreds of my classmates, demanding that the government pay more attention to the working conditions of the migrants and demanding that the University, as a major stakeholder in Florida agriculture, take a stand in support of the migrant workers. It was easy to see how this issue could be a significant one on campus. Nevertheless, Gainesville, where the university is located, had a large black population and poverty was evident only a few blocks away from campus. Yet, that did not seem to command the same level of campus interest.

Q: What about in the classrooms? Did the professors raise these issues in their lectures?

ALMAGUER: Obviously those issues were discussed, but more in the academic sense than as a discussion of things that had an immediate impact on our lives. Latin American issues commanded some interest because of the university's location. UF saw itself as a major academic link to Latin America, particularly in agriculture, where many of the professors had conducted research. The university had a Latin American Studies program that probably was underfunded in comparison to other areas of interest. I did not specialize in Latin American studies, but nevertheless took at least two or three courses

that focused on Latin America. Many of the issues discussed in these courses focused on the "stages of development;" that is, trying to understand the forces that hindered economic and social development in the region. The issue of barriers to development was in vogue at the time and the substance of these courses did influence my subsequent career choices. To this day, I consider myself an international development professional rather than a diplomat.

The other issue discussed in most of the political science courses centered on the genesis of the Cold War and the clash of cultures between Western and Communist societies. The Vietnam situation commanded some interest. Surprisingly, the Cuba situation did not appear to command much attention, despite it being only a few hundred miles away. Southeast Asia and the Middle East were perhaps seen as more exotic places where the future of East-West relations would play out.

The events that took place only a few months after I graduated — at a motel in Memphis, in a hotel kitchen in Los Angeles, and at the Democratic convention in Chicago in the summer of '68 — were events that I doubt anyone at the university in 1967 would have foreseen. Had I been at UF a year or two later, I am sure I would now be recalling the campus mood much differently. The year in which I was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Belize, 1968, was a far different year from the years that preceded it. Even 1963, the year of the "I have a dream" speech and of the JFK assassination, was not as momentous in how we viewed ourselves as 1968 and the subsequent years of turmoil at home and abroad.

I left the country in the summer of '67 (to serve with the Peace Corps) and returned in December of 1969. When I returned home, I was shocked! The country that I remembered, which is the country defined by my life in Miami and Gainesville, was quite different two years after I graduated from college. All of a sudden, guys (not just hippies on TV) were wearing long hair and had beards. All the sadness that afflicted America during the time I was away — the assassination of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, urban riots, the tumultuous election of 1968, the implosion of support for the Vietnam War (including America seeming to turn its back on the soldiers who fought there, even though most were drafted), Woodstock, demonstrations for civil rights, women's rights and so many other causes — were things that I read about from afar. But at no time in my life have I witnessed such enormous change in the general public's attitude about the issues afflicting the country, as was the case between the spring of 1967, when I left the university, and December of 1969, when I returned from Peace Corps service. The world had changed and no doubt even the University of Florida, until then a tranquil oasis, had changed.

Q. As you were getting close to graduation, what were you thinking in terms of your next steps?

ALMAGUER: As I got closer to my senior year, I began to seriously worry about what I was going to do next. I thought of going to graduate school, but worried about the fact that I would be graduating from college with a large debt — some $4,000, which in those

days seemed huge (our first new car, in 1970, cost only $2,700). I was in the same predicament that I was as a senior in high school: I did not find nor did I seek the counseling that I needed to explore career and academic options. It was obvious that I did not know how to approach the work place but assumed that this was my problem — that most of the other classmates knew better. How do you apply to be a high school teacher or a bank officer? I didn't know. I thought that maybe I could teach, but I had not taken education courses. I thought of law school. The University of Florida Law School was (and perhaps still is) the premier law school in Florida and the "breeding ground" for future Florida politicians. Just about every governor (up to that time), as well as senators and other senior elected officials had emerged from the University of Florida Law School. The University of Florida was always very active when it came to state politics and, at the time (in the mid-sixties), one of the big issues in Florida was giving South Florida —where the population was growing at record pace — more of a say in state issues. Until then, northern Florida politicians controlled state politics from Tallahassee. The "Pork Chop" gang, as they were called, benefited from the fact that the state senate seats were apportioned by county and, of Florida's 67 counties, most were small and in the northern half of the state. It wasn't until the Supreme Court ruled that state legislatures had to give more weight to population in apportioning legislative seats that things began to change. All of the sudden South Florida became more important politically. At the time I was there, University of Florida student population and law school admissions no doubt reflected a bias towards northern Florida.

Going back to the question, I thought about but did not actively pursue a graduate degree at that point. I had an opportunity to apply to the George Washington University Law School, which showed an interest in me, but I was not motivated to follow up since it was not clear how I would make ends meet, even with the financial support which GW appeared willing to offer.

Q. When did Peace Corps enter into the picture?

Because I had seen recruitment posters and articles on joining the Peace Corps, this option appealed to me a great deal. The Peace Corps was relatively new then (it was created by JFK in 1961). I can't say that I thought about it much or saw the Peace Corps as an alternative to the military draft. At the time, the real motivator was that I was coming to an important crossroad. I did not have confidence about which career or academic road I was supposed to take. In the meantime, the Peace Corps could give me two more years in which to reach another crossroad. Further, and as I mentioned earlier, over the years I had maintained an active interest in international affairs and international economic development as a subject matter. I had taken political science courses on international development, political geography, and Latin American studies. I was enthralled with the idea that one would go into some small community overseas and do some good. I submitted my application sometime in the fall of my senior year and, lo and behold, it came back with an invitation to join.

The application asked, "Do you speak any foreign language?" I said, "Yes, native Spanish speaker." Nevertheless, the acceptance letter specified that soon after graduation

I would be reporting to participate in a training program for Ceylon (now known as Sri Lanka). This was one of those moments that would reshape my life. Had I said, "Sure, that sounds exciting," my life would be totally different today. But I wrote back and said, "I will accept the invitation, but I am surprised at the proposed country of assignment because I speak Spanish fluently." I expected them to come back to me and say, "Take it or leave it," or, "We'll give you an alternative — Colombia or Costa Rica." Instead, they come back and said, "You're right. We'll send you to British Honduras." Today the country is known as Belize, but in those days the name of the country and the fact that it remained a British colony should have been a hint to someone at the Peace Corps that English was the official language in Belize. I have joked about this with my Peace Corps friends over the years…

Q: [Laughter.]

ALMAGUER: … At that point I figured, "Well, I better live with this because if I go back again and tell them to reassign me to a Spanish-speaking country they probably will kick me out." So I said, "Sure, I would be glad to go to British Honduras."

PEACE CORPS IN BELIZE (1967 – 1969)

ALMAGUER: I graduated from college with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science "with Honors" in the spring of 1967. That summer I did some poorly-paid intern work with the Peace Corps in Washington (filing documents, as well as editing country descriptions, which at that time the Peace Corps prepared for all applicants). After a brief visit with my mother and aunts in Miami, I flew in early September to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where Peace Corps had what they call "stagings." That was my first airplane ride in a long time and the first time I had ever been on a jet plane, so it was quite an experience. At a hotel in Philadelphia I met a small group of fellow Peace Corps trainees, all no doubt as scared as I was. Most were single but we had some couples as well. After more paperwork, as well as some medical and dental exams, we were flown to San Juan, Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico is a great place for training — particularly if you need to learn Spanish!

In Puerto Rico, I was in hog heaven! In San Juan, we stayed at some cheap hotel the first night, and then, on the second day, we were taken in a van to a training camp south of Arecibo, out in the boonies of western Puerto Rico. This camp was one of Peace Corps' original training sites and named after one of the first Peace Corps Volunteers to die overseas. Camp Crozier was rustic. By 1967, the Peace Corps was beginning to change its approach to training. In the early days, the focus was on physical and emotional endurance. Peace Corps' thinking early on was, "If you are going to take an American right out of college and with limited world experience and send them to Guyana or Nigeria or Ceylon, you better follow the Marines' approach and make them physically fit and mentally tough." In effect, Camp Crozier was a boot camp. They had a swimming pool where blindfolded trainees with some weights on their legs were expected to get to the other side of the pool. Similar feats in mountain climbing were also part of the physical fitness and mental adjustment program. By the mid-'60s, the Peace Corps was

beginning to question this training approach and, instead, began to focus on psychological preparedness. Camp Crozier training in the fall of 1967, therefore, was a mixture of the two approaches. The cabins where we stayed were open-sided and with minimal comfort. The cafeteria food was good, with an emphasis on "Boriqua" food. ("Boriqua" is the local slang for Puerto Rican.) However, you could only have that which you could order by name in Spanish. Most of my fellow trainees could only eat "arroz" (rice) the first day. By the second day they said, "You can only eat that which you can order by name in a full sentence in Spanish." So, for the first 48 hours I was the only one eating well!

Q: [Laughter.]

ALMAGUER: Very quickly colleagues were eager to pair up with me because I could help them with Spanish. I was the "big man" on this campus. I loved it! Training at that point consisted mainly of beginning Spanish, some introduction to Peace Corps life, and some physical activities. Then, on the third week, they separated us by taking us to different small towns in Puerto Rico, giving us five dollars each and being told to come back to the Camp in three days — basically intended to see how well we survived in a foreign environment with little money and limited language skills. Of course, that wasn't hard for me, but some had a difficult time. Most of my peers had led solid American middle-class lives in the heartland and this was new and challenging to them.

Subsequently, and because we were going to Belize, an English-speaking Caribbean country, we were sent to St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands, where most of the Eastern Caribbean training took place in those days. There, in a camp close to world-class beaches, we met fellow trainees going to Jamaica and the Eastern Caribbean islands. Training switched from Spanish-language immersion and Latin culture experience to one focused on two key aspects: First, learning about the rich English Caribbean history, culture and literature, and, second, learning the technical skills needed for the assignment we would be handed out once we arrived in our designated communities.

We soon became familiar with the rich literary and cultural experience of the English Caribbean, assisted principally by University of the West Indies staff. (This university had campuses in all the major Caribbean islands, but was headquartered in Jamaica and Trinidad.) In addition, we also began to experience "encounter groups."

Q: You might explain what an encounter group was. It's a term that's no longer used.

ALMAGUER: Okay. The way it was practiced, a small group of trainees (maybe no more than 8 or 10) would form a circle with a staff facilitator. Then, following the facilitator's lead on a topic, we would discuss it and comment on what each other had to say. We were encouraged to be very candid, revealing our inner thoughts on all aspects of our lives and what we were expecting out of the Peace Corps experience. We were expected to assess our own and our peers' strengths and weaknesses in this group setting. It was very stressful! I thought that at times it was almost voyeurism, and a few of our

colleagues could not hack it and quit. I guess this was seen as a good way to achieve "self-selection" out of the program.

As an example of how this was conducted, the staff facilitator shared with the group that I was not happy with the delays in our assigned flight to St. Thomas a few days earlier. As I recall the story, three days prior to gathering at the San Juan Airport on our way to the Virgin Islands, we were once again given survival training by being sent to various communities in Puerto Rico and asked to meet at the airport by 3 p.m. on the assigned date for a flight leaving at 5 p.m. Most of us arrived there tired, dirty, and even hungry from our just-completed survival training. The flight to St. Thomas was delayed and delayed, but no information was being shared. Since I spoke Spanish, I'd be the one going to the counter and saying, "We want to know when this flight is going to leave." The attendants would ignore us and I was getting annoyed. I expressed my annoyance to the airline representative. The flight finally took off at 10 p.m., some five hours late. When we subsequently met as an "encounter group" the facilitator said, "Now Frank, tell us a bit about your ability to deal with tension and stress," and proceeded to describe what I was doing at the San Juan Airport. I was floored since, to my knowledge, no one from our training staff had been at the airport that evening. What happened in those encounter groups was unnerving! One day we would have a candid session and the next day, in our morning class on Caribbean history or technical training (in my case, it was accounting and agro-business), we would look around soon realize that one of our peers was not there. "What happened to John?" "Oh, John was called to Mount Olympus and told to leave." ("Mt. Olympus" was what we called the house in the training camp on top of a hill where staff had their offices and where they would meet to make their decisions.) And we would all ask, "What did he do wrong?" In most cases, it was "self-deselection," although in some cases it was forced upon the unwilling trainee. While I have fond memories of the training experience and gained some great friendships that remain with me to this day, that aspect of the training, with so much focus on the psychological side of the individual, was not particularly pleasant nor, in retrospect, proved to be a good gauge of success or failure as a Peace Corps Volunteer.

Q: This is something very much in vogue at the time. The State Department went through a similar phase. I think they found in the long-run that it was far too destructive of people. It allowed amateur psychiatrists to get out there and play with people's minds.

ALMAGUER: It was destructive. Nevertheless, for those of us who were determined to serve, it soon became a game. We said whatever we assumed we needed to say to stay out of trouble and be selected. The one thing this experience did was to create bonds among virtual strangers. Years have passed and we are all getting on in years, but the bonding remains, more so than with any other experience I that I have had in life. I guess this compares with the bonding experiences that take place among the military and in the battlefield.

Q: So you were selected to serve as a volunteer. When did you arrive in Belize?

ALMAGUER: December 23, 1967. Why they would put us in an airplane and drop us off in a strange place on December 23rd, two days before Christmas, seemed like questionable logic. By the time we arrived in Belize, of the 14 or so who started with me in Philadelphia, we were down to seven or eight. The group, including others going to the Eastern Caribbean, completed training around the 20th of December. We were sworn in by the visiting Peace Corps Director from Washington — Jack Vaughn — with whom years later I developed a good friendship. We were flown to Miami on our way to Belize. My mother was living in Miami, and for the first time I felt comfortable bringing my peers, with whom I shared a unique bonding experience, to my home. It was like these were my brothers and sisters and that was great. They ate good Cuban food that day, followed by last minute shopping.

We left Miami at dawn and arrived in Belize the morning of December 23, 1967. We were lodged in a rooming house in Belize City that must have served as a bordello in its better days; the rooms had paper-thin walls and the bathrooms smelled horrible. One of our married couples did find a small Christmas tree to put up in their room for some Christmas spirit. The Peace Corps Country Director for Belize, Woody, and his wife were kind enough to host us for a Christmas dinner at their Belize City home. The day after Christmas we each would be taken to our town or village of assignment.

Before we left the Virgin Islands I was told that I would be assigned to a place called Orange Walk, which was a sugarcane-growing area in the northern part of Belize. My assignment would be to work with the agricultural cooperatives and credit unions in the Orange Walk Department (one of six Departments or counties in Belize). Centered on Orange Walk Town, within a radius of some 20 miles there were several villages, most with their own agricultural cooperatives and credit unions. The inhabitants of these communities were a blend of people with Mayan origin and a heavy influence of Mexicans from across the nearby border. Mayan dialects were spoken but Spanish dominated. Further, thanks to the strong educational system established by the British, English was widely spoken, particularly by the young. English was the official language but used primarily when dealing with the government bureaucracy. My Orange Walk assignment made sense since I was in one of the few areas in Belize where Spanish was the predominant language. In fact, a couple of my co-ops were on the Belize side of the Rio Hondo, the river that forms the northwestern boundary with Mexico.

This setting was my entry into the world of the 20th Century Mayans, the proud heirs to the Mayan Civilization which centered on this part of Central America for a millennia and which declined precipitously long before the Europeans set foot in this region. Of course, I knew very little about that civilization and even the anthropologists knew very little about the Mayas as late as the 1970s. Only in recent years have anthropologists been able to decipher the language and culture of that civilization. And they are still debating the cause of their subsequent rapid decline.

To give you a sense for that part of Central America, northern Belize is flat as a pancake; it's flatter than Kansas. My home base, Orange Walk Town, may have been 30 to 40 miles from the Caribbean on the east, but you would have to drive several hours to get

there. Much of coastal Belize is swampy. I would guess that the elevation of Orange Walk Town was five feet. Surrounding it were many sugarcane fields. Every once in a while you would see little mounds in the otherwise flat terrain. "What are those?" Nobody knew. Years later, archaeologists began to do some serious digging and found the most extensive irrigation system in all of Central America and Mexico right there in Orange Walk. *National Geographic* did a story on this some years ago. These irrigation systems were truly impressive. Unfortunately, they had fallen into disuse centuries earlier. This is sad since water is a constant source of concern in the region. The co-ops with which I worked struggled to harness the water. The area receives copious amount of rain during part of the year and no water during the rest of the year. Yet 1,000 or 1,500 years earlier they harnessed the water; the mounds that I could see in the cane fields served to facilitate gravity flows for the irrigation systems that the Mayans had built — very impressive!

Where I lived, in Orange Walk Town, I had no running water and an outdoor toilet; for me it wasn't all that different from what I had known in Cuba some fifteen years earlier. I didn't think it was bad at all. I didn't like having to cross the street and join the line with the women in the neighborhood to pump water for my buckets, but it was a social occasion and my neighbors accepted me quite well. If they knew that this young foreigner was with the Peace Corps there was total acceptance. My biggest concern was snakes. There are many snakes, in the region, some of which are poisonous and deadly. At least once a month I would hear stories of farmers being fatally bit by snakes, particularly in the sugar-cane fields. Part of the reason why sugar-cane fields were set on fire just before the harvest was to kill the snakes while also eliminating the underbrush to facilitate the cutting of cane stalks with machetes. That is arduous and under-appreciated labor!

In addition to helping the co-ops and credit unions with their financial reports, I helped them develop inventories and to understand the real cost of their operations. I was well accepted by the farmers. I also volunteered to teach a course in geography at the local high school, which was run by a group of American nuns. It was a struggle since few, if any, of the students had even a basic concept of time and place and their role in it. On the first day I pointed to a world map and asked, "Where is Belize?" After students pointed in every direction, the consensus was that Belize was the big island that we know as Australia! Many students refused to accept the idea that Belize was a small area just south of Mexico. I enjoyed the experience, although I also concluded that I did not want to teach for a living. Even though I'm not a Catholic, I also volunteered to work with a local priest in the church's youth programs. I worked with him in creating a small basketball league for local teenagers. So, I was doing all the classical things that Peace Corps Volunteers tend to do around the globe. The experience had elements of loneliness but, overall, it was rewarding. To this day I remain very fond of Belize and its people.

Belize turned out to be very important in my life in other ways, as well. Every once in a while, the big break from the daily routine was to socialize with our fellow volunteers, going into the "City" (Belize City, population at the time of 30,000) or meeting other volunteers in the nearby countryside. In August 1968, a big new group of Peace Corps

Volunteers arrived in country (perhaps 20-25 PCVs). That group had trained at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad and did not have the Spanish immersion experience that my group had in Puerto Rico. Hence, the Peace Corps staff in Belize City decided that the group would be exposed to Spanish through an intensive few days in Corozal Town, some 40 miles north of Orange Walk, next to the Caribbean Sea and bordering Mexico. This setting was much nicer than Orange Walk. The Peace Corps staff asked me beforehand to take a week off from my assignment to serve as a volunteer instructor for the Spanish immersion program they had planned for the group. One of the members of that group was a cute young lady from Albuquerque, New Mexico, who spoke some Spanish and was to be assigned to serve as a teacher trainer in Orange Walk Town. Her name was Antoinette Gallegos. I met her and the rest of the group while the yellow school bus they were taking from Belize City to Corozal Town passed through Orange Walk. Antoinette claims that I was checking out all the girls; in fact, I was just trying to be welcoming to the group that I would join in a day or two. We have been arguing about my intent that afternoon ever since. …

Q: [Laughter.]

ALMAGUER: We met there and developed a relationship. She'll tell you stories about Peace Corps that may differ from mine. She did serve in Orange Walk for a few months as an elementary school teacher trainer but was subsequently transferred to work in and around Belize City. We visited each other a great deal, while maintaining a wonderful relationship with the rest of the volunteers in the country. By the time I completed my two years in December 1969, it was clear to me that we would marry soon after she completed her two years the following summer. We married shortly thereafter, on August 29, 1970 and have been together ever since.

Peace Corps was an important part of my formative years for many reasons. First, I enjoyed the substantive side of what I was doing, even though it was hot and muggy and lacking basic amenities, such as running water or decent roads. Belizeans that I met in my work and socially received me warmly and were wonderful "salt-of-the-earth" people. Secondly, I became fascinated with development as an issue: Why some countries and societies do better than others; what are the key ingredients that allow a country to prosper, and what's the role of the international community in facilitating self-sustaining growth. I became enamored with the possibility that Belize could develop into a middle-income country. I pondered with some of my Belizean friends and fellow volunteers, particularly over a beer, what it would take to lift Belize out of its poverty.

Most importantly, there I met my future wife. Having the Peace Corps experience, the same Peace Corps friends and Belize in common, were essential ingredients to cement a relationship between two very different people. Any Myers-Briggs personality test would probably put us in opposite personality quadrants — but we had these things in common upon which to build a married life. Further, her Peace Corps experience served subsequently to facilitate her acceptance of my chosen profession, which would eventually take us to many countries and a life punctuated by moves every few years.

Q: Going back to Belize, what was your impression of the government of Belize and its people?

ALMAGUER: Belize at the time remained a British colony, its future in abeyance as a result of Guatemala's claim that the territory belonged to it. It is noteworthy to comment on a peculiarity of our assignment: One of the things we were cautioned about in training was not to say the name of the country. While most everyone assumed that sooner or later Belize would become an independent country, the issue remained controversial. They had an elected government with a premier. But all foreign affairs, defense and some legal issues were referred to Commonwealth authorities in London. The premier (George Price, subsequently accepted by all as the "Father of the Belize Nation") was the leader of the People's United Party (PUP) and he and his followers called the country "Belize." But the local political opposition was not at all interested in independence while territorial claims by Guatemala were unresolved. This opposition called the country "British Honduras," the formal British name for the territory. The PUP was dominated by the lighter-skinned blend of *mestizos* and creoles. The opposition was predominantly darker-skinned creoles. Fortunately for Belize, a multi-ethnic country, these ethnic and racial divisions were not as pronounced as the divisions one finds in Guyana, Suriname and other Caribbean countries. Nevertheless, to avoid the problem of identifying with one or another group, we would say, "It's great to be in your country," or "I love this country," but never mention the name of the country. That was ingrained in us.

The British did a commendable job of building schools and creating a government infrastructure that delivered services to its people, within the constraints of a poor and remote colony on the fringes of a shrinking British Empire. As I subsequently observed in other Central American countries, the Belizean education system, modeled after British practices, was far better than comparable education systems in Spanish-speaking Central America. I was generally sympathetic towards the government. The premier (subsequently prime minister once the country achieved independence in 1981) appeared to be beyond reproach when it came to his personal lifestyle. Money was not his thing. He was perceived as a reclusive monk. He was bachelor all of his life and lived in a humble house and went to Mass every morning. He was weird by Belizean standards, since he did not socialize or drink in a country that had the "easy does it, enjoy life" Caribbean mentality. But he traveled a lot all over the country making sure that his government was delivering the services that it could. On at least three occasions I found myself on a Saturday morning trying to go down to Belize City. Hitching a ride was widely accepted and, lo and behold, here would come Premier Price in his Land Cruiser (with a driver at his side); he stopped each time to give me a ride. We were not trained for what to say or do in these unexpected situations. In any case, other than a cursory exchange, he was not talkative (another strange behavior for a Belizean, since they love to talk). As an aside, shortly after I was sworn in as Ambassador, *State* magazine had story about the relationship between Peace Corps and State Department, and there is a photo in that article of me shaking hands with the Premier of Belize in 1968, as well as a photo of me shaking hands with the President of Honduras at the Credentials Presentation Ceremony. It was nice to see.

While I was a volunteer, a Consul General and a small staff in Belize City represented the United States. I assume that at the time, most of the Consulate's work consisted of following the Belize-Guatemala dispute from the Belize side of the border, as well as typical consular work. This was before Belize had become a popular tourist destination. Hence, I assume that they did not have that much work supporting the tiny American community in Belize. The one thing that I recall is that the Consul had a boat. My small group of fellow volunteers was invited to ride to the cayes (as "keys" are known in Belize) shortly after we arrived in country and we almost perished in a freak storm that appeared unexpectedly on our return to Belize City. If it had not been for one of my fellow volunteers [Lon Hanke], who had boating experience, we could have capsized. The Consulate in Belize must have been a strange place in which to work. The Peace Corps office in Belize City, in keeping with Peace Corps policy, kept its distance from the Consulate.

Q: Was the Foreign Service crossing your radar at all?

ALMAGUER: Yes. I saw some brochures and I took the Foreign Service exam in Miami immediately after I left the Peace Corps in early December 1969.

Q: What were your impressions about your accomplishments? Did you feel positive when you left Belize?

ALMAGUER: At one level I had been frustrated. I wish I had more knowledge of agriculture and marketing because I could have been more useful to my farmers. On the other hand, I really felt good about: 1) how well they had accepted me into their communities; 2) how they respected my views and listened to my suggestions; and 3) how their frustrations and good fortunes became my frustrations and good fortunes. I remember going to Belize City one time to complain to my Belizean boss (the head of the Belizean Department of Cooperatives and Credit Unions) about a government decision that troubled my clients. He cautioned me, "You know, you're a functionary of my department. You're not here as their representative." I remember reacting, saying, "I'm not a functionary of your department. I'm a Peace Corps Volunteer." Even though I was a lowly Peace Corps Volunteer, I had the advantage of being able to knock on doors of a mid-level functionary to represent people who in most cases had never even been to Belize City and had limited capacity to represent themselves. That role was important for me. I really did care. I really felt drawn by the community with whom I worked.

Q: I imagine today many of the technical issues that you faced with your cooperatives could be handled by Internet search …

ALMAGUER: Even the concept of what became the Internet did not exist. The telephone connection to Belize City consisted of one line for the entire northern part of the country. If I had an urgent need to use the phone I would have to go into the telephone office at the Orange Walk Post Office and tell the operator that I needed to call at two o'clock and he would sign me up. When I got there shortly before two o'clock, he would start yelling at the person on the line at that time to "get off the line!" Even the radio was spotty. I

remember being in Orange Walk in July 1969 when Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed on the moon. I was listening to the landing on *BBC* on my short-wave radio. Half the time all I could hear was static. Most of the people in and around Orange Walk were oblivious to the event, and as they learned about it, many doubted it or attributed the drought that year to tampering with nature. We simply were not plugged in to the world.

So basically we wrote letters for communication. More than anything else, we depended on the Peace Corps Office to share with us material that we needed to help us with our work, such as agriculture magazines and brochures. For example, one of the big things that I got into was the production of okra. Somebody had told me that okra could grow well in the region and that there was a market for it in the U.S. I did some research and managed to make contact with a buyer in New Orleans who was interested in our potential for okra production. By hook or crook, I learned a great deal about okra, and some of the funniest and some of the most frustrating moments in my Peace Corps experience happened during my okra episode. For a while some of my fellow volunteers were calling me the "Okra Prince."

Q: You're talking about a vegetable that is about two and one-half inches long.

ALMAGUER: Right. I showed the farmers how big the okra had to be before it was harvested. I told them that the market required okra to be two inches long. Then I would come back the next day, and they not only had picked the ones that were of the right size, but also those that had been allowed to grow three inches or longer, which the market would reject. They had chopped the longer okra to meet the size specification and commingled these with the okra that met specifications. That meant that we had to re-sort the whole batch because the buyer would not accept the shipment that was not 100% up to standard.

My fellow volunteers and I worked with the limited information we could get. The Peace Corps - then and now – is committed to the concept that individuals like myself can tap their ingenuity and thereby make a difference in the lives of people with whom we share two years of our lives. Of course, the world has changed dramatically. Those people with whom I worked — or, more likely their children and grandchildren — now have access to the Internet. I saw some uses of the Internet by indigenous peoples in remote areas in Bolivia that baffled me years later. Times have changed. But in those days, one was still able to live the classic Peace Corps experience of being thrown out there and expected to do some good. Somebody has said, and I agree, that "the single most important thing the volunteers left behind wasn't so much the specific knowledge or skills that they imparted, but the enthusiasm and commitment they passed on to local residents to help them carry on, and to look at the possibilities." Volunteers stimulate positive action on behalf of their communities. I was a believer in the rationale that led to the creation of the Peace Corps and I continue to believe strongly in the idea, although now is more complicated because there are very few places in the world where you can do some of the things I did without better preparation.

Q: What about the society there? I've heard that the Belize's predominant group were black lumbermen who settled there. Was this the case where you were, or was it more Mayan?

ALMAGUER: Belize is quite diverse and that diversity is striking since it has such a small population — 150,000 in the late '60s, and now perhaps twice as many. The country is about the size of El Salvador but the latter has some eight million people. The other surprising thing is how well various racial and ethnic groups seemed to relate to each other. Certain groups tend to be predominant in one part of the country — for example, the "Black Caribs" (now known as the Garifunas) are heavily concentrated in the coastal south of the country, but you will find them elsewhere. The *mestizos* (mixed Mayan and Spanish blood) predominate in the border areas near Guatemala and Mexico. I worked in that area. The Creoles are dominant in Belize City and the cayes. They are descendants of the original black settlers and slaves, are English-speaking, and have been at the center of political life for most of Belize's history. In the southwest, in addition to the *mestizos*, one can find Mayans, with their own dialects. Belize is quite a mixed society. As you may recall, soon after the Americas were "discovered," the Pope divided the new world vertically in half. The western half was granted to the Spaniards and the eastern half went to the Portuguese. Because of geography (South America is further east than most people realize), the dividing line was drawn in such a way that today's Brazil wound up on the Portuguese side of the line, whereas the Spaniards received the bulk of the Americas. The Papal decision was then reinforced by the Spaniards by colonization of one form or another. In Central America (which was in the western half of the papal divide), that colonization occurred principally from the Pacific side. The center spine of Central America, which is a continuation of the Rockies, was where most indigenous populations lived and where the Spaniards settled. To this day, capital cities and large population centers are in the highlands and on the Pacific side of the center spine. The eastern or Caribbean side was less hospitable, hotter, swampy, and otherwise less appealing to the colonial authorities. Hence, very few Spanish settlements occurred on that side, including the portion that today we know as Belize.

The Caribbean coast was, in theory, Spanish, but in practice it was minimally populated throughout most of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Thus, the British pirates who in those days roamed the Caribbean looking for Spanish galleons carrying precious metals back to Spain found the Caribbean coast of Central America a perfect place in which to hide. Belize, which has the second largest barrier reef in the world (after eastern Australia), was particularly well suited as a pirates' hideaway because once the ships managed to sail through the treacherous coastal reefs and reach the coastal side of the reef, they found shallow calm waters (unless a hurricane hits) and plenty of mangroves and coves — a perfect place where pirates could hide. So British pirates settled in there. At that time, there were only small pockets of Mayan population further inland. We now know that this region was a major hub of Mayan civilization and perhaps a million Mayans lived in what we today know as Belize. However, for reasons that remain unclear, the Mayans suffered a major decline in the 1200s or thereabout. Consequently, by the time Europeans arrived in this area, there were few native people in the region.

"Belize" is an interesting name. A theory that I like is that it was named after a pirate by the name of Wallace. In Spanish there is no sound for "W. " Hence, it's pronounced as a "V," the sound tending to what in English is that of "B." As a result, the Spaniards knew this pirate as "Va-lay-cee." From there, it is easy to see how the pronunciation evolved into "Belize." At some point, the pirates may have begun to settle along the coast and soon began to bring in slaves. They needed a labor force to harvest the huge mahogany trees that at the time were found further inland.

Q: When you were there, did you observe a color line?

ALMAGUER: Yes, but a different color line from what I saw in Florida in the '50s and '60s. Belize in the 1960s was a Creole-run society. The Creoles, descendants of slaves and of mixed British blood, were educated, like many of the British Caribbean people. (Secretary of State) Colin Powell, who had Jamaican parents, is a good example of a Creole. Because the British had done a good job of creating a civil service, many Creoles were civil servants. The Creole population in the 1960s made up, I would guess, 60 to 70 percent of the population of the country. In more recent times, other population groups, particularly the *mestizos*, have grown faster and I suspect that Creoles now make up less than 50 percent of the population. In my time in Orange Walk, where the population was overwhelmingly *mestizo*, Creoles dominated the public sector, including as teachers and in the police force. The interaction between Creoles and the *mestizos* seemed to be devoid of tension. Intermarriage, while not common, did occur. The real dividing line was the language of common use. The Creoles were English-speaking and only a few spoke Spanish. The *mestizos*, on the other hand, spoke Spanish at home but also spoke English in schools and public settings.

In the south, Belize also had two different kinds of indigenous groups, also Mayan, but more pure and of great interest to anthropologists and others seeking a better understanding of Mayan civilization. I did not meet many from this group in the region of the country where I was assigned. There is another interesting group in Belize, now called the *Garifunas*. They were called Black Caribs up until more recent times. *Garifunas* are distinguished for their deep dark black skin but also with indigenous facial features, such as high cheekbones. They also speak a distinctive indigenous dialect. The history books trace their origin to a shipwreck off the coast of the Caribbean island of St. Vincent. Slaves being carried to the Americas managed to escape and settled in that part of the Caribbean. They must have intermarried with the indigenous Carib Indians. This mixed-blood group eventually settled in the Caribbean side of Central America and can be found along the coast from Belize down to Panama. In no country, however, is this group as important as in Belize. Belize presents a terrific panorama of mixed races and cultures that is a goldmine for anthropologists and sociologists to study.

Q: So you left there in December 1969. What were you planning to do afterwards?

ALMAGUER: On the personal side, I was hoping that Antoinette would complete her two years of service in the summer of 1970 and marry me afterwards. I was going to

Washington to see if I could start a career in U.S. Government, preferably in the foreign affairs realm.

EARLY WASHINGTON DAYS (1970 – 1974)

ARRIVING IN DC (1970)

ALMAGUER: Once I made up my mind that I was going to pursue a career in the public sector, preferably in the international development and diplomacy field, Washington was the place to be. In those days, working in the public sector and for the Federal Government in particular was still fashionable. The FDR "New Dealers" were mostly gone but the young Kennedy-era public servants made working in the public sector once again an exciting thing to do. While much had happened (e.g., the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers and of Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as urban riots and the Vietnam War) to dampen that enthusiasm, Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, the Peace Corps, the Alliance for Progress and similar programs made it very exciting for me. Further, going to Washington and securing a Federal job would likely mean a more secure future for me and a leap forward from my early days as an immigrant in a country that I truly loved.

After visiting my family over Christmas (and a side bus trip to New Orleans to see Antoinette on her way to visit her parents in Albuquerque), I left for D.C. in a Greyhound bus the first week of January 1970. I had no jobs or personal contacts waiting for me, but I did have a check for $2,000 from the Peace Corps, which I thought was a significant amount of money! As a Peace Corps Volunteer, one receives in local currency just enough on a monthly basis to survive (in my case about $100 per month) and then, at the end, you get a resettlement allowance that helps returned Peace Corps Volunteers to do exactly what I was doing — resettling. (By the way, I said "returned" volunteer. In the Peace Corps we like to say that, just as you never have an "ex" or "former" Marine, once you have been a Peace Corps Volunteer, you will always be a "returned" but not "ex" or "former" Peace Corps Volunteer.)

With the $2,000 I was able to buy a couple of cheap suits in Miami (tropical blend — I didn't know much about cold weather and had never seen snow), as well as my bus ticket to D.C. (by way of North Carolina to visit my two sisters, and their families). I saw snow for the very first time in my life looking out from the bus window as we rode through the Virginia countryside. I had done some housing research and prearranged to move directly into a place called Harnett Hall, right off of Dupont Circle, at 21st and P Streets, North West (NW). They owned a number of townhouses along 21st and O Streets. They converted these into rooming houses with a cafeteria at Harnett Hall. I don't recall how much I paid for room and board, but I paid by the week for my room as well as breakfast and dinner. It certainly facilitated my entry into this unknown place.

I will be eternally grateful to the Peace Corps for many things, but one of them was their program at the time to help returned volunteers to find jobs (as well as schools for those pursuing additional degrees). On the very next morning after I arrived in D.C. I walked over to the Peace Corps headquarters (which at that time was across from the White

House, off of Lafayette Park). There, they offered access to a small lounge where I could read the newspapers and job ads.

I really lucked out. One of the Peace Corps staffers identified for me a job opportunity at the Office of Economic Opportunity [OEO], which was created in 1965 to run Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty." It had a number of openings for GS-7 (General Schedule) positions. GS-7 was (and perhaps continues to be) the entry-level in the Federal government for recent college graduates. The position that I applied for was as a "management analyst" in the OEO Office of Health Affairs. I had no idea what it was, but I thought that it would be a great way to gain entry into the federal government. I had one great advantage: returned PCVs were not required to take and pass the standard Civil Service exam used in those days. I took the test and no doubt did well, but it was not necessary to do so in my case. Secondly, as a returned PCV, I could be hired without regard to the normal competitive rankings — the process is akin to the hiring preference given to former military personnel. I walked over to OEO, then at 19th and M Streets, NW and, after a set of cursory interviews, I was hired for 90 days. I really didn't know how difficult it would be to land my first "real" job in D.C., but it turns out to have been simpler than I ever imagined possible. Within a week of arriving in D.C., I had landed my first job — in an exciting workplace at the time and within a few blocks of where I was living. The salary sounded terrific: a GS-7, Step 1 made $7,200 per year — $600 per month before taxes. I started the following week!

THE FOREIGN SERVICE EXAM (1970)

Q: Having talked about the university period, the Peace Corps, and your arrival in DC — and before we talk about OEO — let's talk about the Foreign Service entry process.

ALMAGUER: Prior to leaving Belize, in early December 1969, I applied to take the written Foreign Service exam in Miami. In those days, the exam was given once a year, in early December, in locations throughout the country - and even overseas, at American Embassies. I timed my departure from Belize so that I could get to Miami, where my mother and aunts continued to reside, in time to take the December Foreign Service written exam. Then, having successfully passed the written exam, I was invited to take the oral exam — I guess this would be around July of 1970, when I was already living in D.C. and working at the OEO. I remember going to a building in Rosslyn, [Virginia] to meet with the Foreign Service Board of Examiners. It was not a comfortable experience, not so much because of the questions, which seemed to border on the minutia of history, but by the style and comments of the lead examiner…

Q: Can you give me an example of a question that you received?

ALMAGUER: One question was, "What was the most important event that happened in the United States in 1837?

Q: You got me! [Laughter.]

ALMAGUER: I knew that 1837 was the tail end of Andrew Jackson's eight-year presidency and the beginning of the Martin Van Buren Administration. I said a number of things about President Jackson and noted Jackson's refusal to accept South Carolina's nullification of one of the laws passed earlier in his term. While I had the right context, I did not have the precise details. The examiner told me that the most important event that year was the disestablishment of the Second Bank of the United States. I was perplexed and felt that historians of the period would probably engage in a debate with the examiner – but I did not question the examiner's subjective opinion. In any case, to this day I wonder why this historical tidbit was so central to my future in the Foreign Service! [Laughter.]

Q: But it was central to one of the examiners...

ALMAGUER: Exactly. Two things were said to me that afternoon that remain with me to this day. Towards the end of being quizzed on both current and historical events, I was told by the examiners (and as I subsequently learned from direct experience) that the deteriorating security situation in Southeast Asia was forcing the State Department to redeploy Foreign Service staff back to Headquarters. This meant that fewer entry-level officers would be hired in the coming months and years. Consequently, significantly fewer qualified candidates who had otherwise done well in the written and oral tests would be hired in the near future. I had done well, but apparently I was not in the top tier. As a result, I assumed (correctly) that even though I was still a candidate, my chances of being selected at that time as part of this process was not that good.

The second thing I was told by one of the examiners — after quizzing me on my personal background — was something that today would not be acceptable. He said, and I paraphrase, "Given your limited familiarity with diplomatic life, the required protocol and its social expectations, don't you feel that you're going to be uncomfortable in that world?" What was really uncomfortable was listening to that comment and not having a ready answer for the elitist attitude reflected in the question.

Q: Yes, right.

ALMAGUER: Parenthetically, the *Foreign Service Journal* sometime back had an article on George Kennan, probably the best-known career diplomat of the 20th Century (and "father" of the Containment Policy that guided us through the Cold War period). He came into the Foreign Service in 1926, and he pointed out that by then new entrants were no longer expected to be of independent means — wealthy enough to support themselves overseas in the lavish style presumed to be the norm for diplomats. However, he added, candidates were expected to come from stable families. In his case, he came from a family of lawyers in Wisconsin. Apparently, the changes in the culture of the Foreign Service that allowed Kennan to join the Foreign Service despite not being independently wealthy did not, in 1970 and in the mind of this examiner, extend to reaching out to potential candidates who did not meet the "stable families" criterion. It would appear from my experience with the Board of Examiners that, as recently as the early 1970s, some examiners were uncomfortable with candidates with perceived handicaps such as

having an immigrant upbringing, coming from a broken family, raised by a single mother who was a seamstress, and who, throughout his academic years, because of financial limitations, could not be an active member of fraternities and other "training opportunities" to experience the "niceties" expected of our diplomats. I'm speculating here, but it would appear that as recently as the early 1970s, it was still a question mark whether it was okay to have a degree from a state university vs. from the Ivy League, to be a serious candidate to join the Foreign Service. Diversity to ensure that the Foreign Service reflected America was not yet part of the Foreign Service culture.

In a practical suggestion, the examiners recommended that I get a master's degree, which I subsequently did by going to school at night.

Q: I was one of the examiners for a year, in 1975 – 76, when there were three questioners. Quite frankly, that type of question to which you were subjected would have never occurred to me. As a matter of fact, we mentally gave extra points to someone who had a rough time getting up to the exam because we thought this represented hustle. The difficult background you represented should have been more of a plus than a minus.

ALMAGUER: I wish you had been my examiner. [Laughter] As you can well imagine, in the early '70s I was still at a point in my life where I was very self-conscious of my unique roots and circumstances. So, even though I was looking forward to a place in the Foreign Service, I didn't quite know what I needed to do at that point to achieve it. But I did not give up. I continued to work at OEO and also began to take evening courses at George Washington University [GWU], eventually getting a master's degree in public administration in May 1974. I took a master's in public administration because that was one of the best ways that I could find of getting my employer to finance at least some of the courses that were part of the program.

OFFICE OF ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY (1970-1972)

Q: Tell me more about the Office of Economic Opportunity.

ALMAGUER: OEO was created by Lyndon Johnson to manage a wide array of anti-poverty programs. As I recall, we had everything from Head Start for preschoolers to legal aid for those too poor to find legal counsel. The Office of Health Affairs supported a network of health clinics throughout the United States, both in urban and rural areas. These were the genesis of HMOs — Health Maintenance Organizations — that continue to meet health needs across the economic spectrum. These clinics normally operated out of community-based organizations that provided a range of services across low-income urban neighborhoods and in rural areas. At the time, the leadership of these community groups read like a *Who's Who* among the civil rights movement of the era. Many of the second generation of civil rights leaders went from these community action groups, to become mayors, aldermen and private sector leaders in their communities.

In my job I did two things: review monthly reports from OEO health grant recipients (the community-based health centers), focusing on the financial side, and highlight issues for

my boss (for example, low utilization of grant resources or poor reporting from some of the grantees). Within a few weeks, I was being asked by my boss (a man by the name of Dan Zwick — a hard-working role model who expected hard work but was there for me when I needed guidance) to travel to some of these places and do on-site assessments. It was great! I got to travel to San Francisco, Chicago, New York and Boston, the Mississippi Delta, Appalachia, and remote Indian reservations in Oklahoma and elsewhere. I really got to see a great deal of some of the most troubling parts of America. It was a terrific learning opportunity that I probably would never have experienced on my own. I also learned much that continues to pique my interest. For example, in 1970 the segment of the U.S. population that was worse off, aside from the urban blighted neighborhoods, was the elderly. Much of what the War on Poverty did, including Medicare and Medicaid, was focused on the elderly for a reason. Today, that demographic group is doing much better and that attests to the success of at least some key elements of the War on Poverty.

A little bit of historical and political flavor is worth commenting on: when OEO was created, President Johnson asked the then-head of the Peace Corps, Sargent Shriver, to run the OEO. As I recall, for a while Shriver held both jobs simultaneously. In retrospect, it's easy to see why Shriver was so highly regarded in his time and even today. With the election of Richard Nixon in 1968, many expected the War on Poverty to end. Despite all the unsavory things we now know about Richard Nixon, at the time pundits were forgetting that Nixon, too, had come from relative poverty. While he may have downplayed the program since it was so closely identified with the Democrats, he did not dismantle it. In fact, he named a fairly liberal (at the time) up-and-coming young congressman from Illinois to serve as his Director of OEO. His name was Donald Rumsfeld.

Q: Oh.

ALMAGUER: Director Rumsfeld had an assistant, his hatchet man, by the name of Dick Cheney. While we know them best in their subsequent roles, it is quite interesting that they began their climb in the Washington scene via the War on Poverty. While I was still at OEO, both of them wound up at the White House, first, and then at the Department of Defense under Presidents Nixon and Ford. Frank Carlucci, someone who had come out of the Foreign Service, if memory serves me right, replaced Rumsfeld. Eventually he, too, became Secretary of Defense. These are all high-power personalities. By the time I left OEO in 1972, it was headed by one of the first Latinos to make it to higher-level positions in DC: Phil Sanchez, who had been a local political figure in Fresno, California, and who would subsequently serve as a political Ambassador to Honduras (where our paths would cross again) and Colombia. OEO was populated by "hot shot" young staff who were both committed to the anti-poverty cause and visualized higher levels of achievement for themselves. It was not a stale bureaucracy by any means.

While I was beginning to understand my job and to meet people, I knew that I needed to "punch a ticket" and get a master's degree. Hence, I signed up for evening courses at GWU. I could not do it full-time and I also needed some financial support from my

employer. My $600 salary per month didn't go very far and I had to think ahead about the upcoming marriage, the need to find an apartment, and the need to buy a car. Further, my University of Florida school loans, which I managed to fend off while serving in the Peace Corps, now required monthly payments. Hence, I needed to find courses that were related to my OEO job. I decided to pursue a Master's in Public Administration with emphasis on public financial management. OEO agreed to pay the cost of some of the evening courses that I was taking. In retrospect, I think that it is amazing how much was going on in my life at that time. This period certainly created a platform for things to come.

Up to this point, while speaking Spanish was of great benefit to me, I did not associate all that much with the emerging Latino consciousness, which was a natural offshoot of the black-centered Civil Rights movement. As I began to work with OEO, I became better aware of the challenges faced by migrant workers in California and the Puerto Rican community living in some of the most blighted areas of Brooklyn and the Bronx.

At some point, perhaps after Phil Sanchez became its Director, OEO created a Hispanic Council. I am not sure what it was called but it was intended to draw more agency attention to the underserved Latino community. The fact that the Civil Rights movement emerged from the African-American community and that the leadership of anti-poverty programs at the time was focused on that community, it seemed right that some attention be given the growing Latino slice of American society. (As a footnote, sometime around this period, the terminology began to change: I'm not sure when we switched from Negroes or Colored to Blacks and, subsequently, to African-Americans, but by the mid-70s "black" seemed to predominate. In contrast, "Hispanics" and "Latinos" continue to be used interchangeably, although conservatives gravitate towards "Hispanic" and liberals seem to prefer "Latino.")

As a member of the Hispanic Council, I got to know Phil Sanchez. One of the most interesting and vivid memories of that time involved the famous Ben Bradlee, the then-editor of the *Washington Post*. Sanchez was frustrated at the fact that the *Post,* which set so much of the agenda for this town, never mentioned issues related to the Hispanic community, or even Latin America. Sanchez was able to get an appointment with Bradlee and decided to bring along to this meeting a small cross section of people who worked in his agency and who could give firsthand accounts of some of the issues confronting Latinos who were living in this country. Lo and behold, I was one of six or seven people who went along with Director Sanchez. I felt like a real "big shot" going to see the editor of the *Post*. Please remember that even in this pre-Watergate period Bradlee was friends of presidents and *confidant* to the movers and shakers in Washington. When he spoke, everyone who was anyone in D.C. listened. So, we are in the meeting in a crammed office and Sanchez explains to Bradlee our collective concern that his influential newspaper was not covering Latino issues. Bradlee looks around and, with a bit of a smirk in his face (perhaps trying appear humorous) says, "You know, I only know one word in Spanish, '*mierda*' (which means '*shit'*)." I was sitting in the back, so I didn't have to react to this insensitive comment. I don't remember exactly how Sanchez reacted since I could not see his face either, but, in an era in which political correctness was

beginning to be part of how polite society dealt with sensitive issues, the response from the much-exalted Ben Bradlee was not only politically incorrect, but also revealing about how far back the Latino population was in the eyes of official and high society Washington. It was a very telling moment!

Q: Yes. Before we finish this session, what was your impression of the Office of Economic Opportunity? You were looking at it at the ground level. Was it doing things?

ALMAGUER: It was doing a lot. I am proud of my association with the program in the early '70s. I remember my boss, Dan Zwick, a GS-14 career fellow much older than me (or so it seemed). He was a big deal to me and a role model for a hard-working official committed to doing the people's business to the best of his ability. I was inspired by him, despite the fact that many would see someone like him and identify him as part of the faceless and often ridiculed federal bureaucracy. My boss's boss, the Director of Health Affairs, was also a dedicated lower-level political appointee. My colleagues in that office, some of whom remain personal friends today, worked equally hard and were convinced that they were making a difference. It really hurts me to hear jokes and unfounded stories about the federal bureaucracy. It may well be that I was lucky to land where I did, but, in fact, from Day One in my federal career I was inspired by my colleagues and bosses (with some minor exceptions) and by their commitment to achieve higher-level goals. This may sound like a bureaucrat speaking, but I mean it. With regards to work ethics, I've always been an early riser and yet, at OEO and in subsequent jobs, I always found people who got there before I did and stayed longer to get the job done. Very few professionals with whom I worked were merely "punching the clock."

For example, Dan Zwick, by the time I got to work he would inevitably be there and his hand-written notes (it would have been so nice for him to have had e-mail, but that would take another quarter of a century) would be in everybody's in-boxes. These would be his comments or instructions on issues of the day, all neatly handwritten. I listened to him and paid attention at how he did and said things. When I am asked, "How do you do things in Washington?" his example comes to mind. He said at one time something quite prophetic (referring to the War on Poverty and our health programs), "The biggest thing that's going to come out of this effort is not so much the programs that we start, but the people that we can inspire." If you look at the history of black community leadership after the Martin Luther King, Jr., era, you will find members of Congress, mayors and other leaders who emerged from these anti-poverty programs. Local leaders were given a shot in the arm and an opportunity to do something for their communities. The original civil rights leaders became part of the War on Poverty. They, in turn, became mentors to other generations of people engaged in community activism. More than anything else, Washington was the source of money that allowed local leaders to do useful things. In an era in which people distrust Washington and question why Washington should be part of the solution to local problems, what happened in the War on Poverty — even with its many failures — is an experience that has been insufficiently studied or properly considered.

In retrospect, the War on Poverty accomplished many things. Among them is the Medicare program, as well as the states-based Medicaid program. They effectively dealt with the problem of poverty among the elderly. Unfortunately, there was a negative consequence: the transfer of resources to the elderly from children. If a War on Poverty were to be designed today, it would no doubt focus on children and single mothers, where poverty continues to be a serious problem, particularly among lesser-educated urban residents.

While I did not have much to do with the Legal Services Office or the Head Start Program, they were part of the OEO portfolio of programs in the War on Poverty. Their success has been well documented. While today it seems pretentious to "declare war on poverty," it is no more pretentious than declaring war on drugs and war against terrorism. The terminology may be overblown but the effort is worth it.

What I find most surprising is that in subsequent administrations (Nixon, Ford, Carter and, to a lesser degree, Reagan) the War on Poverty continued to churn along. The OEO did not disappear until the Reagan period — and what that administration appears to have done was to "mainstream" many of the OEO-managed programs by transferring them to more appropriate government agencies (e.g., Head Start to Education, health programs to Health and Human Services, housing subsidies to HUD, etc.).

TRANSITION PERIOD (1972 – 1973)

Q. At some point you got married, worked for OEO and worked on your master's degree. What else was going on?

Let's recap a bit. After Antoinette completed her Peace Corps tour in June 1970, she returned to the United States and in August she and I were married at a Catholic Church on the campus of her college, the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, from where she graduated in 1968. It was a small family wedding (we didn't have much money) and my Best Man and her two Maids of Honor were fellow "Returned PCVs" from Belize. After a brief honeymoon in Taos, we moved back to DC, where my job with the OEO would sustain us for a while. I should remark here that moving to DC, essentially a foreign setting for her, with no friends or acquaintances nearby, was a monumental decision on her part that I did not fully appreciate at the time. It was a rough period for both of us as we acclimated to DC, learned how Washington works and learned about each other's strengths and foibles.

Initially, we had a one-bedroom apartment overlooking Glover Park, which was a nice setting, just north of Georgetown, [in Washington], and we were paying about $179 per month. We had just bought a classic 1970 yellow Volkswagen Beetle for about $2,700. Those two bills, along with repayment of my college loans, took a big chunk out of my GS-7 paycheck, which wasn't great even for that time. (Parenthetically, the highest-paid government career official at the time was making $36,000 when I joined the government, and I dreamed of the day that I would be somewhere near that $36,000 income level. [Laughter.] We didn't have much left at the end of the pay period!

Simultaneously, I was taking evening courses at George Washington University, which occupied much of my evenings and weekends. We didn't do much by way of social activities, in part because studying for my master's took so much of my time and energy and because we were living from paycheck to paycheck.

Antoinette managed to find a job with the Girls Scouts of America, D.C. field office, working with Hispanic girls and mothers, as well as with inner city girls in Southeast D.C. That helped a great deal. At the same time, OEO promoted me fairly quickly to a GS-9 position, doing essentially the same thing I had been doing from the beginning.

As I noted earlier, thanks to the interest shown by OEO Director Phil Sanchez on Hispanic issues, he took an interest in me. Despite the fact that I was getting noticed and promoted, it was clear that after two years at OEO, it was time to move on. Sanchez called me in one day and made a very interesting proposal: join the president's re-election campaign to help promote Hispanic issues and thereby increase the Hispanic vote turnout for the president at the upcoming November elections.

Q. Oh?

ALMAGUER: It sounded exciting. One must also keep in mind my earlier interest in Nixon and the fact that while his Vietnam policies were increasingly under attack, his track record on issues that I cared about was pretty good. He maintained support for both the Peace Corps and OEO when many had expected the demise of those agencies under his Administration. He had created the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] and supported a number of positive initiatives in education and housing, among others. Today, he would have been considered a "flaming liberal" by many Republicans. At the same time, the Democrats were in shambles. Nixon's subsequent visit to China was another example of a leader whom I saw as visionary and forward-looking in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. So, much to my wife's chagrin, I joined the Committee to Re-elect the President (subsequently notoriously known as "the CREEP"). My job, under the leadership of professional campaign staffer Alex Almendariz, who ran the Hispanic constituency desk, consisted of drafting position papers on subjects like Medicare, low-cost housing and other themes designed to appeal to particular Hispanic voters in Florida, New York, and the Southwest. I also ensured that field offices had campaign material and get-out-the-vote initiatives focused on our target group.

From the beginning, there was no doubt that Nixon would win re-election. No one however, had predicted a 49-state sweep (everything but Massachusetts and D.C.). It probably would have happened even without many of the campaign efforts that the CREEP mounted. While I was fairly junior in that campaign organization, I did have a chance to know in passing many of the figures whose subsequent deeds and misdeeds consumed our attention in the following two years. Fortunately for me, nothing that I was involved with was touched by the conspiracy that emerged as a result of the Watergate break-in and Nixon's subsequent efforts to cover them up. When the break-in happened, and it quickly became evident that Cuban-American operatives were involved, I became concerned that somehow my name would be linked to that incredibly foolish episode. As

it turns out, I was recovering from chicken pox the week of the break-in and was nowhere near the campaign headquarters at the time. In subsequent investigations, I was called one or two times by the Independent Counsel's Office, but they must have quickly concluded that I was not a person of interest in the investigation.

Needless to add, the events that followed forever tainted my interest in being involved in political campaigns. Further, it was painful to discover that the president was such a flawed individual. The next few months (Dec. 1972 to April 1973) were particularly difficult. Antoinette and I were expecting our first baby. She eventually had to quit her job to focus on the pregnancy and the baby and I had to re-set my career button after the campaign. Fortunately for me, there were enough contractors working for OEO projects that I was able to maintain an income stream, even as I pursued my studies and intensified efforts to join USAID.

Q. That's a good segue. How did you join USAID?

FIRST PHASE OF MY USAID CAREER (1973 – 1974)

ALMAGUER: Throughout this time, I continued to explore my options for getting a foot in the door of a Foreign Service career. I learned as much as I could about the United States Agency for International Development. It had all the elements of the Foreign Service, it used the Foreign Service structure, and it dealt in very specific ways with the subject areas that interested me the most — development issues in countries located in regions that I found most intriguing, particularly Latin America. (Parenthetically, immediately after I returned to Miami from my Peace Corps assignment in Belize, in December 1969, I had received a recruitment call from USAID inquiring about my interest in joining its Vietnam program. In retrospect, I am surprised at how quickly I said "no." My negative answer at that time probably was influenced by the growing unpopularity of the Vietnam War, as well as by my naïve thought that I would get to Washington in early January and be in a better position at that point to consider my options.)

In the winter and early spring of 1973, with a new baby (a lovely boy, Francisco Daniel Almaguer, born on February 18), I intensified my efforts to explore opportunities at USAID. I had a big plus: the preferential treatment given to Returned PCVs, my OEO experience and status with the Civil Service (having been cleared for quick appointment in the Civil Service). At the time, there were several ways to join USAID. One way was a direct appointment to an office with an immediate need — and I was in a hurry to land a permanent job. The USAID Office of the Auditor General was recruiting and they liked the fact that I was working on a master's in Public Administration. It was a foot in the door!

I was accepted by USAID and its Auditor General after several low-key interviews and became a Civil Service (GS-11) "permanent" employee of USAID. My first assignment, after going through the normal Agency orientation and training program in May 1973,

was one that I was not particularly thrilled about, but it was a beginning. I would be assisting in the conduct of audits of Headquarters programs.

USAID manages billions of dollars worldwide and, at Congress's request, maintains a large cadre of auditors both at home and throughout the world. While the emphasis at that time was the huge program in Southeast Asia, there were also significant programs managed from Washington that required on-going audits. A job is a job and I had to do it, even though I felt that I had little in common with the Washington-based USAID auditors. Further, I found the job boring and felt underutilized. The one positive is that it gave me some opportunity to study for the courses that I continued to take as I pursued my master's studies. In addition, USAID generously agreed to pick up some of the costs associated with individual courses, as the OEO had done previously. Without that on-going help I doubt I could have completed the program. I am sorry that federal agencies are finding it much more difficult these days to support employee advancement programs. The erosion of work/study benefits for our career public servants has been an additional detriment to young folks today wishing to join the Federal workforce.

Q. Physically, where did you work?

ALMAGUER: At that time, and until 1996, the State Department and USAID were collocated at the Main State Building. USAID and State also maintained a few offices in Rosslyn [Virginia], and elsewhere in the DC metropolitan area. The Audit staff was located in Rosslyn, although I took the shuttle to Main State almost daily for job-related purposes and to use of the State cafeteria. It was about a 5-7 minute hop across the river.

The more I got to know people in other offices at USAID, particularly the regional bureaus, the more I itched for an overseas assignment as soon as I completed my master's program (which occurred in May 1974). By this time our little boy was growing and we moved to a two-bedroom apartment in the same building on Glover Park. We also traded our Beetle for a safer Volvo. Although my salary had gone up, it was not keeping up with our growing needs. Going overseas, even as an auditor was tempting. Antoinette had a full-time job taking care of our baby, which meant that we were back at having only one income stream

Sometime in mid 1974, about the time that I was graduating from George Washington University and about a year into my USAID career, the then-administrator of USAID, a fellow by the name of Dan Parker (of Parker Pen fame), convened a "town hall" meeting of all USAID employees to announce that because the war in Vietnam and Southeast Asia was coming to an end, the phasedown of the heavy USAID presence in that region would soon begin. (It took another year before the fall of Saigon, but by the summer of 1974 it was clear that our presence in Southeast Asia was ending.) If I recall correctly, a huge number, perhaps 50 percent, of all USAID employees at the time were based either in Vietnam or nearby countries, and there was simply no room to absorb them back at Headquarters. The Agency would have to carry out a reduction-in-force (RIF). This would turn out to be my first of two RIF experiences at USAID. In his presentation, Administrator Parker announced that in certain cases USAID would be willing to

consider a "detail" of its permanent employees to other federal agencies — as long as the other federal agency picked up the tab. This was a nice alternative to being laid-off. Even as I was dusting off my CV, I remember visiting relatively recent acquaintances in USAID's Latin America Bureau about an overseas assignment and they said, "Are you kidding? No. … Those who have seniority in the agency are going to grab the few jobs that are available."

I knew that events within USAID were conspiring against me. Hence, I took Administrator Parker's comments to heart — that if I could identify an alternative position in the federal government, USAID would be willing to detail me to that other agency. Further, under the rules for details across agencies, USAID would be expected to guarantee me a job when circumstances permitted it. I then, as I often have, turned to my old Peace Corps friends and renewed contacts with that agency. Lucky for me, the Peace Corps was not affected at that point by budget cutbacks and staff drawdowns. They were looking for what they called Program and Training Officers (PTOs). These PTOs usually are the equivalent of the deputy director position in overseas Peace Corps offices. I was interested and Peace Corps was interested in me. Soon thereafter Peace Corps personnel told me that they would "pick up the tab" if USAID would detail me to the Peace Corps. In what seems to have been no time at all, USAID gave me a 24-month or 30-month detail, renewable for up to 60 months (5 years), which would allow me to come back to USAID in the future. Equally appealing was that Peace Corps, with USAID support, would convert me to "Career Foreign Service Limited." I believe it was called FSR (for "Reserves"). They would pick me up as an FSR-5 (in the "old system"; equivalent to FS-3 in the current system that went into effect after they created the Senior Foreign Service around 1980).

BACK TO BELIZE IN A PEACE CORPS STAFF POSITION

Q. Let's start talking about what you did for Peace Corps the second time around.

ALMAGUER: I re-joined the Peace Corps, this time as a staff member, in October 1974. There were a couple of options, but the Peace Corps assigned me to go back to Belize, where my wife and I had served as volunteers less than five years earlier. Both my wife and I were a bit nervous about this, but our finances almost mandated a move and it was an opportunity to break into overseas work. By then our son, Danny, was a year-and-a-half-old toddler and this was a good time to be in a place like Belize since schooling was not yet an issue. And we hoped to be able to save some money since housing was covered and we would have few other major expenses there.

I was assigned to fill the position of Program and Training Officer. It was a unique situation since I would be the only American on staff. At this point, the Peace Corps was experimenting with having locals fill most positions. In the case of Belize, a small program with only some 45 volunteers, the director, Alex Frankel, was a local hire. (He was actually from Jamaica but had served as a senior officer in the Belize Government civil service for many years.) Hence, I would be in the unique position of reporting to a local employee.

It was an interesting and, in many ways, difficult 16 months (Dec. 1974 – April 1976). As my wife in particular discovered, a place like Belize when one is young and unattached could be fun — challenging but not terribly difficult. However, when you have a little baby and there's no running water for days on end — and this in the days before disposable diapers — it was particularly rough on her. And we had no Embassy support of any significance. The Peace Corps has always minimized its dependence on the Embassy. Further, it wasn't even an Embassy yet, since independence didn't come to Belize until 1981. Having a local employee as director meant that there was no one in the "Country Team" to represent the Peace Corps. Even our house was substandard by typical Embassy guidelines. To give you just one example, on the evening we arrived we were taken to the house we would be occupying, but it was still occupied by my predecessor — a wonderful person, whom we got to know well subsequently in Honduras. But on the afternoon in which we arrived, he was out-of-town and we soon discovered that hotel restaurants would not open until 7 p.m., with a hungry toddler not quite understanding what was going on! Episodes such as that one made life very difficult for my wife.

On the other hand, I was doing what I anticipated I would be doing, and in a country that I knew fairly well. I quickly picked up on the issues; became acquainted with what the volunteers were doing, and sat down with country officials to help define work descriptions for future volunteers. It was a pleasant and unhurried job environment. It hurt not having an American mentor as my boss, although the director was very nice and very competent, but marched to a different drummer. I also worried that the small Consulate staff showed no interest in the work of the Peace Corps. In the meantime, things got further complicated at home. My wife was pregnant. While the timing was not planned, we looked forward to having a second baby. Some 10 months after arriving, we now had a baby girl, Nina, along with our 2 ½ years-old son. And issues like water, poor sanitation outside our home, and lack of adequate support services continued to plague us — my wife in particular. Amazingly, my wife opted to have that baby in Belize, which in retrospect was crazy. I don't recall that we talked about it that much — it just seemed natural to have the baby in Belize City. The birth itself was memorable in certain ways. My wife's hospital room overlooked the Caribbean Sea and early that Sunday, October 5, the sun was rising as the delivery became imminent. In the delivery room, as soon as our beautiful, healthy baby was born, the nurse said to me, "Did you bring the soap?" And I said, "What soap?" [Laughter.] It was not totally rustic there, but close to it. And bear in mind that we did not have family nearby or particularly supportive friends to help us deal with the travails of a family with a newborn.

Q: It was tough.

ALMAGUER: Yes it was. At that point it became evident that this was going to be too much, and so I began to inquire with the Peace Corps back in Washington. They were very understanding. (I doubt a larger bureaucracy like State or USAID would have cared all that much.) In the course of our few months in Belize, we had ample visits from Headquarters, including from the Peace Corps Director, and it was clear that they were pleased with the work I had been doing and eager to retain me. Early in 1976, the Peace

Corps indicated that they would be willing to transfer us to a more substantive program in a larger setting — Tegucigalpa, Honduras. …

Q: [Laughter] Oh boy!

ALMAGUER: … to do the same thing. I actually went first on TDY [Temporary Duty] in February 1976. When I saw the Maya Hotel near the Peace Corps office, I though that I was being transferred to Paris. [Laughter.]

FIRST TIME IN HONDURAS – WITH THE PEACE CORPS (1976 – 79)

ALMAGUER: We left Belize in April and, after visiting family in Miami and Albuquerque, showing off our new baby girl, Nina, and our growing son, Danny, we arrived in Tegucigalpa in May 1976. At that time (and for several years afterwards) it was the largest Peace Corps program anywhere. On the one hand, the country needed it. At the same time, it was considered fairly safe and welcoming to Americans. There was a quasi-decent hospital and more medical services than in Belize. Further, while not great, housing was far better, as well as support services from the Peace Corps and the fairly large Embassy there. Life was likely to be a bit easier for my wife and for our growing family — and, in fact, that was the case.

Q. Tell me about your job situation.

ALMAGUER: I had been in Honduras all of one month when the Country Director, Steve Smith, who was scheduled to leave soon, was asked to return to Washington to become the head of the Latin America Office at Peace Corps Headquarters. A new Country Director had been selected, but there was going to be a bit of a gap. The person who was coming to replace him, however, for some reason was not allowed to go to post. All of a sudden we were facing a bigger gap. At this time there some four or five American Peace Corps staff members who had been there longer, who were more senior than me in terms of age (I was 31 at the time) and in years of service. Interestingly enough, none of them wanted to be Acting Director. The outgoing Country Director, who was about to become my boss in Washington, said, "Look, if it's okay with you, we'll make you acting director until we can get a permanent director down here." This was in keeping with the Peace Corps standard practice of having the PTO serve as second-in-command. I said, "Sure." That seemed like a good opportunity. I would continue to serve as PTO, but also add to my portfolio the director's on-going responsibilities. It would be more work for me, and thus probably less time at home, but also it seemed to be a career-enhancing opportunity that I could not turn down. At the least, it would get me some notice.

Further, as luck would have it, the then American Ambassador to Honduras at the time was political appointee Phil Sanchez, my OEO boss who had singled me out for mentoring and who was very happy to have me on his team. Unlike my experience in Belize, the American Embassy in Tegucigalpa was very much involved in providing support to the Peace Corps and kept in touch with our volunteer community. The Peace

Corps Director (and, in my case, Acting Director) was welcomed at the Country Team; was invited to official social events, and the Ambassador went out of his way to meet and participate in Peace Corps activities. It seemed like a lucky draw all around and, in any case, I would be relieved of doing double duty in the coming weeks, as soon as the Peace Corps could identify and send down a full-time Country Director.

Q. That was a good start…

ALMAGUER: Well, I had been acting director for all of two weeks when tragedy struck. A volunteer was killed in a traffic mishap in Comayaguela, Tegucigalpa's twin city across the river. The volunteer, Roseanne Provini, was standing at an intersection talking to a driver (perhaps negotiating a fare with the cab driver) when she was side swiped by a fast-moving car that had failed to stop at the light. She was killed instantly. The driver of the car did not stop. There were several elements to this sad story that stand vividly in my mind. First, of course, was my having to contact and console the mother (a single mother, if I recall correctly). Secondly, having to console her friends and colleagues in the Peace Corps community. Third, having to go through the complex bureaucratic process both at the Embassy and with Peace Corps headquarters in D.C. to activate the established procedures for repatriation of the body, as well handling the appropriate funeral and memorial services with her friends in Honduras. Lastly, but just as important for the morale of the volunteers and their long-term safety and security, we had to piece together what happened and make every effort to ensure that justice was done. Back in the United States, this case would quickly command the attention of the law enforcement agencies and every effort would be made to find and prosecute the perpetrator. That's not what happened in Honduras in most instances, both because of weak law enforcement institutions and fear of reprisals on the part of the police and legal personnel. If we were going to receive justice, we would have to claw our way up the Honduran bureaucracy and political leadership. The volunteers as a group were understandably outraged, particularly so because the word was out that Miss Provini had been killed by a young and apparently drunk Honduran army officer.

Q: You said a young army officer … didn't the military control the government of Honduras at the time?

ALMAGUER: Yes, there were a number of eyewitnesses. The perpetrator was recognized, although not named by scared witnesses. Bear in mind that all government institutions were controlled by the military at the time. Irrespective, there was no excuse for the perpetrator's behavior and justice had to be done for the Provini family and for the Peace Corps community. The very same evening of the tragic accident I began to work closely with the Embassy community, including the Ambassador, the DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission), and the Administrative Section staff. This was destined to become a landmark case because we were taking on the Honduran military at a time when the military ran the country and protected its own above all else, even if it meant covering up for some young officer's drunken behavior.

I thought I was doing my job as best as I could, neither better than anybody, nor worse, but basically committed to doing what needed to be done. While in the end we were not able to pin the charges on a particular individual, the word got around that the Americans would not be passive to this type of behavior. Over and over again, we were assured that the military would transfer and otherwise punish the perpetrator. Even though this was not satisfactory, our efforts were noticed back home. Peace Corps staff were pleased that the family was satisfied with our efforts and with the sensitivity with which this case was handled. Even members of Congress commended us for the effort. The Peace Corps was pleased that a terrible situation had been managed in an appropriate way. The Embassy, in turn, took this case as an opportunity to focus attention on the perpetual problem of injustices committed by people who have complete power.

What happened next was totally unexpected. Soon after this terrible incident, I received a call asking whether I would be willing to have my name go forward to the White House to be named Country Director. So, wow! (Parenthetically, in those days Peace Corps Country Directors had to be cleared by the Office of White House Personnel. By then Gerald Ford was president and they anticipated no problems in that regard.) I have gone over this sad incident in some detail in part because it reflects the reality of working in a difficult environment. Secondly, it also highlights the fact that Peace Corps staff has among its major duties the health and welfare of its volunteers. The volunteers may be adults and understand that they do not enjoy the privileges and immunities of U.S. government officials, but this quasi-parental role is essential to ensure the good will and on-going commitment of the volunteer community. Third, and as a personal reflection, this proved to be an unexpected but pivotal moment in my career. I wish that this pivotal moment had happened under a different, happier, set of circumstances. Nevertheless, it allowed others to judge me as having the management, diplomatic and leadership skills needed to succeed in the complex world of representing U.S. goals and interests.

Q: I can see that. Before we move on, tell me more about how the Honduran government responded to the pressure we were putting on them?

ALMAGUER: They were not very happy, but I suspect that they knew that what I was doing was appropriate. Fortunately, the Honduran military was not led by vicious officers. While some of the surrounding countries (i.e., Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua) were governed by "*dictaduras*" (literally, "dictate harshly"), the Honduran military ran a "*dictablanda*" ("dictate mildly"). Individual rights were not protected, but most people could go about their business with minimal interference as long as they stayed out of politics or out of the military's hair. The authorities wished that we would drop the case, but seem to have understood that we needed to pursue it. Besides, Peace Corps Volunteers were very popular in Honduras at the time and they did not want the outspoken volunteers to instigate civic discontent. They were not about to arrest the perpetrator and turn him over to a civilian court, but they made sure that the perpetrator was kept out of sight and ultimately transferred to some rural outpost to spend a few years in the backwaters of the military. Under these difficult circumstances, we at least had the commitment on the part of the Honduran military authorities that the officer would somehow be brought to justice through military channels. They never did,

however, and when his exile in the boonies ended, he was back in the ranks of the up-and-coming officers. This became a sore subject long after the event. Years later, as Ambassador in Honduras, I resurrected the case. I wasn't going to forget it or allow the military hierarchy to ignore it.

Q: Weren't you supposed to be "detailed" from USAID for only 24 months?

ALMAGUER: Yes, by then my detail to the Peace Corps was expiring, and I wanted to finish what I had just started, so I asked USAID if there was a way they could extend my detail and USAID Personnel, still dealing with the aftermath of the drawdown from Vietnam, said, "Fine." Eventually I wound up with a 60-month detail from USAID while serving in the Peace Corps. By the time I returned to USAID in August 1979, I had served on detail to the Peace Corps for a total of 58 months.

I should point out that at that time it was not unusual to have Foreign Service Officers serving as staff members in the Peace Corps. Some of the early Peace Corps Country Directors came from State and USAID. The link with USAID was stronger because of the overlap in international development work, but State was in the picture as well. The only U.S. foreign affairs agencies not involved with the Peace Corps were those that were part of the intelligence community. Peace Corps legislation from the beginning barred any type of relationship with the intelligence community in order to ensure that volunteers were not perceived as intelligence-gathering officers.

So I completed my almost five years with the Peace Corps in Honduras.

Q: Let's talk a bit about Honduras. What was the situation in Honduras at the time economically, politically, and socially?

ALMAGUER: Honduras was then, as it is today, one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere, although later on, when we discuss my time there as Ambassador, I will highlight the difference 20 years made (1999 vs. 1979) in the lives of the Honduran people, particularly the quality of life among the majority who were, and continue to be, poor. In the mid-70s, maternal and child mortality rates in Honduras were among the highest anywhere. The number of school-age children who completed the third grade was very low. Tegucigalpa, the capital city, even by Central American standards was a small provincial town, with 250,000 people and the only significant modern structure was a nice hotel for the times [The Honduras Maya]. All other hotels had limited amenities. Grocery and department stores carried relatively few quality goods. There were no Burger Kings or McDonalds or any other type of international franchise. Restaurant selection was limited. Road conditions were beginning to improve, but only along the Tegucigalpa to San Pedro Sula to La Ceiba corridor.

As in the case of most of Latin America and every country in Central America except for Belize and Costa Rica, the government was a military regime. Honduras, like many countries in the region, had had a tumultuous history, including periodic civil wars and wars with neighboring countries, as well as periodic military coups. Almost all

democratically elected presidents lasted a short time, until the next coup. Many Latin Americans, including Hondurans, would argue that in at least some of the coups the United States had played a role. The military in Honduras was composed of officers who came from lower- or lower-middle-class backgrounds. The soldiers were conscripted from the poorest urban and rural neighborhoods. The military leadership did not invest much time in proper training and education for their soldiers, most of whom were probably better off in the military than back home. Honduras incorporated the police force into the military. Hence, even traffic cops were soldiers in police uniforms. Families from the middle and upper classes could easily make sure that their kids were not conscripted. Influence and money could buy an easy way out of the military for their kids. The officers probably were more interested in the money than any patriotic cause they would proclaim to serve. In the '70s (and until the advent of democratic governments later on), the military not only ran the government, but many of the utilities and other money-making businesses, including telephone, electricity and water services. They had their hands in banks and construction companies. Private companies made sure to treat the military with special care and many under-the-table payments were made to the senior echelons of the military to maintain relations and/or to keep competitors away. The colonels in charge of one of the state utilities, to use one example, made out like bandits, not only because they were receiving a pretty good salary, but also because of "insider" deals and internal corruption. These senior officers would no doubt pass on some of the earnings to their superiors and to potential competitors within the military. There were expectations of this type of "profit sharing" when senior officers were appointed to these lucrative posts. Years later, when I was serving as Ambassador, an officer described for me what was going on when the military ran the country. He said that if you were the colonel in charge of the passport office or the postal service or some other money-making operation, you had a quota to fulfill: Bring in to the coffers of the senior commanders $40,000 or $50,000 a month or whatever your quota was. If you could get more for yourself and those who work for you, great, but that was the way it was set up.

The Honduran military was apolitical. There was no prevailing ideology, other than protecting the status quo in the name of preserving peace and tranquility and protecting the "Motherland." At the time, there were a handful of military governments in Latin America that tilted to the left (Peru is an example) and proclaimed support for "social" causes. Others, Honduras included, didn't pay all that much attention to social issues except to avoid social unrest. Hence, much of the military government programs tended to be "handouts" that would placate social groups. If political opposition surfaced, the Honduran military attempted bribery or, in rare instances, exiled or jailed opponents. But they were not as vicious as the military in nearby countries. "*Dictablanda*" ("soft rule") tactics prevailed.

This period coincided with the height of the Cold War (but before Central America was to wage proxy wars in the 1980s). Consequently, the military went out of its way to proclaim its "pro-Western," anti-Communist views, keeping the United States happy. (It would be several more years before the U.S. began to focus public attention on human rights practices and to insist on democratic governance.) As long as countries like

Honduras voted with us at the U.N. and other international fora, we did not press all that hard for social and political reforms.

Years later, we proclaimed that sustainable economic and social development could not be achieved without the rule of law, respect for democratic institutions and human rights, as well as market-driven practices. I would certainly agree that the U.S. was right to support these types of reforms after the Cold War ended. In the mid-to-late '70s, however, countries like South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and others thrived under military or quasi-dictatorial regimes. The view at the time seemed to be that if a country had in place the right economic and commercial policies, it could grow economically and improve socially (through added investment in schools and health service, for example). The assumption was that in these settings the political structures and return to civilian control would take care of itself. Hence, the process leading to greater "democratization" of Honduras was a topic of discussion in the Country Team context in the '70s, but not as central as issues that dealt directly with the need to keep communist forces at bay. It was a different time from the period later on when I returned to Honduras as Ambassador after the Cold War had ended.

Q: What was the situation at that point in Nicaragua?

ALMAGUER: Nicaragua was at the tail end of the long-lasting Somoza regime. Somoza Junior [Anastasio Somoza Debayle] was the dictator at the time. Between Somoza Senior [Anastasio Somoza García] and Somoza Junior, the family had run the country since the 1920s. In 1972, there was a major earthquake in Nicaragua, causing significant destruction in Managua in particular. The world community responded in a big way, but the Somoza family succeeded in pocketing most of that aid. More than anything else, I think that the aftermath of the earthquake was the catalyst for popular insurrection in Nicaragua. The Sandinista movement, which had a strong Marxist ideology and was supported by Castro, had a perfect opening for future success. Somoza's behavior, both in terms of crass corruption and harsh treatment of opponents, ultimately undermined the family's hold on the country. This was a "*dictadura*" ("harsh rule") vs. the Honduras' "*dictablanda*."

President Jimmy Carter, who by then was beginning to make human rights issues more central to the conduct of U.S. foreign policy, was increasingly vocal about the behavior of the Nicaraguan regime, despite its close identification with the U.S. and its anti-communist stance. In late '78 (or perhaps early '79), President Carter threatened to pull the Peace Corps out of Nicaragua if the Nicaraguan government did not begin a process of reforms, including respect for human rights. Somoza's response was to mock the threat. As I recall, Somoza intimated that if the U.S. pulled the Peace Corps out of Nicaragua (where the program was popular), he would remove the traffic light in front of the American Embassy … make American officials suffer as they attempted to cross that busy intersection. From the Peace Corps' perspective, while it did not want to be part of the political tit for tat, there was already in place a guerrilla movement along the Nicaraguan-Honduran border that placed in harm's way at least some of its volunteers. Whether for political reasons or for the security of the volunteers, Peace Corps pulled out

its volunteers in Nicaragua in early ’79. The evacuation took place by way of Honduras. Peace Corps Honduras became host to this large influx of volunteers, who were then to be absorbed by the Honduras program or re-assigned to other Peace Corps countries.

The Nicaragua Peace Corps volunteers, once in Honduras, shared their aversion for the Somoza regime; they had seen first-hand the horrible effects of the regime and the plight of Nicaraguans living at the margins of that society. On the other hand, to a person, every single PCV to whom I spoke expressed strong disagreement with the U.S. policy of pulling them out of the country and out of their work sites. They felt very strongly that they were working with and for the people of Nicaragua and not with the government. Consequently, Carter’s decision was not popular among these affected volunteers; in fact, most were quite angry at the decision.

By the time I left Honduras, in June of ’79, the situation in Nicaragua had deteriorated further. The Sandinistas succeeded in toppling the Somoza regime shortly thereafter, in July 1979. That, of course, set in motion a series of events that intensified the violent unrest already underway in the region. The situation in Nicaragua was compounded by the ongoing civil war in Guatemala (which had been going on, off then on again, since the 1950s) and the growing instability in El Salvador, where a harsh military dictatorship faced a strong guerrilla movement. In this setting Honduras seemed like a tranquil oasis in the region. All of this was the precursor to the Central American civil wars that vexed the Reagan Administration throughout most of the 1980s.

Long after I left in 1979, U.S. interests in Honduras grew in proportion to the instability in the Central American neighborhood. In the ‘80s, Honduras became the U.S. safe haven (or as Honduras called it, “the U.S. aircraft carrier”) in our attempts to counter perceived communist forces elsewhere in the region. Honduras, this relatively quiet and relatively isolated country, became the center for expanded U.S. presence in the region. In addition to establishing a small support air base in Comayagua in central Honduras, people like Ollie North [Oliver Laurence North] became part of the folklore of the times. Embassy operations were significantly expanded to include a large influx from our defense and intelligence community, from where they could monitor the situation in Central America and provide support to friendly forces across the Honduran borders. Indeed, much of our assistance to the government of El Salvador and to the “Contras” in Nicaragua emanated from or through Honduras. Our mutually supportive relationship with the Honduran authorities over the previous years facilitated this new role for Honduras, precisely at the time when the military regime was transitioning out to be replaced, over time, with democratically-elected civilian authorities.

Q: What was the Peace Corps doing, and how effective do you think they were?

ALMAGUER: Peace Corps in Honduras, as in many other countries, was doing a variety of things, but focused primarily around three areas: The first was agriculture at the grass-roots level — working with farmers, for example, to terrace their lands. Honduras is a hilly country, with a relative scarcity of suitable flat agricultural land, and much of the flat lands were owned and cultivated by the banana multinationals, like United Fruit and

Standard Fruit, or wealthy Honduran commercial interests. Hence, terracing and improvements to protect watersheds was a big program.

Protecting forests lands — among the last remaining forest regions in Central America — was a second large program (and very much related to the work of the volunteers engaged in watershed management and improvements in agricultural practices).

We also had a large program focused on social and health needs, including the provision of basic health services, improving childhood nutrition and childhood inoculation services, as well as elementary school education.

We also had a scattering of volunteers working in what we would call community development activities, including working with municipal authorities to improve their delivery of services to the more needy communities, supporting the work of non-governmental groups, such as the Catholic Church program with orphanages and the work of CARE, Save the Children, and other NGOs. The vast majority of the volunteers' work was in the rural areas and designed to favor traditionally disadvantaged communities throughout the country. Our volunteers were well received and most soon learned to speak Spanish fluently — with a "*Catracho*" (slang for "Honduran") accent — and to develop a taste for Honduran food and beer.

As has always been the case with the Peace Corps experience, the volunteer ideally leaves much behind in his or her assigned community, including technical know-how and the ability to plan and organize to get things done. However, what the volunteer takes back after two years of service is of immeasurable benefit to the individual and to the U.S. In most cases, the individual, who is fresh out of college, learns a new language and learns it fluently; becomes familiar with another culture and another way of seeing the world; learns about the challenges confronting the vast majority of the world's population; and acquires a life-long interest in their particular country of assignment and in the issues that confront less-developed societies. Volunteers are not likely to make a huge impact on national policy. Let's face it, what happens in the countryside is not likely to influence national-level politics; the volunteers tend to work with the voiceless masses. On the other hand, volunteers do make a big difference in the countryside, in their assigned communities. And if they get lucky, they may even affect how the country looks at issues. For example, the watershed management programs that volunteers carried out had the salutary impact of changing how the Honduran authorities viewed environmental issues. In Honduras, which is a welcoming and relatively small country (about 3.5 million inhabitants in the 1970s), one could almost assume that if there was community center being built, an old school building being repaired, a new water system installed, or a farmer using new techniques and practices, the likelihood was high that a Peace Corps volunteer was involved. The Peace Corps, working at the grass-roots level, has an incredible history to tell, in terms of the skills and work ethics the volunteers have left behind, but also at a human level. In most cases, these strangers to the community arrived, began to live much like them, did some good, and learned to eat the local food, drink the local brew, and enjoy the local games and dances. These foreigners, whom most locals assumed to be well off back in the U.S., turned out to be really nice people and, in

some cases, fell in love with a local. I cannot think of too many programs where one can say what I say about the Peace Corps. It has been by far one of the best investments the U.S. has ever made. I remain proud of my association with the Peace Corps and with the volunteers with whom I have had to honor to work, both as a colleague and as a staff member. To this day, many of the volunteers we met in Belize and, subsequently, in Honduras remain some of our closest and cherished friends. While many in the U.S. criticize the work of the State Department or USAID, there seems to be widespread acceptance that the Peace Corps is a good thing all around.

Q: Switching gears, what was the population of Honduras like, particularly with regards to ethnicity and social classes? Was there a social divide?

ALMAGUER: Honduras fundamentally is a *mestizo* society, "*mestizo*" meaning a mixture of Indian and Hispanic. Unlike Guatemala, for example, where there is a very large indigenous population, with huge barriers to upward mobility, Honduras is relatively homogenous, with a very small indigenous or other ethnic group population. Further, at least until recently, the gap between the richest and poorest was not as great in Honduras — meaning that there were relatively fewer rich families, and they had moderate wealth in comparison to wealthy families elsewhere in Latin America. This may account for at least some of the tranquility Honduras enjoyed, at least until recent times, relative to other countries in the region. Honduras was a backwater region of Central America during the colonial period. The capital of the region was Guatemala City. The Mayan empire covered from what today is southern Mexico down to the western reaches of Honduras, with the rest of what today is the country of Honduras largely unpopulated during most of the Mayan and subsequent Spanish colonial period. The Caribbean coast began to be settled only in the 19th Century, with a small influx of African slaves and, subsequently, a migration of "black Caribs" ("Garifunas"), most of who are bilingual or multilingual and who extended their reach from coastal Belize down the Central American coast. Small pockets of indigenous groups not considered part of the Mayan empire could be found in the central valleys. Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador are relatively homogeneous *mestizo* societies, in contrast to Guatemala or Mexico, where there's a large population of Mayans and other ethnic groups, most of whom preceded the colonial period.

In the late 19th and early 20th century (in the post-colonial period), El Salvador and, to a lesser degree Nicaragua and Honduras, came to be identified with one or two crops in high demand by American and European consumers. In El Salvador, growing coffee became a profitable venture. Savvy coffee producers moved quickly to grab as much land as they could, leaving the rest of the population relatively landless. El Salvador is the extreme case: a country that's relatively homogeneous but with limited space available for a very fast-growing population, with landless masses gravitating to the city, and land controlled for most of the 20th Century by a handful of landholders. Some have said that the Salvadorian civil war of the 1970s and '80s was among the first examples of the impact of a growing population on shrinking available resources, including land. Development professionals no longer agree with this simplistic analysis, but there is no doubt that land held by a few families while the rest scrape for a living is a formula for

widespread discontent. In Nicaragua, the situation was at least as bad: one family, the Somozas, and a few of their allies controlled that nation's physical wealth.

Q: What about United Fruit and some of the other companies that turned Central America into what is known as "banana republics?" How did that affect Honduras?

ALMAGUER: United Fruit was headquartered in Honduras, and Standard Fruit (now Dole) had big operations in Honduras from early days of the 20th Century. If you look at a map of the Gulf of Mexico, you have Louisiana and Mississippi to the north and Honduras straight south. The north coast of Honduras has a mixture of mountains and fertile tropical valleys, and excellent harbors which facilitated transportation from Honduras to the U.S. Gulf states. This ideal setting for bananas, a highly perishable product, converted Honduras into the premier "banana republic."

Banana barons include the famous "Sam the Banana Man" [Samuel Zemurray], a Russian immigrant who moved to Mobile, Alabama, in the late 1800s. After peddling over-ripe bananas (discarded by the large banana wholesalers), he found increasingly more lucrative ways to make it rich in the banana trade. Eventually, he managed to take over the Boston-based United Fruit Company and gained enormous influence over Honduran politics, ensuring in the process that Honduran law favored banana industry interests. At the turn of the last century and well into the 20th Century, the Honduran central authorities in Tegucigalpa did not have full control over its territory and the banana barons filled the vacuum. The banana companies quickly managed to gain concessions, no doubt paying bribes. When the government in power at the time wasn't friendly, changing the government turned out to be not so difficult. There are many stories, some of which may be true. One, for example, refers to a sheriff of Mobile, Alabama, a fellow by the name of Christmas, who was brought down to Honduras by one of the banana barons to manage security in the banana growing regions. He ultimately managed to control the Honduran army.

Q: [Laughter.]

ALMAGUER: The agreement between the banana companies and the Tegucigalpa-based Honduran authorities included the granting of land concessions along the North Coast in return for the companies' agreement to build a railroad line from the coast to Tegucigalpa, in Honduras' central highlands. The banana companies eventually built a railroad, but never to the capital; they built it up and down the coast to the banana fields.

This type of behavior conceivably could have left a streak of anti-American feelings in Honduras. That, however, was not the case. The banana companies had a positive impact, at least on the North Coast. To this day, one sees in the region buildings erected in the 1920s that served as hospitals and schools. They brought improved sanitation and health practices. Sam Zemurray financed the creation of what today is the leading university in Latin America for tropical and subtropical agriculture, the Pan American Agricultural School, "Zamorano", some 30 miles east of Tegucigalpa. *(Note for the record: long after this interview, Almaguer became, in 2012, a member of the Board of Trustees of*

Zamorano University.) The fruit companies conducted experiments not only with bananas, but with other tropical fruits as well. The banana companies may have controlled the politics of the country. On the other hand, they did provide for its employees and their families a better quality of life than they had ever experienced. Further, they did not stifle the creation of labor movements. This led Honduras to have some of the strongest labor unions in the region.

Until the 1950s, Honduras may have seemed to be a fiefdom of these banana companies, but they also placed Honduras on the map and bonded the ties between Honduras and the U.S. New Orleans in particular was intimately tied to Honduras and Hondurans flocked to that city and its schools and medical facilities until the 1970s, when Miami and Houston became the hubs for the airlines serving Honduras.

Q: Getting back to the Peace Corps, was it a different creature than the one you had known when you were a Peace Corps volunteer? Were the new generation of volunteers coming out of the universities as activists wanting to change the world, or not?

ALMAGUER: When I joined the Peace Corps as a volunteer in the 1960s, it was made up of mostly middle-class young white men and women from all over the United States, idealists but not radicals. They believed in "doing good" as a social responsibility. The cynicism of later years was not yet as evident. By the mid '70s, when I was in charge of a new generation of volunteers, I noticed a few differences. The early volunteers arrived in their country of assignment neatly dressed and with short haircuts. The volunteers who were getting off the plane in Tegucigalpa in the mid-'70s, were looking scruffier — sporting long hair, beards and sandals. They looked like America in the '70s. Nevertheless, most were not radical or activists. My sense is that if a person had become radicalized by either the war in Vietnam or some other cause, the Peace Corps was only marginally more appealing than joining the military. I would guess that Peace Corps would have been seen by the more radical elements as an instrument of the "Establishment." Some may have joined it as an alternative to the draft, but by then we were out of Vietnam. Irrespective of the motives for joining, once in the Peace Corps, once they accepted the fact that one of the things that we expected of them was to respect the local norms, most were quite compliant. I did find myself saying to new recruits, "Look, I'm not even going to talk to you if when I come to the Training Center, you're not wearing shoes, because Hondurans don't wear flip-flops, or shorts for that matter." This was not being puritanical on my part. Rather, it was an effort to help them understand that they were in a different social setting, where the casual behavior and attire found in American colleges at the time were anathema to most Hondurans. Despite its poverty, the country at the time was quite conservative in social matters. We wanted the volunteers to be accepted in their communities from Day One and if their behavior and appearance was likely to turn off many, then why send them there?

I had another factor at play that influenced the strict code that I followed: I was only a few years older — still in my early 30s — than most volunteers. Some were older than me. Hence, if I had to play a "father figure" role, it would be through my behavior and

expectations. I wanted to be seen as open-minded and available to them, but not as their buddy or peer. I think most of our volunteers accepted this.

Q: Did you run across situations where local authorities were not really cooperating with the volunteers or giving them rough time? Would you have to come and try to keep them from marching on the governor's palace or something like that?

ALMAGUER: Lack of cooperation rarely happened among the people with whom the volunteers worked at the community level. It was more of a problem among more senior bureaucrats — a municipal department head, for example — who often were full of themselves and not receptive to change. Frankly, when that happened my sympathies, more often than not, were with the volunteers. They work in a community and soon become part of that community. They are assigned a task and do it - often with passion. They bring the people along. Then they run into barriers like some provincial big shot who probably doesn't know much about the community and who tries to play a self-important role. That's usually unfair to the volunteer and to the community. We had a number of those encounters, and almost inevitably one of two things would happen: I would draw to the attention of authorities in Tegucigalpa the behavior of their local official(s) and/ or re-assign the volunteer if staying in a community had become unsustainable for the volunteer. In Honduras, which was generally welcoming to volunteers and the people adverse to confrontation, the attitude of the local officials, for the most part, was "don't make the gringos mad at me." So, generally speaking, the volunteers were well protected and well supported, and most local officials played a positive role, even when their instinct was to resist change.

Q: What about physical violence? Don't a lot of people carry guns?

ALMAGUER: Honduras in the 1970s was a great deal more peaceful than is the case today. In those days, few carried guns. The violence that one read about usually was a quarrel involving alcohol and a machete. Volunteers were alerted during training to be aware when going to a party in the countryside; to be attentive to situations that could get out of hand, such as dancing with someone else's girlfriend. Drunkenness in the rural areas, particularly when machetes were available, could be a problem. Fortunately, however, our volunteers were savvy and, for the most part, managed to stay out of trouble. And one of the best sources of support for our PCVs were the residents of the community, who for the most part became quite protective of "their" PCVs.

Q: Were drugs part of the scene, including marijuana?

ALMAGUER: The Peace Corps always has had strict rules regarding the use of drugs, even back at the time when I was a volunteer. "You do it, including marijuana, and you're out!" The rule was a product of the times. The Peace Corps felt compelled to be tough on that particular issue. Because volunteers periodically would see one of their colleagues kicked out for doing marijuana, I had relatively few problems in this regard. That is not to say that they were *not* doing it. In fact, I suspect that there was more marijuana use than I ever knew. I never used the stuff and I was strict in the application

of the rule. Credible allegations of PCV use of marijuana or any other prohibited drug was investigated and, if evidence was found or the volunteer confessed, he or she went home. That kept us pretty straight. At least the PCVs who used drugs were very discrete about it. I guess this was another example of being a hard-nosed parent to men and women who were not much younger than me.

Q: How did you relate to the Embassy?

ALMAGUER: As Peace Corps Country Director, I dealt with the Embassy quite a bit. To this day the Peace Corps has an ambivalent attitude towards the Embassy and the Embassy community. Yet, one has to look to the Embassy for certain support needs, including advice on how to protect the physical security of Peace Corps volunteers and staff, as well as for cable traffic (which, in the pre-Internet days, was used extensively by the Peace Corps). The PCVs are not U.S. government employees, but the staff (both local and Americans) are U.S. Government employees. We drew careful lines. We did not want our PCVs to be perceived as spies or doing work for the Political Office. I, on the other hand, sat in on the Country Team. Honduras was the first of many instances in which I was part of the Country Team. I was well accepted by my Embassy colleagues and the Embassy never pushed the envelope. At the same time, I kept the Country Team well informed on our work in Honduras, on the issues we were facing, and sought advice when I needed it. The three Ambassadors with whom I served in my first tour in Honduras were all political appointees who were very supportive. I am referring to Phil Sanchez, whom I first met in Washington and who welcomed me with open arms; Ralph Becker, an older gentleman with limited language skills but a kind human being, whose wife, Anne, was a great mentor to my wife as she began to engage in the social activities of the Embassy community; and finally, Mari-Luci Jaramillo, a wonderful educator who came from Albuquerque, N.M., whom we first met there and who was always supportive of our volunteers. All three of them, and their DCMs, came to Peace Corps events and swore-in our volunteers in very dignified and festive ceremonies. They made it a point of visiting volunteer work sites when they traveled in their communities and were attentive to their needs. From time to time, I would hear accusations that Peace Corps volunteers were CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] spies, usually coming out of university settings, but never taken seriously either by the local authorities or the communities in which they worked. Honduras was a great place in which to be a PCV, which may explain why the community of Returned PCVs from Honduras is among the most active in the family of RPCVs in the U.S.

Q: As a country director of the Peace Corps in the context of the Country Team, wouldn't you share that your people were reporting unrest in such and such a department, or wouldn't you use the information you picked up at the Country Team to guide your decisions on placement of volunteers?

ALMAGUER: Sure. This is always a touchy issue, but my primary concern had to be the safety of the volunteers. If I became aware from the Embassy that there were issues in a certain part of the country that could perhaps compromise the well-being of a volunteer, I

took that as a cue to conduct our own assessment and determine what, if anything, we should do regarding the volunteer. Fortunately, in Honduras, at that time, this was rare.

I remember one time saying in the Country Team meeting that my volunteers were seeing some unrest in the southwest corner of Honduras, an isolated region that borders on El Salvador. This period coincided with the beginnings of the guerilla movement on the El Salvador side, not too far from where my volunteers were stationed. The Honduran side was fairly quiet, but in a region in which families have relatives on both sides of the border, any unrest on the other side impacted on our side of the border. And I said to my colleagues, "I'm assuming that folks around this Country Team table have more information. Should we start pulling the volunteers out?" I remember a couple of guys, including the Station Chief, laughing and saying, "Look, you probably know more about these things than we do sitting here in the capital city." I should add that the discussions that I participated in, as the Peace Corps country director, did not include specific political, military or intelligence decisions being made at a different level. I was invited (along with my USAID counterparts) to participate in discussions of Honduran social and economic trends and to sit in the Embassy's emergency preparedness committee (which worries about US response to natural disasters and does contingency planning for the evacuation of Americans, as events warrant).

Q. Would you like to say more about Ambassador Jaramillo?

ALMAGUER: Mari-Luci Jaramillo was an educator teaching the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque at the time she was selected by President Carter's White House to serve as Carter's Ambassador to Honduras. Apparently she had caught the attention of the White House because of her role at the Mexico City World Conference on Women in 1975. A number of Carter White House appointees had attended that event (obviously prior to joining the new Administration) and she had made an impression on them. Mari-Luci Jaramillo would become the very first woman American Ambassador in a Latin American country, as well as the first Hispanic woman anywhere to serve as Ambassador. She was a career educator and a very down-to-earth person from a humble background. Because my wife is from Albuquerque, when the White House announced the nomination I made it a point of calling her to let her know that we would soon be in Albuquerque on leave. She invited us to her modest home and welcomed us warmly. I will never forget that she sat on the floor and in a casual manner asked, "Now exactly what do ambassadors do? How do I go about ambassadoring?" she said. I asked, "Well, how did you get to point where you've been nominated?" She commented that when she received a call from the White House, she assumed that they had the wrong person because there was a local politician with a similar name. But no, they assured her that they wanted her. This modest and unassuming person arrived in Honduras at a very important time. Honduras was still under a military dictatorship, but under growing pressure from the Carter Administration to transition towards democracy. Ambassador Jaramillo, this person with no Washington or political experience, made a historic difference. Twenty years later, when I arrived in Honduras as Ambassador, she was my role model and the person Hondurans of all political persuasions respected and admired. She was the person whom Honduran politicians praised as having had the greatest

influence in helping Honduras transition from a military dictatorship to a democracy in the late '70s. She took on the task of sitting down with the military and convincing them why it was time for them to return to the barracks. She also worked behind the scenes to mentor rising young political leaders and to help them understand that it wasn't just simply switching from military control to civilian control — that democratic governance required the acceptance of opposition, compromise and transparency. To this day, now-aging Honduran civilian politicians, including at least two who became president afterwards, give her enormous credit and share profound affection for her.

I think that this is an important story. She did not have the traditional background to be Ambassador, but had the right instincts, a cultural affinity, and ability to effectively transfer her teaching skills to another setting and do so successfully. She genuinely cared about the country and its people and she cared about the wellbeing of her staff. This story shows that when you have the right set of skills, whether you are career or non-career, you can do a terrific job.

Q: Great story.

DIPLOMACY IN CENTRAL AMERICA– AN OVERVIEW

Q. This is sort of going backwards and forwards since I want you to share perceptions over time, but I wonder if you would care to comment on your impression of the diplomatic corps in Central America. I suspect that the region is not high on the list of posts for many career diplomats from Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere. How would you rate them? I'm not talking about the Americans, but I'm talking principally about the others.

ALMAGUER: Well, let me generalize. In terms of American Foreign Service Officers, by and large, they have enjoyed their time in Central America — and some have made the region their specialty. Some of our career people initially may have questioned where their career was going when they found themselves as consuls in Managua or San José. What many soon discovered was that it is perhaps more fun and satisfying to be in an environment in which your decisions weigh heavily on the policy outlook of a government than when that is not the case. Let's be perfectly blunt. A U.S. consul in Managua is a much more important person, someone who impacts both local and U.S. policy much more so, than someone with a comparable posting in Britain, France or Germany. Most of the U.S. diplomats in the region whom I have met over the years have been terrific in terms of not only doing the job they were sent to do, but also of understanding the local culture and developing strong contacts. Just to give you one example of a very distinguished diplomat, Bill Walker [William Walker], who has played significant roles in El Salvador and elsewhere, most recently in the former Yugoslavia. Bill Walker served as deputy chief of mission in Honduras years ago, before he became Ambassador in El Salvador [in 1988] during the height of the war there. Yet when I was Ambassador in Honduras, Bill would come back to the region. He actually had some business interests representing a couple of companies; but let's face it, he was there

visiting Honduran friends, and they enjoyed him, and he enjoyed them. That's the kind of relationship that you see many of these American diplomats developing.

The Europeans fall into two categories. There are the Spaniards, who in recent years have moved to second place vis-à-vis the Americans in terms of the influence they have in the region. King Juan Carlos, in my view, is one of the most underrated important personalities of the last 35 to 40 years because of the transition he led in Spain. Further, he did a terrific job of assuming the leadership for greater integration at all levels between Spain and Latin America. Spain and Latin America share historical and cultural ties and he has reinforced those through his engagement in the region. He took an active role. It's unusual for a king to be as outspoken as he was in standing up for democratic values. As a consequence, his prime ministers — José María Aznar López, Felipe González Márquez and others — have played a major role in Latin America. The Spanish ambassador is an important person in every one of the countries in Central America, and I, as U.S. Ambassador, would consult with the Spanish ambassador frequently.

The other European ambassadors range from those who have been sent out to a far-away region either to gain experience or to ride out the end of their careers. When I was ambassador in Honduras, the British ambassador at the time, who remains a close personal friend, was one of Britain's few Latin Americanists. He outdid me in terms of getting out and visiting isolated communities all over the country and showing the flag, if you will, as well as speaking out on issues of importance to Britain. He was at the tail end of his career and British interests in Honduras were limited, but the U.K. was well represented. The other folks to whom I give lots of credit are the Scandinavians. This may come as a surprise. The Scandinavians became involved in the region perhaps, from our point of view, for the wrong set of reasons — that is, they became enamored with the Sandinistas and the idea of a socialist revolution in Central America to change the landscape of poverty. Like the rest of us, they soured on the Sandinistas early on, but yet remained committed to the region, if for no other reason than fighting poverty is a foreign policy fundamental for the Scandinavians, particularly the Swedes, but also the Danes and the Norwegians. Into that mix I have to add the Dutch, who have had a very large foreign aid program in relation to the size of their economy. All of these Nordic countries rank in the top tier in terms of per capita contributions to world development. They have developed a strong body of Latin Americanists in their international cooperation and foreign affairs ministries. Those countries have played a leading role in pushing important policy initiatives, including on the role of women in development. At times, they could do things that we may not have been able to do. That is because we have so many interests in the region that at times those interests are in conflict (e.g., promoting environmental causes while supporting U.S. energy interests). Further, often times we need the support of the Central Americans, in votes at the UN, for example, and therefore we may have played down some areas of disagreements (e.g., human rights abuses). The Scandinavians, on the other hand, have very few non-development-related interests in the region. Hence, they stood up firmly and consistently for what they believe are the right values, including freedom of expression, human rights, workers rights, etc. They are wonderful allies for us in many situations.

The French are sort of … here and there. They do play a role; they have an ambassador in just about every country, but they tend to limit themselves to cultural activities. There's a French cultural center in just about every large Central American city. They financed a few cultural events. The other country from outside the region that was emerging as a major powerhouse, not only in Central America, but also all over Latin America, is Japan. The Japanese do see the region as an important market for them, and we are seeing links that did not exist as recently as 15 to 20 years ago. One can now fly to Japan from Mexico City (Mexico), or from Sapporo (Japan) to Lima (Peru); the presence of Japanese businessmen in Central America has grown dramatically. They are good allies. They play a low-key role in the sense that they don't get up front on issues, but on the other hand you know that they are watching for every opportunity to promote investment, and they also do a lot of humanitarian work. In fact, the very first time the Japanese sent their military overseas after World War II was in 1998 in Honduras, right after Hurricane Mitch, where the devastation was such that the Japanese not only contributed with cash and materials, but also sent a contingent of Japanese soldiers to participate in rescue and reconstruction efforts. Indeed, we are seeing more and more Japanese who speak Spanish. A combination of commercial interests and a growing capacity to engage on regional issues makes Japan a very strong participant in the region.

To generalize and summarize, as recently as 20 years ago, in any capital in Latin America there was "The Embassy", and if you exited the airport and asked a taxi cab driver to take you to "The Embassy", you did not have to specify which one — it was a given. Now, you find that the Spanish embassy, the Japanese embassy, the Mexican embassy, the Brazilian embassy are all important. The local leadership in these countries welcomes this development because they can play one against the other. Today, if you go to Central America, you find fewer American vehicles and more Japanese and European ones. Airbus is out there competing with Boeing for airplane business in Latin America, and they've been very successful at it. Everywhere you go, the U.S. has real and effective competition.

China is a new development. Central America had been a bastion of support for Taiwan and Taiwan has showered the leadership in these countries with gifts of all sorts. Now, with the People's Republic opening markets all over Latin America, the Central Americans are beginning to re-think their alliance with Taiwan.

Q: Well, Frank, what about the Papal Nuncio? How did you find them?

ALMAGUER: The Papal Nuncio plays a significant role in all of Latin America, if for no other reason than he is the dean of the diplomatic corps. The fact that he represents the Pope and the Vatican curia gives him weight throughout the region. What happens in day-to-day transactions depends a great deal on the personality of the Nuncio. I have seen nuncios who have been shy and withdrawn and who have opted to minimize their public contact; others have played an external role that is quite impressive. In Honduras, for example, the nuncio who was there when I served as ambassador (and who happened to have been from India, which I found fascinating since I didn't associate Catholicism with India) was someone who loved to entertain. He was one of the few people who could

invite the leadership of the various political opposition groups and the incumbent ruling party and get away with it with a great deal of grace; people would welcome those kinds of invitations. I understand that his predecessor didn't do much of that. So it all depends, but nuncios can play a very significant role.

Q: I would think that the nuncio would be somebody that you would go to find out what's happening in the country, I mean, a good source of information, in that they have their priests who are out there all over the place?

ALMAGUER: Frankly, that was not my experience. Local priests were not always that well informed and often on the ideological side of issues. Further, their interaction with the Nuncio may not have been all that much. If anything, I found that it was the other way around, and I'll tell you why. Even though the nuncio is usually a bishop or an archbishop, and he is treated as first among equals among the bishops of the country, the local priests report to the local bishop; the nuncio is an outsider. Second, the bishops are competing with each other for influence, and even for influencing the nuncio, because after all, the nuncio does have a great deal to say on who gets recommended to become a bishop, archbishop, and eventually a cardinal, a situation which I witnessed in Honduras. The relationship between the nuncio and the bishops, on the one hand, and the nuncio and the priests, on other, is either distant or often filled with some tension.

Q: It reminds me a little bit of the business world, where you would be known as the SOB (son of a bitch) from the home office out in the field. [Laughter.]

ALMAGUER: Exactly, something like that! The cardinal of Honduras [Óscar Andrés Rodríguez Maradiaga], who was elevated while I was in Honduras as Ambassador, was written about frequently as "papabile" (Italian for possible successor to the pope). Frankly, if Hollywood were to cast a pope, he's it: he speaks seven or eight languages fluently, flies airplanes, plays all kinds of instruments, has a melodious voice and sings operas and pop music. He is truly one of the Vatican's favorites because of the stance he has taken on debt in the Third World and his views on social justice. He has been the chair of the Latin American Bishops' Conference, plus he's got a great deal of charisma. Nevertheless, there was tension between the cardinal and the nuncio because of what the nuncio perceived as the cardinal perhaps getting ahead of what the "home office" (i.e., the Vatican Curia) was saying on some of these issues.

Q: Could you talk a bit about Mexico? I think that in Central America Mexico would stand out as a colossus, as the United States stands out in Mexico.

ALMAGUER: In South America, Mexico is overshadowed by Brazil and is only now emerging as an important player. For a long time, the Brazilians and the Argentines and a few of the other South American powerhouses resented Mexico because of what they felt was Mexico's role vis-à-vis the United States. As Mexico emerged as a strong economic ally of the United States and then with the NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) treaty, Mexico was seen as clearly in the US camp. The Brazilians in particular, but others as well, have felt that Mexico perhaps had sold itself on the cheap to

the United States, at a time when an alliance combining Brazil, Mexico, Argentina and others would have made it easier for the region to stand up to the United States. Nevertheless, there is admiration for the Mexican Revolution and for the way the Mexicans conducted their relationship with the United States, in terms of not allowing their culture to disappear, and so on. Of course, they joke about poor Mexico: so far from God and …

Q: So close to the United States…

ALMAGUER: But Central America is to Mexico what Mexico is to us. Mexico faces a serious development gap between its relatively well-off north and its much poorer south. As Mexican economic growth has taken off, northern Mexico today is an extension of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. If you were to separate southern Mexico from the rest of Mexico, Mexico's GDP (gross domestic product) would jump several fold. Whereas northern Central America and southern Mexico have much in common: they are part of the historic Mayan empire, more tropical in nature, and mired in poverty. The flow of emigrants to the United States today comes overwhelmingly from southern Mexico and Central America. Migration is becoming as much of a problem for Mexico as it is for the United States. In southern Mexico, in Chiapas, you had the Zapatistas, the would-be, weakened quasi-guerilla revolutionaries who haven't done very well. Mexican President Vicente Fox early on made a big effort to become a player in the region and announced his "Puebla-to-Panama" program, Puebla being the northern most city in southern Mexico. Fox characterized the region of southern Mexico all the way down to Panama as linked by Mayan roots and by poverty caused by geography, history, and culture. What he was thinking about was developing a kind of Marshall Plan for the region. Mexico wanted to focus on infrastructure needs — highways, telecommunications, electric grid and the like — and urged the World Bank, the U.S., and others to contribute heavily to the program. That program did not take off for a variety of reasons, including Fox's own weaknesses at home, a lack of resources and, frankly, Central Americans' fear of the colossus of the north, in this case Mexico. Central Americans have been a bit leery of tying themselves too much to Mexico.

Q: Well, did you find that in your time in Central America the South American diplomats played much of a role, or was this one of these exile spots?

ALMAGUER: [Laughter] Oh, it was a wonderful exile spot for them! There were a couple of exceptions, but by and large, it was the place where you were sent either because you were defeated in the last presidential election, you lost a legislative seat or, as some would say, you were the mistress of the president and the wife found out about it, so you wound up being ambassador to some country in Central America. [Laughter.]

BACK TO USAID AND ON TO PANAMA (1979 – 1983)

Departing Honduras and Returning to USAID

Q: Okay. What happened to you next? You left Honduras in 1979. I understand that you were moving back to the USAID ranks.

ALMAGUER: Yes, I was heading back to USAID since my "detail" to Peace Corps would expire no later than 60 months after it was granted, or October 1979. USAID had no commitment beyond giving me a position at the level that I had been at the time that I was "detailed" to the Peace Corps in 1974 (that is, as a GS-12). However, by the time that I had completed my tour as Peace Corps Country Director in Honduras I had been converted to the Foreign Service System as an FS-5 (equivalent to a GS-12 at the time) and subsequently promoted a couple of times. In August 1979, I already was an FS-3. (As you will recall, in the early '80s, with the signing of the 1980 Foreign Service Act, the Foreign Service (FS) grade structure was changed and FS-3s in the "old" system became FS-1s in the "new" system. The old FS-2 and FS-1 grades were eliminated and replaced by the 3-grade Senior Foreign Service: Counselor, Minister-Counselor and Career Minister). Beginning in early 1979, I began to make the case to USAID that I needed to be placed in a position commensurate with the more senior grade that I had achieved in the Peace Corps.

Q: How did USAID react to that new reality?

ALMAGUER: During the period of my detail, the Peace Corps would submit my EERs (Employee Evaluation Reports) to USAID and USAID apparently did little with them except to file them. I was doing quite well at Peace Corps and within a short period of time I was running a large operation in comparison to my peers in the same grade. USAID seems to have accepted the fact that I was now much more senior than when I left five years earlier. The issue for USAID was placing me in a job that made best use of my talents. I assumed that they were going to bring me back to Washington. Fortunately for me, the USAID Director in Honduras at the time, Jack Robinson, was one of the most senior and respected USAID officers anywhere, and he and I had developed a solid working relationship. He was aware of my situation and he made sure that I was introduced to the then-head of the USAID Latin America Bureau, Abelardo Valdez (who subsequently became Chief of Protocol for the State Department). "Lalo," as he was known, soon became convinced that I would be a good addition to USAID's program in Panama. This was during the politically-charged period when the Carter Administration's proposed Panama Canal Treaties were under discussion in the Senate and the future of the treaties was uncertain. Opposition to the treaties was strong and led by Senator Jesse Helms. President Carter, whose popularity by then was quite low, was in the political battle of his presidency; many doubted that he could garner the needed two-thirds of the votes in the Senate to pass the Treaties.

Lalo, in the meantime, was planning for the eventuality that the treaties would receive the needed two-thirds vote in the Senate. The USAID Mission in Panama would play an important role in the post-treaty period. It would be a focused program, principally designed to ensure that key elements of the treaties would be implemented as contemplated. To my surprise, Lalo considered that my skill set would be valuable in the sensitive Panama posting. As he told me at the time, he liked my reputation for being able

to combine the development and diplomacy tools effectively. I was also perceived as a good manager and spoke Spanish fluently. Hence, he proposed me as his Bureau's candidate to be Deputy Mission Director in Panama. My surprise at his offer was related principally to the fact that the Latin America and Caribbean Bureau of USAID was staffed with immensely talented people with more seniority. It was obvious that Lalo was bypassing many potential candidates who were far more experienced with USAID. There was some resentment on the part of some otherwise well qualified officers. Nevertheless, I somehow managed to overcome some of those resentments. The good thing about the Foreign Service is that, like the military, once the senior commanding officer has made a decision, most — if not all — officers will follow instructions and move on.

Q: Give me an example … you were pretty young, weren't you? How were you received?

ALMAGUER: I was all of 34! I had no idea then how young that was. The very first day that I was at my office in Panama, an officer who eventually became a good friend said to me: "You know, I resent this enormously. Nothing against you personally, but I should be sitting at your desk. This is not right." I was being tested every day. My response would always be that in the eyes of those who made the decision I was ready for the job and the right person for it. I made it clear that I understood some of the resentment; that I respected the technical competence of those more senior than me, and that I knew that we could work well together. I made that clear, not only verbally but also in my work habits. I intended to work as hard as anyone and was not afraid to get my hands dirty in the details of the job. I wanted my style to speak for itself: I always have emphasized teamwork, open communication, and transparency in decision-making. I always made sure that people understood what I was thinking (I don't read minds and don't expect others to read mine) and stressed that success in our mission required people working together harmoniously. I also ensured that everyone got the credit for success stories, not just the front office. There is no question that I had to work very hard to gain trust. But in the end, it worked and I had excellent rapport with my staff, including the ones who had been more outspoken in their initial resentment.

Q: What did you find that you had brought with you that was helpful in doing this?

ALMAGUER: Well, one would be good management skills. Secondly, I think I had a facility for not playing the "get-even" game. It would hurt initially to sense that some were waiting for me to slip on a banana peel. Ultimately, it was the ability to do the job and to be fair in my dealings with staff that allowed the initial resentment on the part of some to fade away.

Q. And what did your family think of the move?

ALMAGUER: Antoinette, had been teaching at a private school in Tegucigalpa [Elvel School] that followed the American educational system. She had been teaching 4th grade classes, while at the same time shouldering more than her fair share of responsibility for our two kids. By 1979, our son, Francisco Daniel, had turned six and in the first grade at the local American School in Tegucigalpa. Our daughter, Nina, was three, about to turn

four. Both had learned in Honduras to speak Spanish fluently. We were doing okay financially, but being in two hardship posts with the Peace Corps in those five years (Belize and Honduras) was not the financial bonanza that it may have been for State Department or USAID employees. The Peace Corps did not pay "hardship" allowance, considering (correctly) that, by definition, the Peace Corps worked in hardship places and its staff accepted that reality as a condition of employment. Further, the Peace Corps made it a point of having its staff stay away from costlier housing offered to State and USAID employees. Our house in Tegucigalpa was nice, but in a middle-class Honduran neighborhood — not in the hilltop neighborhood ("Lomas") where most American families lived. While we entertained quite a bit, we did not receive an entertainment allowance. We also took family vacations in nearby countries (in the late '70s it was still fairly safe to drive throughout the region, at least in the daytime), as well as visits back home to Florida and New Mexico. Hence, we had not saved as much as one would expect during our almost two years in Belize and three years in "Tegus." I am sure that Antoinette would have preferred to go back to the U.S., but Panama sounded like a good posting and perfect for our kids, who soon would need good schools. Hence, the transfer to Panama option sounded good.

The transfer process was marred somewhat by my coming down with hepatitis during my last weeks in Honduras, the result of my carelessness. I accompanied Ambassador Jaramillo to the inauguration of the "*Escuela Estados Unidos*" ("United States School"), which had been financed by a grant from a private group to a PCV based in Yoro, a hard-to-reach rural area in northern Honduras. As in all such festivities, "*chicha*" was served. *Chicha* is a local brew made from fermented corn and water. The subsequent hepatitis attack left me debilitated and this resulted in Antoinette having to bear most of the brunt of moving. It was not fun for either of us.

Q. So the treaties were approved….

ALMAGUER: While we were in Washington that summer going through USAID orientation and consultations, as well as being on home leave, the Senate, by one vote, ratified the Panama Canal Treaties. Only then was I allowed to move to Panama. We landed in Panama around Labor Day of '79, and the treaties were to go into effect October 1 of that year. This was pivotal and historic; it could not have been more exciting for me!

Panama in October 1979: Canal Treaties Go into Effect

Q: What was the situation in Panama in September of '79 when you arrived?

ALMAGUER: It was a period of high expectations and some anxiety. General Omar Torrijos was the dictator at the time and he was at the height of his popularity, having achieved one of the greatest victories in Panama's history – U.S. acceptance that the Canal would revert to Panama and that the old Canal Zone would come under Panamanian sovereignty. Torrijos was an unusual military dictator. Very few people ever went to see Omar Torrijos to conduct official business. There was no doubt as to who

was in charge, but aside from being the head of the National Guard (*de facto* military), he did not occupy a formal position in the civilian government. There was a civilian elected president playing a role more akin to a prime minister, with a cabinet made up mostly of civilian technocrats. There was a political party, PRD [Democratic Revolutionary Party], created by General Torrijos. Both civilian government officials and military officers were affiliated with the PRD. Elections were held periodically, but only the PRD candidates placed in there by Torrijos had any expectation of winning. The president when I arrived was Aristides Royo Sanchez, approximately 34 years old (the same as me), a lawyer by training and a very polished and engaging individual who had played a central role on the Panamanian side in the negotiation of the treaties with his American counterparts. Royo ran the PRD left-of-center government while Omar Torrijos spent most of his time up in his country farm. Yet, there was no question about who was in charge.

The Panamanians were looking forward to acquiring sovereignty over the Canal Zone as of October 1, 1979, control of U.S. installations over a longer negotiated period, and full control of the Canal itself as of December 31, 1999. The treaties were the best deal possible for the Panamanians, who resented in particular U.S. sovereignty over the Canal Zone, which divided the Republic of Panama in half. The only way to go from one side of the country to the other side was to cross a U.S. Canal Zone Police-patrolled bridge, with strict adherence to U.S. traffic laws over the 10-mile width of the Canal Zone. For good reason the Panamanians were very excited about what was coming up. They hated what they perceived as an indignity to have to subject themselves to U.S. police and traffic rules as they traveled from one side of their country to the other. They could not wait for that system to end.

It would take 20 years for the full transfer of the Canal and its ancillary operations to take place. Panama's full acquisition took place at mid-day on December 31, 1999, as contemplated in the treaties. While sovereignty of the Canal Zone was acquired on October 1, 1979, transfer of the various assets would take time. In practical terms, only two significant milestones were supposed to happen on October 1st. First, the American flag would be lowered over the Canal Zone and the Panamanian flag would rise over Ancon Hill, a highly visible and prominent sight a few blocks from "*Casco Viejo*" ("Old Town") in Panama City. Secondly, sovereignty over the Bridge of the Americas connecting both sides of the country, and the roads leading to it would also transfer to Panamanian sovereignty. The emotional significance of that moment cannot be overstated.

While the Panamanians were poised to seize the moment, the Americans on the other side — the so-called "Zonians" — were quite unhappy and deeply concerned. There were Zonians who not only had lived in the Zone all of their lives, but many also were children of original Zonians. While they may have claimed Alabama or Louisiana or some other (usually southern) state as their home of record, in fact, for many of them the Zone was the only home they knew. The Zone was "Little America." Frankly, it was "Little America of the 1920s" in most of the Zone, where life seemed similar to what life must have been like in small towns in the Midwest in the early1900s — but much hotter. The Zone seemed to me and to many others like a perfect socialist paradise, with the Zone

Government taking care of perfectly-manicured lawns and parks, and well-enforced laws. Schools were part of the Defense Department school system and military commissaries were open to all U.S. civilian personnel. Unlike the bustle of Panama City nearby, the Canal Zone was bucolic and devoid of commercial activity, except for the Canal and ancillary operations. Many Zonians were in shock that the Senate had actually ratified the treaties. Some imagined that on October 1st Panamanian hordes would charge across the border and commit all kinds of atrocities. Some of the Zonian families sent their children packing to the U.S. for fear that they would be caught in acts violence perpetrated by Panamanians, who would take advantage of the change in sovereignty to act out on repressed anger.

In fact, the transfer of sovereignty ceremony was anti-climatic. On September 30, then-Vice President Walter Mondale came to Panama for the hand-over ceremonies. On October 1, the crowds waited; the ceremony in the Zone was running behind schedule as the dignitaries waited for the appearance of Omar Torrijos. The president of Panama was there, along with most Panamanian civilian and military leaders, but Omar Torrijos was nowhere to be found. Ultimately, they decided to go ahead with the ceremony. What they apparently did not know at the time was that Omar Torrijos had decided that this was a perfectly good day for him to fly to Trinidad and Tobago, at the other end of the Caribbean, to buy some water buffaloes for his farm. [Laughter.] It was sort of funny and typical of the eccentric Omar Torrijos. The only newsworthy event that day (aside from Torrijos' absence) was that many Panamanians celebrated their "independence" by driving fast over the Bridge of the Americas, which was now under Panamanian jurisdiction. I am sure there were multiple speeding accidents. But this was a reflection of the emotions many Panamanians felt about no longer having to justify their driving habits to an American highway patrol officer.

Q: What about the U.S. official presence?

ALMAGUER: At the time, we had in Panama an interesting set-up. In effect, we had three co-equal Chiefs of Mission. We had the Ambassador of the United States to Panama, who at the time was a young gentleman by the name of Ambler H. Moss, Jr. Ambassador Moss is the terrific guy who has been, for many years now, Dean of the North-South Center at the University of Miami. At the time he must have been maybe in his late thirties. Moss had been one of the assistants to Ellsworth Bunker, who negotiated the treaties. As a political appointee, Moss had served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Congressional Relations in the early days of the Carter presidency, and then, after working on the Treaty negotiations, was named Ambassador to Panama. He was very well liked by both the American community and the Panamanians, and spoke Spanish with near-native fluency.

The second powerful figure on the U.S. side was the Commander-in-Chief (CINC), U.S. Southern Command [SOUTHCOM]. The Canal Zone was the Command Headquarters of SOUTHCOM until it was transferred to Miami years later. The large U.S. military community in the former Canal Zone was under his control. Further, as the head of the U.S. military, he played a pivotal role in U.S. interaction with the Panamanian military.

Finally we had, until October 1st, 1979, the governor of the Canal Zone. There had been times (perhaps the norm) when the Governor and the CINC were one and the same, but that wasn't the case at the time. Usually the governor was a retired three- or four-star general. As the person in charge of the Zone, the Canal and its operations were under his jurisdiction. Those three — the Ambassador, the CINC and the governor — met frequently. I understand that at times they clashed as each saw events from slightly different vantage points. On October 1st, 1979, the role of U.S. Governor of the Canal Zone ceased to exist. If I recall correctly, General Dennis McAuliffe, who had been the CINC, then became the U.S. Commissioner of the Panama Canal. As required under the Treaties, the Panama Canal Commission under McAuliffe appointed a Panamanian, Fernando Manfredo, Jr., as his deputy. Therefore, the Commissioner of the Canal took on a role similar to that of the former governor, with the added responsibility for implementing the gradual transfer of Canal assets and the training of Panamanians to run the Canal — and to do so in a working partnership with the Panamanian deputy. The Treaties provided that this arrangement would last 10 years, with the roles reversed in 1989 in preparation for full Panamanian control by 1999.

The relationship between Panama and the United States was tense at times. In retrospect, I am amazed that things turned out so well and that the sequence of transfer-related events adhered so closely to the Treaty-imposed timetables. Relations between the Panamanian public and Americans were complicated. After Puerto Rico, there isn't a country in Latin America that has become more Americanized than Panama. They use the dollar as the local currency (which they call the "*Balboa*"); they listen to American music; they even watched American television (broadcasting from the Zone) long before cable and satellite dishes made American TV a worldwide phenomenon. Many Panamanians studied in the U.S. On the other hand, the perceived indignity of having their country divided in half by the U.S.-run Canal Zone, plus the incorrect perception that the U.S. "stole" their Canal, and periodic legal problems with Zone authorities, gave Panamanians reasons (or at least the excuse) to gripe about the United States, culminating in violent clashes in 1964 between the U.S. military and Panamanian students along the street separating "Old Town" Panama and the Zone. (We called that street "*Avenida 4 de Julio*" and the Panamanians called it "*Avenida de los Martires*" – Martyrs Ave.) Panamanians are strongly nationalist; their sense of "victimhood" was capitalized on by leftist political operators, probably with Cuban support. Even though Panama's outward appearance was that of a country that had become highly Americanized, there was much resentment of the U.S. just below the surface. While I don't want to over-generalize, it is fair to say that I found the Panamanians, particularly those in the Panamanian government with whom I interacted, difficult to read. It was not easy to tell if the outward friendliness masked deep-seated antagonism.

Whenever we confronted disagreements with Panamanian authorities (or even local office staff) over some of the economic and social development issues in which we had a mutual interest, we wondered if the disagreement was legitimate and centered on the substance of the issue, or if it was a visceral reaction to having a *gringo* (no matter how well-meaning he or she was) tell them what to do. This perception issue filtered down to

individual relationships. This created some distance between the American and Panamanian communities, even under the most favorable of circumstances – and despite the genuine warmth and openness of the Panamanian people in social settings.

Further, corruption was endemic and another source of discomfort in dealing with Panamanian officials. Corruption in Panama at the time probably was no worse than anywhere else. But the way we saw it, Panama, because of its geographic assets and strong human capital base, could be one of the richest countries in the world. It was perfectly tailored to be the Hong Kong or Singapore of the Western Hemisphere. But it was nowhere near the scale of development of those two former British colonies. Corruption, combined with indifference shown by some of the local elites to the plight of the working poor, made Panama a frustrating country in which to work as a development professional. While the same could be said for other countries in which I have worked, the frustration was higher in Panama because the power elite, both in out of government, was failing to take full advantage of the country's enviable situation. When the local authorities failed to live up to their potential, our frustration was greater than it would have been elsewhere in the region.

The USAID/Panama Mission

Q: What about your job?

ALMAGUER: I served as Deputy Mission Director for USAID from 1979 to 1983. The Mission was mid-sized, with about 15 American officers occupying an excellent facility about a mile from the Embassy and across the street from the University of Panama. The local staff, numbering perhaps 100, was outstanding and occupied very senior positions within the Mission.

Q: What about the USAID Country Director?

ALMAGUER: The Mission received a new Mission Director only a month or two before I arrived: Aldelmo Ruiz was a senior career USAID FSO who had a strong engineering background and came from Puerto Rico (hence, good cultural and language affinity with the Panamanians). Ruiz had spent many years in the Middle East and was deemed to have strong technical skills. The feeling was that I would complement Ruiz in areas where he was perceived to be weaker, including management. We got along very well and did complement each other. In a strange way, he made my job of getting accepted within the Mission much easier. His communication skills were not great. Further, I soon realized that that he would spent lots of time out of the office for a very good reason (aside from liking to go out on field trips): he befriended Omar Torrijos. He may have been among Torrijos' closest friends. The two would spend enormous amount of "quality time" together touring farms and in Torrijos' own farm in Coclecito, in the middle of the country.

Ruiz developed confidence in my ability to run the operation in his absence and could be sure that I would be following his guidance, when given. Ruiz engaged principally in a

handful of issues of interest to him and was quite willing to delegate the rest. Hence, I soon found myself taking care of issues that normally would have gone up to the Mission Director. This put an additional burden on me, but one with many advantages. For example, as deputy mission director, I would not have been a member of the Country Team. But since the Mission Director so frequently was out of town, I was able to develop a better understanding of the complex set of U.S. interests in the country, while developing an excellent relationship with the Ambassador and the Embassy senior staff. The Country Team, and particularly the Ambassador, appreciated the fact that I was developing good relationships with my Panamanian counterparts, and that I had access that allowed me to interpret some of the government's views and actions, particularly on economic policy.

Q: What about the activities undertaken by the USAID Mission at that time?

ALMAGUER: Our biggest focus of attention was on development issues that related to the future well-being of the Canal — broadly interpreted, since a healthy, wealthy, and stable Panama would be more conducive to the successful implementation of the Canal Treaties. One of our biggest concerns post-October 1, 1979, was the physical well being of the lands adjacent to the Canal. The Canal would not exist if it were not for readily available fresh water. The volume of water that must be pumped into the chambers of each lock is enormous, and they do this 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, every day of every year. The reason why they are able to do that is because there is a great amount of rainfall in this humid tropical country and because there are natural and artificial reservoirs along the Canal, including the man-made Gatun Lake. These, along with the Chagres River the main source of Canal water, have been managed effectively for a century. This has included watershed-protection measures that were in place in the Canal Zone long before the world paid much attention to environmental issues. There is a great deal of forest land in the old Canal Zone. That was particularly striking because the Canal Watershed is adjacent to large population centers — Panama City and Colon — with their own demand for land and water.

Frankly, from the perspective of land-hungry Panamanians and commercial land developers, these were lands that could be exploited to meet urban pressures and even for commercial agriculture. Imagine the U.S. Homestead Act and visualize homesteaders literally lining the border to rush in once the gun was fired. Not to exaggerate too much, but there were legitimate concerns on the part of some outside observers that once the Canal Zone reverted to Panama, the pressures on the Panamanian government to release that land for private and commercial use would be intense. Helping Panama develop so that it could be a more prosperous society for all, while protecting the new Panamanian lands from human incursion, was perhaps our highest priority objective. As the facts can attest, the Panamanians did a very good job, which took courageous work on their part, with our assistance where feasible.

Q: What else was the USAID program doing?

ALMAGUER: Panama had a per capita income that was much higher than in most of Latin America. Our focus, as I noted earlier, was primarily on issues having to do with the Canal and efforts to mitigate the impact of migration into the old Canal Zone. This included, in addition to watershed protection programs, the promotion of secondary urban areas in the interior of the country that would provide improved markets for farmers and for urban job seekers who would otherwise attempt to move into the old Canal Zone. The gap between Panama City and the rest of the country was enormous and we wanted to help reduce that gap. We also put lots of money into low-income housing to encourage people to move into areas that were already settled, as opposed to opening up new lands in the Zone. As a consequence, new housing projects went up in the periphery of Panama City, away from the Canal Zone, with many interesting new features. These were sold at low interest rates, with mortgages that we helped to finance.

Panama Political Highlights: 1979 - 83

Q. Aside from the Canal, what were some of the things that were going on in Panama during your time there?

The Shah Arrives (December 1979)

One of the early highlights of our time in Panama was the temporary stay in that country of the ailing exiled Shah of Iran and his wife, Farah Diba, from December 1979 to March 1980. This humanitarian gesture, coordinated by the Carter White House with the Panamanian authorities, was meant to provide medical attention to an old ally without further endangering the lives of the U.S. hostages in Teheran. The fear was that any further medical attention to the Shah on U.S. soil would further aggravate the serious diplomatic crisis already underway in Teheran. Hence, Panama, with decent medical facilities, was deemed a viable option.

Q: Could you talk a bit about when the Shah [Mohammad Reza Pahlavi] came to be there?

ALMAGUER: The Shah, if I recall correctly, was flown from the Middle East in 1979 to receive medical attention in Houston. It wasn't clear at the time that he had terminal cancer. The Shah's presence in U.S. territory aggravated an already serious situation with Iran. Through the intermediation of Hamilton Jordan, Carter's chief of staff, and Jody Powell, a senior Carter advisor, who flew to Panama in late 1979, President Carter gained agreement from General Torrijos, the *de facto* ruler of the country, to let the Shah stay in Panama. Unlike many countries in Latin America at the time, Panama offered a hospitable physical environment and good medical care. Ideally, the Shah would be allowed to live out his retirement there. The goodwill between the Carter White House and Torrijos as a result of the Canal Treaties helped to secure Panama's acceptance of this "guest," who probably was unwelcomed almost everywhere else.

The arrival of the Shah, though, provoked University of Panama students. Bear in mind that many of the clashes in the early 1960s between American military personnel and Panamanian youth involved University of Panama students. When the Shah showed up in Panama, students rioted for days. The Shah had to be ferried from one place to the other, particularly for medical attention, and this was a source of constant tension. The Shah himself was not a willing refugee. Even though he was in failing health, he didn't particularly care to be exiled in some villa in Panama. Eventually the Panamanian authorities sent him to Contadora, a resort island some 30 miles off the coast in the Pacific. Even there the Shah created consternation. We at USAID witnessed many of the anti-Shah (and anti-American) protest marches from our perch at the USAID building located across the street from the university. Fortunately, USAID was never attacked, but one of our jobs was to let our American Embassy colleagues know when the marchers were on their way to protest against "Yankee imperialism."

One of the funniest episodes that I can recall, a little risqué too, which I heard from Ambler Moss a few days after the fact, (and, hence, is third-hand) involved the alleged kidnapping of the Shah by unknown forces. On a Sunday morning, the Ambassador received an urgent call from Hamilton Jordan, Carter's chief of staff, informing him that the White House had heard from the Shah's wife, Farah Diba, that a Panamanian helicopter had come into their compound in Contadora, and soldiers, with weapons in hand, had whisked away the Shah. It appeared to be a kidnapping. The Ambassador was asked to immediately find out what was going on. It was a Sunday, and the president (Aristides Royo) was nowhere to be found, and Torrijos, as usual, was at his farm and couldn't be reached. Hours passed, and finally at about 4 p.m. that same day, the president of Panama returned the Ambassador's call and had a good laugh. He explained that the Shah had a girlfriend and had to find a way to escape his wife. [Laughter.] The Panamanians had engineered for him to be "kidnapped", creating an unintended international incident. This is an example of how difficult the Shah made it for the American Embassy every day he was in Panama. Eventually, around March 1980, the Shah just couldn't stand it anymore and left. By then he had terminal cancer and died a few months later in Egypt, I believe. But Panamanians thoroughly resented having the Shah there — I think it was unanimous. They resented the imposition of this man, particularly after the Canal Treaties went into effect. The popular feeling was that Panama had regained its honor with the Treaties, only to lose it soon thereafter.

Q. What about relations between the U.S. and Panama after Carter left the White House?

Reagan's Relations with Panama

ALMAGUER: In 1981, when Ronald Reagan assumed the Presidency, Ambler Moss was still Ambassador. Unlike most political Ambassadors, Moss was allowed to stay much longer than is the norm. It speaks highly of the respect all had for him and the fact that he was seen as a professional foreign affairs specialist and not highly partisan. Shortly after Alexander Haig became Secretary of State, Haig sent a note to Torrijos — and I only know this second-hand — reminding him that the new U.S. Administration was not happy that Panama appeared to be too friendly with Castro and too cozy with anti-U.S.

groups. In a way, this was Haig shaking his finger at Torrijos and making sure that he understood that, unlike the Carter Administration, the new team in Washington was not going to take it sitting down. Ambassador Moss trekked up to the mountaintop where Torrijos lived on his farm and, as Ambler recounted, he delivered the note to Torrijos as the general was rocking in a hammock. Torrijos read the note and gave it back to Moss, and is alleged to have said (to paraphrase): "You cannot rely on the post office these days, because I am sure that this message was not intended for me. I am sure that that message was intended for the governor of Puerto Rico. If it was intended for me, please remind Mr. Haig that Panama, unlike Puerto Rico, is an independent country." [Laughter.] The relationship with Panama in that early period of the Reagan Administration was a tense one, as the new U.S. Administration attempted to establish a tougher foreign policy agenda for the region.

Torrijos killed and the Rise of Noriega

While my family and I were on home leave, on August 1, 1981, General Torrijos was killed in a plane crash. When I heard the news on a television news bulletin, while watching a regular TV show at a beach house in North Carolina, I was sure that my boss had been killed as well because Ruiz was always with the general. Fortunately, that was not the case, but it was a very traumatic moment for all. After this tragic accident, Panama was quickly transformed from having a fairly benign dictatorship, whose leader had managed to gain new respect for Panama, to a more malignant and unstable form of government. A procession of "lowlifes" in the military vied for power, culminating with Colonel Manuel Noriega, chief of the military intelligence service ("G-2"), taking full control of the military and of the civilian government shortly after we departed post in the summer of 1983.

Noriega was already a notorious figure in and out of uniform. With Torrijos's departure, a new phase of U.S.-Panamanian relations emerged. Relations with Panama in the 1970s and early 1980s had been friendly but sensitive for reasons we have discussed already. However, relations went from so-so to terrible in a relatively short period after Torrijos' death, thanks in great part to the perception - if not the fact - that Noriega was part of the drug trade, was involved in the murder of opponents, and was linked to other types of corrupt practices. Fortunately for me, I was not there to see the deterioration of the Panamanian state under Noriega.

The Pope visits

One of the more interesting episodes during our time in Panama was the visit of the then-young, very active Pope, John Paul II. The highlight of the visit was a big mass at Albrook Field, which was one of the first U.S. military bases transferred to Panama. The location next to the city, with a large but still unused airfield, made it ideal for the Papal Mass. Some two days before the mass, the Panamanians had still not cut the grass, and there was lots of grass! So they set the grass on fire. By the time we all traipsed over to the mass, we were stepping on embers. Many in the American community (and even a few Panamanians opponents of the government) often cited this logistics snafu as an

example of how the Panamanians could not get-it-together and plan properly. That continued to characterize the view of Zonians in particular and of other observers who dreaded the idea that Panama would gain full control of Canal operations in a few years. History has vindicated the Panamanians' capacity to manage. But all too often detractors of the Treaties would use such examples to predict the collapse of Canal operations soon after the Panamanians were scheduled to it take over.

My family and I were beneficiaries of strained relations between the new military authorities (in the aftermath of Torrijos' death) and our Embassy. Our new Ambassador, a terrific and highly-successful career Foreign Service Officer, Ted [Everett] Briggs, was having difficulties with the interim military leadership and, since the Pope's visit was being touted by those leaders as perhaps an endorsement of their regime, Briggs decided not to attend the event and send, instead, a more junior representative. That turned out to be me, giving my wife, kids and me an up-and-close seat among the massive crowd of attendees. Despite the heat (from both the intense sun and the still smoldering ground), it was a memorable occasion for us. I am not sure that the Panamanians noticed the American snub but we surely enjoyed playing the role. And, of course, I was quite pleased and honored that in such a large embassy community, Ambassador Briggs chose my family to represent the U.S.

The Zonians, the U.S. Military and Expatriates

Q: Talk about your interaction with the Zonians, the American military and the large expatriate community in Panama.

ALMAGUER: Surprisingly, I had little interaction with any of them. I already have spoken a bit about the Zonians during the Canal Zone transfer process. My only significant interaction with the Zonians had to do with the fact that, regrettably (at least my wife and I felt that way), our kids had to go to Department of Defense schools in the former Canal Zone, as did most kids of the official Embassy community in Panama City. I say regrettable for two reasons: every morning they had to travel a significant distance to get to their school (Diablo Elementary in the old Canal Zone), when there were perfectly good international schools near our house. Secondly, the curriculum was geared to meet certain minimum standards but offered little for those students who were ready for a more challenging program. My kids were still little (in fact, during our first year in Panama, our daughter attended a pre-school program across the street from our house, while our son was in the second grade). Had we stayed longer in Panama, we probably would have had them attend a private school in the city.

We also bought most of our groceries and many household items at the military PX (Post Exchange). The Department of Defense had huge ones in the old Canal Zone at the time. Having come from both the Peace Corps and USAID, we were appalled that the U.S. Government was spending enormous amounts of monies to fly in daily, for example, white Holsum Bread from Miami, when one could buy perfectly good, tasty bread down the street. When you lived in the Zone, whether civilian or military, you were in the United States, and things like PXs and schools reinforced that perspective. For most

residents of the Zone at the time, they had very few reasons to cross the street to go into Panama City. Obviously, for us, it was convenient to buy cheaper products in the former Canal Zone, so we drove the extra miles on most weekends to shop there.

Our stay in Panama also coincided with a period of some turmoil for the U.S. military. To put some context into my story, there was a colonel assigned to Panama at the time by the name of Wesley Clark. He went on to become a four-star general and Supreme Allied Commander during the war in the former Yugoslavia. At that time, however, Clark was a lieutenant colonel. A few years after he retired, I had an opportunity to engage with him at a dinner party in Washington and we talked a bit about that period of time in Panama and in the military. He concurred that it was a difficult period because the military was still reeling from Vietnam. The draft had ended and many of the new recruits were not up to desired standards. For example, a significant number of new recruits had not yet completed high school. Hence, training and discipline was made more difficult. Further, military pay was low and support services were not fully funded.

One outcome of this situation was that the military was having problems with some military families. For example, a few — but too many by historical standards — engaged in petty acts of thievery. Alcohol abuse was another serious problem among a number of military families. I am not sure the problem was greater among the U.S. military families in the Zone vs. elsewhere, but it was a significant challenge for the U.S. military leadership in Panama.

In the meantime, many among the American civilian population of the former Canal Zone were beginning to move out. Canal operations were gradually being taken over by Panamanians. There were incentives for early retirement. In many cases, experienced American hands were leaving before the Panamanians were ready to fill some of the specialized positions. As a consequence, an increasing number of Americans helping to run the Canal in those early years of the 20-year transition period were American contractors without the emotional attachment to the Zone, or to Canal operations, that characterized the traditional Zonian population.

In my day-to-day work and in our social interactions, we dealt almost exclusively with the Panamanian Government and civil society and with the U.S. official community. Our interaction with private sector Americans living and working in Panama (particularly in the booming banking sector) was somewhat limited. Our paths did not cross that much.

Working Among Panamanians

Q: How did you find the sort of the people you were working with?

ALMAGUER: The Panamanian USAID staff and our counterparts in the public and private sector were among the sharpest and best educated that I have encountered over my career! Our staff, as well as many of our government and private sector counterparts, spoke flawless English. Almost all had some type of degree, knew what they were doing, and felt themselves the equals of the Americans. Perhaps because of this, they also were

quick to take offense at perceived slights or condescension on the part of the Americans. The period from 1964 (when riots took place in Panama demanding an end to perceived "American colonialism") until the Treaties went into effect in 1979, many angry words were exchanged. In the post-Canal Treaties period sensitivities remained raw. I recall instances within our USAID staff in which some Panamanian employees, feeling aggrieved, would say (with regards to an American colleague or supervisor), "John doesn't treat me with respect. If he doesn't change his ways, we're not coming to work tomorrow," or similar verbal threats. Panamanians pulled no punches and felt quite free to voice strong opinions on any subject. This, of course, made some Americans uncomfortable. But in terms of productivity, the vast majority of the Panamanian staff at USAID and elsewhere within the American official community was terrific. As events have proven, the Panamanians have been just as good as the Americans at running the Canal. They have done a terrific job, and so my hat's off to them. I would like to believe that some of that tension that I witnessed in my time in Panama has now dissipated.

At least some Americans at USAID in Panama during my time there did not find the assignment their preferred cup of tea — more so than at any other post that I had served, despite all of the amenities at post. One American staff member told me once, "I signed up to go overseas and I find myself at home, in a way, with all these extra added tensions." To add to the cultural confusion that Panama caused at least some Americans, it was (and continues to be) a dollar economy, with zero "locality pay." It was not a place a Foreign Service family went to save money. Panama was a comfortable but not necessarily a happy place for many American families. Further, there was little sense of American community because it was fractured. For example, if you were an American military officer assigned to the Embassy, you attended Country Team meetings and so on, but your social life was over at the Officers' Club in the old Canal Zone. Others found social outlets outside the official American community. The strong *esprit de corps* that one often finds in more isolated and physically difficult postings was not in evidence in Panama. At the time that I was there, the Peace Corps was no longer in Panama. There were a number of banks with American senior staff, but these were business folks who, frankly, did not interact all that much with the Embassy community, except for the specialists in commerce.

Q: I would think you would find it hard to calibrate your approach to Panamanians, both on the job and otherwise, in that you didn't want to appear condescending. Was this hard?

ALMAGUER: It was hard, but there is no question that my ethnic and cultural background helped a great deal because I was able to speak with Panamanians in Spanish using their comfortable style of social interaction. My wife and I found ourselves invited to a number of social functions that were strictly Panamanian. We would look around and all of a sudden realize that we were the only non-Panamanians there. My boss, Al Ruiz (the USAID Mission Director at the time), although he was not prone to socializing, also helped to break some barriers. Our Ambassador appreciated this because everyone knew that Torrijos considered Al Ruiz his favorite American buddy. (Ruiz was from Puerto Rico and was as folksy as Torrijos and shared common interests, including their love of

the rural countryside lifestyle). USAID and the Embassy benefited in a direct way from the role that Al played as the person close to Torrijos - someone who, like Ruiz, was a bit of a recluse. Government counterparts knew that if disagreements reached a boiling point, USAID had a direct pipeline to the ultimate decider in Panama. Our Ambassador at the time [Ambler Moss] astutely allowed that relationship to blossom since it was one sure way to get to Torrijos when other avenues were not working.

Living Conditions

Q: Did you find the problem that has existed in other places, where USAID people were living" high off the hog," with perks not available to State or other agencies?

ALMAGUER: No, Panama was not one of those places. Most had pretty much the same kind of living environment. It wasn't bad, although my own house was fairly modest and more modest than the apartments where most Americans lived. Most Americans lived in apartment buildings with beautiful views of Panama Bay. These were large apartments, but living was expensive. The cost of real estate was high and living allowances in many cases did not cover all rental and utility expenses. American officers tended to live a little lower on the scale of what you could expect to get in a country like Panama. The USAID vs. State accommodations debate was a nonissue in Panama. Frankly, I continue to be perplexed that this matter keeps coming up, since in my experience USAID and State housing were just about the same everywhere I served.

Corruption

Q: What about the problem of corruption? Were you seeing a disintegrating society after the Torrijos airplane crash, or had corruption been there all along?

ALMAGUER: It wasn't so much a disintegrating society, but it was a society built around corruption. Everybody understood that to get anything done required a "*quid pro quo*." Even those with the best of intentions (and most were in this category) had to "game the system" to get anything done and everyone was suspicious of everyone else when it came to business deals. When specific stories emerged, little surprise was expressed because it merely proved the assumption. For example, the deputy commissioner of the Panama Canal at the time, a very distinguished Panamanian gentleman whom we handpicked for that job, was subsequently alleged to be "selling" property in the Zone that didn't belong to him. Public officials were all suspect — and often for good reason. It was often very frustrating because you would expect this from people who had fewer opportunities for advancement in a lesser-developed environment. That well-educated, business-savvy Panamanians were involved in corrupt practices was a great disappointment to all of us working in the development field.

Panama had a highly stratified society — not unusual for Latin America, but it was a major feature of Panamanian society. There were the wealthy social elites, which the Panamanians called the *"rabiblancos,"* which in a rough translation means "white tails" and is intended to convey the way a duck waddles and appears to be full of his own

importance. The *rabiblancos* were perceived to be pompous and tended also to be whiter (*blanco*) than the average Panamanian. They controlled the business sector, particularly those businesses that took advantage of Panama's transit zone location. By the mid-20th Century Panama had became an international center of commerce and banking and the U.S.-educated *rabiblanco* community was among the first to seize the opportunities the geographic setting offered Panama. This community seemed to flaunt its wealth — there were more Mercedes and BMWs in Panama during my time there than I had seen anywhere else. The majority of Panamanians resented the *rabiblanco* lifestyle, but not enough to stand up to it. The military (technically a police force) was overwhelmingly composed of individuals from the lower classes and of darker complexion. While ostensibly the military coup that led to the rise of Torrijos and his successors had more to do with the dispute over the Canal, class issues were part of the mix. Even during the era of military rule, the role of the *rabiblancos* remained pretty much intact.

Corruption was a subject not talked about all that much during my years in Panama, if for no other reason than the military government would not allow it. The military controlled most of the media. What one heard and saw in the media were mostly benign stories about the latest inauguration of a new housing program or the latest supermarket opening. But social issues of that nature were only discussed in private settings. The military and the private sector elites had little in common but they understood each other and gave each other plenty of room to enjoy the benefits of Panama's location and of its growing wealth.

Q: What about corruption in the USAID program? I would think that this would be a real target.

ALMAGUER: We were sensitive to that issue. Nevertheless, we had it under control. To begin with we did not have any cash transfers in Panama. The country did not need it. Further, we were leery of cash transfers, which is direct budget support for the government. Any time cash is transferred, there is legitimate concern that while U.S. resources may be applied to support legitimate development activities, money is fungible and the local resources "liberated" in the local government's budget as a result of U.S. support could wind up in someone's pocket. These cash transfers serve a good purpose to augment local investment in sectors like health and agriculture, but the "local counterpart funds" do not always stay in the desired sector and are all-too-often diverted to other sectors or to support corrupt practices.

We had a strong audit program in Panama. In fact, the regional USAID audit office for Latin America was co-located with the Panama Mission. Nevertheless, when it came time to do some of the road construction projects — we did a number of secondary roads to help encourage farmers to develop their agricultural lands instead of moving to the canal area — we were constantly vigilant of the process used to build these roads. In fact, we saw instances of construction bids that were rigged. Two or three companies would bid on a project and the process seemed fair and transparent. But we may not have known that the companies competing for the project may have been owned by three different cousins, with these cousins eventually working it out among themselves to share in the

profits. We tried, but I am sure we were not always successful in preventing those arrangements that limited price competition.

I am sure that we at USAID did a much better job, and always have, than the World Bank and the IDB [Inter-American Development Bank] in minimizing misuse of development assistance funds. This is not to blame other agencies of sloppy management of their funds; rather, USAID has tended to control its monies a lot tighter because: 1) we have more people working for us in the field, and 2) we participate in all aspects of a project, including the contracting and implementation phases. In contrast, many of the lending banks transfer the funds to the local authorities and are not as involved in the execution of projects as USAID tends to be. Further, much of our assistance is channeled through established NGOs (Nongovernmental Organizations) like CARE and Save the Children, or contracted through other mechanisms in which USAID plays a direct role. Panamanian authorities did not always appreciate our "hand-holding" and there were tensions, but they understood that we were committed to ensuring that U.S. taxpayers' dollars were used for their intended purposes.

Rise of Noriega

Q: You were mentioning you had some stories that you observed in the rise of Noriega, didn't you?

ALMAGUER: Manuel Noriega early on was the regional commander for the western Panama (Chiriquí) region. Then he became chief of intelligence during the Torrijos regime. He was a most unappealing character. Noriega masterfully, but in a most self-serving way, used that intelligence platform for his own benefit. By all accounts, he managed to get a lot of money from some of the rich families by simply making them aware of the fact that he knew where their money came from and that he had the power to interfere with those business pursuits. He no doubt made plenty of money from his role as chief of intelligence by extortion and sweetheart deals — and that's even before he became wealthier by becoming complicit in the drug trade from South America and other illicit commerce transiting through Panama.

He also tried to ingratiate himself with the Americans, most cynically by offering his services in support of the U.S. "war on drugs." One of the most awkward episodes that I can recall was participating in a ceremony in 1982 at the Panama Hilton Hotel ballroom when then-Vice President George H. W. Bush presented Noriega with a DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) medal and a certificate of congratulations for Noriega's "supportive role" in the war on drugs. Only seven years later, by then President, George H. W. Bush was forced to invade Panama and overthrow Noriega for turning our ally into a narco-state. Noriega was probably devoid of ideology other than greed, and for a while played us very effectively.

Noriega was a very strange character. He was widely assumed to be bisexual, with all the male and female lovers money could buy. He imported some from Scandinavian countries. One day, while Noriega was serving as head of intelligence, his assistant called

USAID Director Al Ruiz requesting an opportunity for Noriega to be briefed on what USAID was doing in Panama. Al arranged for an intimate luncheon at his house, including only Al, Noriega, his assistant, and me. This was to be the first and only time I actually had a conversation with Noriega. At the last minute, his office called to say that Noriega would be accompanied by two assistants, rather than just one; so we set an extra plate. Soon the colonel showed up and his two assistants were statuesque Scandinavian women who spoke no English or Spanish (that we know of). It was strange for this guy to show up to a serious business luncheon with U.S. officials displaying these two women in that fashion. I never understood what type of message, if any, he was delivering other than perhaps reminding us that he was a man of good taste in women! He had no class. And from what little I can recall about the substance of the lunch, he did not seem particularly interested in the work we were doing in his country. I should note that much earlier, before my time and while Noriega was police chief in Chiriquí, he had managed to scare the Peace Corps away from the region because of the way he would sexually harass women volunteers in that area of the country. Allegedly, if the volunteer refused his advances, he would make it impossible for that person to continue to work, often resulting in the transfer of the volunteer to another region or to another country. Noriega is one of the sleaziest characters I ever have met, and one whom apparently we thought we were using in support of our interests, both in the Cold War struggle against Castro and in the fight against narcotics. On the contrary, history shows that he used us on both counts. I suspect that one of subjective elements of the subsequent decision by President George H. W. Bush to overthrow Noriega was the anger Bush must have felt at being used multiple times by this cunning but sleazy tinhorn dictator.

Cuba

Q: While you were there at Country Team meetings or in conversations or even in your work, did the Cuba connection turn up at all?

ALMAGUER: Yes. Panama was one of the Latin American countries that worried us the most, since it was beautifully situated to facilitate Cuba's involvement in the rest of the region and to facilitate Cuban commerce that would circumvent the U.S. embargo. After having broken diplomatic relations with Cuba early in the Castro period, Panama was among the first in the region to break ranks and recognize the Castro regime. When I served in Panama, relatively few Latin American countries had recognized the Castro regime, so Cuba had a very large presence in Panama. That presence was pervasive: they had a strong Embassy presence; lots of Panamanian students were taken to Cuba to study, which always has been one of Cuba's favorite public diplomacy tools (along with sending Cuban doctors to serve in the Latin American countryside); and they had a very large intelligence presence in Panama, in some cases I assume spying on us.

Cuba also had a very large commercial presence — Panama was a moneymaking proposition for Cuba. They even used some restaurants as fronts, with legal local ownership but presumed to be owned by the Cuban government. They had a liquor business there. Havana Gold Rum was bottled in Panama, but everybody knew that it was

owned lock, stock, and barrel, by the Cuban government. The Cubans maintained warehouses at the Canal Free Zone in Colón on the Atlantic side.

What the Cubans were up to was always a matter of interest on the part of the Embassy. While I was not involved with our Station, I have to imagine that much of the workload of the Agency in Panama centered on what the Cubans were up to.

Panamanian Media, Labor and Cultural Norms

Q: How did you find the media there?

ALMAGUER: The media was either corrupted by Torrijos and his military successors, or hampered in the conduct of their work by the ruling authorities. It was one of the most controlled medias that I have experienced in Latin America. Control of the media by the government authorities was ubiquitous in Latin America at the time, but in Panama it seemed to be more so and, hence, noteworthy. A journalist who attempted every once in a while to publish something critical of the regime could inevitably find himself in trouble. They would tow his car because it was parked improperly or his printing press burned down "accidentally." In a happy-go-lucky, sunshine-filled country, it was a repressive environment for serious Panamanian journalists.

Q: How about the labor movement? I would think that would affect you.

ALMAGUER: The labor movement was also totally controlled or subjugated by the regime. Unlike other countries in Latin America, where the local labor movement managed to organize strikes and other labor movement activities, in Panama they were used in support of the regime and its causes. The AFL-CIO, which in those days had a presence in Latin America, found Panama one of the more difficult settings for them because they could not truly develop a working relationship with independent labor groups. If one emerged, that organization would soon be co-opted by the web of controls that the military, along with their civilian allies, had created.

When we were in Honduras the first time (1976-79), there was a military dictatorship in place. If you went to a government office in Honduras, most of the senior people wore military uniforms, so you knew that this was a military government. In Panama it wasn't that way. Most of the people in government offices were civilians. The chief interlocutor for USAID in Panama during part of my tour was the Minister of Planning, Ernesto Pérez Balladares, "El Toro (The Bull) Balladares" as he was known. He worked in a very senior position as a civilian, but it was clear that he reported not to the civilian president but to the military high command. Balladares was a brilliant man and no doubt would have done well in any business environment. Eventually he became (many years after I had left) one of the first freely elected presidents of Panama. Years later, the day before he left office, we took away his visa — for corruption (selling Panamanian passports to Chinese citizens). In my time in Panama he was an integral part of the Torrijos regime, and while he led a multimillionaire's life and was part of the *"rabiblanco"* social class, he used and was used by the military to serve their mutual interests.

I should add that I learned a good deal about the Balladares lifestyle early on. I became aware that the minister enjoyed having people over for breakfast as a way of dealing with issues. So I was invited to breakfast at his house on a fairly frequent basis; to this day I have been to few houses anywhere that displayed the kind of ostentatious wealth that I saw at Pérez Balladares's home.

Q: Given the situation, most of the people with money sent their kids to school in the United States, didn't they?

ALMAGUER: Yes.

Q: Did they come back with the spark of wanting to change the habits of the elites or were they immediately engulfed by them?

ALMAGUER: Frankly, this is one of the most frustrating issues that I have observed not only in Panama but also throughout the region. Many of these young men and women (mostly men initially, now increasingly more women) were sent by their families to study in the United States. They came back home with engineering or other valuable degrees. In recent times, MBAs (Masters of Business Administration) from Harvard, Yale and other prestigious schools have been popular. What we have to remember is that in the scale of values and priorities in these countries, nothing comes before your extended family. Your country, your friends, your outlook on life, and so on may be important, but nothing is as central as your family, and it is a bonding that we cannot overemphasize because we don't fully understand it in the United States. When these young professionals from well-established families come back home they may be full of ideals for helping their country and society. Nevertheless, along the way the patriarch of the family says, "Well, now that you got an MBA I am going to make you foreman of my factory a hundred miles from here," and that basically begin the process of going into the family business, moving up the ladder until they eventually inherit it. Very quickly they come to accept the norms of a successful enterprise in a country like Panama, which may include offering and accepting bribes, gaining monopolistic control of the market in which they work, and skimming on worker wages and safety. It is almost as if much of the training and ethics inculcated in them by their business school had gone out the window. I find it one of the most frustrating sides of dealing with Latin America.

Change of U.S. Administrations

Q: Earlier you mentioned Secretary Haig's note to Torrijos, but what about the change from the Carter administration to the Reagan administration? Did you feel it in your work?

ALMAGUER: The simple answer is "yes." It was one of the most significant transitions of U.S. administrations that I can recall in my many years of service. By way of contrast, the change in administrations from George H.W. Bush to Clinton, and from Clinton to George W. Bush, from my vantage point, were relatively smooth. The one from Carter to

Reagan involved a totally different perception of the world, and the incoming team had opposed the Panama Canal Treaties. They inherited a set of treaties well underway in terms of implementation and almost impossible to reverse, but I would guess that some of President Reagan's folks were hoping that, somewhere along the way, either Panama would do something that would void the treaties or something would happen that would allow the U.S. to reverse this "ignominious giveaway," as someone in the Reagan Administration expressed it. USAID was somewhat less affected. USAID probably was an afterthought on the part of the Reagan administration. I'm not sure how Peter McPherson came to be named as USAID Administrator nor what the Reagan Administration expected of him. McPherson — who to this day remains a dear friend and who subsequently served as president of Michigan State University, among many senior positions in his stellar career — was a young lawyer who had been a Peace Corps Volunteer in Peru. He was someone who enjoyed details — I've never seen anybody consume details as much as Peter — and who habitually worked 20 hours a day. In fact, I recently called Peter on an unrelated matter and, as I waited, his secretary confirmed that he still does the same, that he doesn't sleep all that much. Peter's outlook reflected the Reagan administration's commitment to free-market principles, to promoting business as the way to create growth, et cetera, but Peter's historical baggage of having served in Latin America as a Peace Corps Volunteer allowed him to see certain nuances in the world that were not evident to some of his colleagues in the new Reagan Administration. This was the Administration, if you recall, that changed the U.S. position on family-planning issues to a more restrictive view. Yet, Peter managed this sensitive topic in a way that allowed the USAID family-planning programs to thrive. Peter did a masterful job of keeping the Reagan White House happy with him, and he, after serving as USAID administrator for over six years, was handpicked by then-Secretary of the Treasury Jim Baker [James Baker] to be his deputy. Here's a savvy, politically well-attuned guy who succeeded during those eight years to balance competing political and social views, while earning the respect and loyalty of his career staff. If you talk to anybody familiar with USAID history today, they no doubt will tell you that the Peter McPherson era was the Golden Age of USAID. We were blessed with great leadership who managed up well while gaining legions of supporters throughout the complex USAID bureaucracy. I consider him one of my best mentors ever.

McPherson made one of his first field trips (in 1981) to Panama - I suppose because it was easy to reach at a time when he did not want to be too far from Washington. That was the first time I met him and was very impressed with him, even though I thought he was a bit unusual for a high-level Washington dignitary. He was very informal in his dealings with people, asked rather detailed technical questions and, most surprisingly, listened and learned from those discussions. He was "real" and not your classic self-important functionary. That helps to explain his success. We were blessed to have him as Administrator for many years and I was lucky to be able to work closely with him once I was transferred to Washington in 1983.

Ambler Moss was eventually replaced as Ambassador, as one would have expected for a political appointee of the previous Administration, but he left after having served U.S. interests in an impeccable manner and with the friendship of the Panamanians and of the

Embassy community. In my book, he rates high among the best political Ambassadors of his generation and among the best with whom I have served, political or career.

Fortunately for us at the U.S. Embassy community in Panama, the Reagan Administration send us another excellent Ambassador: Ted Briggs [Edward Ellis Briggs]. A second-generation Ambassador, Briggs spoke Spanish like a native. This was his first of several ambassadorships and other senior postings. While he was perceived as more in line with the political leanings of the Reagan team, he — like any good Foreign Service Officer — was the consummate diplomat and effective leader. He had strong opinions but also listened to other views and was open to his staff. He quickly earned the respect and even the admiration of his team — including me. Despite the fact that I was the Number Two person at USAID, he and I developed a good relationship early on, perhaps because he was born in Cuba while his father was serving in Cuba as political counselor in the '30s and eventually went back to Cuba again when his father was serving as Ambassador there. So he spoke flawless "*Cubano*" (Cuban Spanish), which is very fast and very colloquial, and he and I loved to engage each other in this language. He was a wonderful person, and his wife, Sally, was equally regarded, particularly in her work with the community.

Ambler Moss had a conciliatory style, in tune with the needs of the time he was there — Panama had a difficult relationship with the U.S. in the 60s and 70s and to be effective one had to treat the Panamanians gingerly. The Ted Briggs approach at a different moment in time was one of, "Hey, if we're going to be partners, if you want to be treated as equals, then we're going to discuss these issues as adults." He came onboard about the time of the Torrijos airplane accident, and so he witnessed the beginning of a procession of would-be military dictators until the emergence of Noriega. His relationship with the Panamanian authorities was less subtle, but also appropriate in keeping with the changing realities in Panama. The new military leadership didn't particularly like him, but they respected him. Ted Briggs gave my family and me one of the most unique tasks ever for a second-tier officer. As I recounted earlier, during the Pope's visit, he opted to demonstrate his displeasure with the military leadership by not occupying the VIP (Very Important Person) seat reserved for the American Ambassador and his family at the Papal Mass. I recall that I was on the Country Team at the time and that I was one of the ones who said, "But you've got to go! This is not about Panama; this is about the Pope and the Vatican!" "No, no, I'm not going!" he insisted. So he called me afterwards and said, "I'm not going, but you're going!" "Why me?" I was really junior on the totem pole, and he said: "That's precisely why! I know you. You're going to do a good job. If I send the DCM or the Political Counselor they may think that I'm sick. By sending you, they (the military leaders) will get the message that I really do not want to be there with them." For me it was great! This was Ted Briggs' style, which one had to respect and admire. After he left Panama, he was appointed to be Ambassador to Honduras during some of the most difficult times in the Central American crises of the 1980s. The Reagan Administration and Congress loved his toughness and straight-shooter style. I was lucky to see first-hand two contrasting ambassadorial styles, both successful and both appropriate for the times in which they (Moss and Briggs) served.

Q: This brings up the reason I asked about this change in administration. It seems that for the Reagan Administration, Central America was a major focus. For most of the other geographic bureaus, the change of administration went smoothly, but there was practically blood in the corridors of ARA (Bureau for Inter-American Affairs) at this changeover. They seemed to be "true believers" who came to oust the infidels who had been there under Carter and his emphasis on human rights and other "soft" objectives.

ALMAGUER: Oh yes! I remember it well.

Q: Were you getting emissaries from Jesse Helms, Hill staffers and other "self-appointed" ideologues?

ALMAGUER, Personally, I didn't feel it all that much because I was lower on the bureaucratic totem pole (Number Two at the USAID Mission in Panama) but, nevertheless, I was seeing it and sensing what was happening "upstairs." Clearly, within USAID Washington there was some turmoil. After a couple of failed USAID Assistant Administrators for Latin America, the Reagan Administration eventually found Otto Reich. Reich was back in the news in more recent times (in 2001) as an unconfirmed Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs and, subsequently, as special advisor to the President on Latin American issues. He shared with Elliott Abrams (who served as ARA Assistant Secretary for Reagan) the view that the human rights issues that the Carter Administration had been focusing on were important, but not as critical at the moment as the potential spread of communism in the region. At the time, it did seem as if communist sympathizers were gaining the upper hand in the region. In their view, we had to become more aggressively engaged in Central America — and, at times, support people we did not necessarily like but who shared our antipathy for communism and for the Castro regime in Cuba.

Recall that during the early days of the Reagan Administration there was Marxist government in Nicaragua; a very successful Marxist guerrilla on the verge of taking over in El Salvador; a 36-year civil war in Guatemala; and large portions of the population of the region tired of right-wing military dictatorships. All of a sudden we found ourselves in a very uncomfortable situation, where we had obvious enemies — the Marxists — and "friends" who were, in many cases, pretty rotten, human-rights-violating human beings. This created a great deal of tension within the Embassy community on how best to tackle the challenges that we clearly faced. We all understood the roots of the problems in the region: years of military-backed oppression, limited economic opportunities for the vast majority, ill-equipped populations due to lack of investment in health and education, limited infrastructure, and self-centered elites who preferred to rig the system in their favor than to compete in an open marketplace. On the other hand, the Communist-inspired (and Castro-supported) guerrillas were not only our proclaimed enemies but also ill-equipped to establish viable governments in the region. The tensions perceived within the ARA bureaucracy was not so much disagreement over the desired outcomes but how best to guide the region in those challenging times. These decisions were being made at the upper reaches of the Department of State and at the White House. As Foreign Service Officers, we salute the flag, salute the President, and follow policy guidance. Very rarely

does it get to the point where one feels that our own sense of what is right is being violated. In this particular case, I think all of us shared the strong view that Washington felt — that we couldn't let the Communists win in Central America. Whatever misgivings there was about the human-rights-violating and corrupt leadership in the region — El Salvador and Guatemala being egregious examples — those misgivings took a back seat to the more urgent need to defeat the Marxist guerrillas. The Foreign Service team in the field, as to be expected, accommodated fairly quickly to the strong pronouncements coming out of Washington. In Washington, there may have been, as you said, a civil war within the bureaucracy, and indeed they went through a procession of Assistant Secretaries until they came up with Elliott Abrams, who held office with a strong hand. Over at the White House, the incredible story of a lieutenant colonel, Ollie North, setting policy in ways that a lieutenant colonel never does certainly raised eyebrows.

At the same time, Senator Jesse Helms was emerging as a powerful figure, eventually becoming the chairman or ranking minority member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and always focused on Latin America. He had developed a cadre of field staff, led by two very able and politically astute young people: One was Deborah DeMoss (later Deborah DeMoss Fonseca) and the other was Roger Noriega, who later became Assistant Secretary for WHA in the George W. Bush Administration. Both were protégés of Helm. What I heard most frequently from career staff was that during the most intense period in the Central American wars of the 1980s, Roger and Deborah, together or separately, would fly into these trouble spots, at times without the knowledge of the Embassy, and conduct negotiations disguised as Congressional oversight visits. I never witnessed any of this because Panama was not one of the Central American hot spots and, after 1983, I was focused on South America. But the stories are legendary. From Country Teams' point of view, their job was to reflect and follow the instructions of the Administration and engage the various factions in the clearly-understood objective of defeating the Marxist menace while continuing to appeal to the ruling classes to respect human rights and reform their economic and social policies to support a more politically and socially inclusive society. DeMoss and Noriega, whom I did not know at the time but who subsequently became friends and colleagues, allegedly developed strong relationships with local military and political leaders on the right, undermining (from the Embassies' perspective) a fundamental rule that the U.S. Government speaks with one voice and only through the established Executive Branch channels. Presumably, Deborah and Roger were reporting back to Helms complaints from the local military that they could win "if the American Embassy would just leave us alone." This presumably fed Helms' view that the Foreign Service was ill-equipped to handle "get-tough" policies and had to be marginalized in order to let the "good guys" (defined as those fighting Communists) win. There is no question that there was a great deal of tension at that time between the career bureaucracy (even among the majority who supported the Administration's "get-tough" policies) and the political leadership, including the Congressional oversight committees. I believe, and this is getting beyond my pay grade at the time, that, with the departure of Haig and the coming of George P. Shultz as Secretary of State, the tensions eased a bit because Shultz did not take the black-and white-view of the world that Haig and Abrams engaged in.

Q: You left Panama around 1983. What happened next?

USAID/ Washington (1983 – 1986)

ALMAGUER: In ’83 I came back to Washington for three years.

Q. How did your family adjust to the move?

ALMAGUER: After almost nine consecutive years overseas, we all were pleased and eager to go home for at least a while. As in all moves, this one was challenging for the family. We now had a son who was ten years old and a daughter who was about to turn eight. Finding the right school setting for them was our highest priority. Secondly, we needed to buy a house in which to settle. The logistics were complicated. We send the children to spend part of that summer at my brother-in-law’s ranch in New Mexico while Antoinette and I searched for a house and all that goes with that. It is a miracle that by the beginning of the 1983-84 school year we were settled in Vienna, Virginia (very close to Wolf Trap Park for the Performing Arts), had the kids registered in school and with the house furnished and a car in the garage. It all sounds mundane, but it was complex and with none of the support services available overseas. My stress was compounded by the fact that I would be joining USAID Headquarters in a relatively senior position and with limited knowledge of how the institution functioned in DC. But we made it, as is the case for most of the unsung families of the Foreign Service.

Q: Where did you go?

ALMAGUER: I became the Director of the USAID Office for South America and Mexico. This was my first significant assignment in Washington, after nine years in Central America. The office, like the typical State or USAID Desk, was in charge of maintaining liaison with our USAID missions in South America as well as in Mexico, working closely with the State Department and with other federal agencies in Washington. We had a relatively low-key operation at the time because Mexico had never had much of a USAID program, and Brazil and Colombia — which at one time (during the Alliance for Progress era) — had been the world’s largest USAID programs, by the 1980s had shrunk to a residual set of activities (mostly in the family planning area) and, in both cases, we were contemplating a phase-out. Most of our programmatic activities were concentrated in Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador, each with a large field Mission, as well as residual activities in Paraguay, Uruguay, Chile, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico.

My office also became the center of the growing U.S. interest in dealing with the coca leaf and cocaine production problem in South America — the so- called “War on Drugs,” in which USAID had a minor role until the early 1980s, when it became an issue of major importance in our development assistance program in the region. USAID became a key player in the fight against cocaine production in South America by making “alternative

development" the focus of USAID attention in the coca-growing regions in Peru and Bolivia.

I think it would be useful to put this narrative in some context. In 1961, when President Kennedy created the Alliance for Progress, the Kennedy Administration integrated the USAID Office of Latin American Affairs and what was then the American Republics Affairs Office (ARA) of the State Department. In fact, the Assistant Secretary of the consolidated Bureau was from State and the Deputy Assistant Secretary was from USAID. This model worked for the next several years. By the early 1980s, that integration seems to have withered. While in the 1980s the respective USAID and State Latin American operations worked as closely as any other set of geographic offices at USAID and State, the structural merger had ended. I'm not sure exactly how that separation came to be, but by the time I took over the South America account, the USAID and State regional offices were separate but complementary units. The ARA offices and the USAID Latin America and the Caribbean offices continued to be located near each other, mostly in the southeast quadrant of the State Department Building (along the "blue corridors"). My suite of offices, for example, was located next to the ARA Office of Andean Affairs, and a few feet away from the ARA Office of the Southern Cone Affairs. The close interaction that was facilitated by physical closeness was a big plus for me in the years I headed the USAID South America Office. I regret that in the mid-90's, with the move of USAID to the Ronald Reagan Building, that mutually beneficial interaction was lost. I think it would have been far more beneficial to both USAID and State to maintain the physical proximity. In any case, during this period, the U.S. Government's attention was heavily focused on Central America and those of us engaged on South American and even Mexican issues had a great deal more autonomy to help shape policy than was the case for those focused on Central America issues. In the case of the latter, policy was shaped at a much higher level, including the Defense Department, the CIA and the National Security Council. In contrast, I was pleased with the amount of latitude my office had, in concert with my State counterparts, to shape our region's programs and priorities.

Q: This is early Reagan?

ALMAGUER: Yes, early to mid-Reagan period. During that time (1983-86) not only was the Administration focused on the potential spread of Communism in Central America, but also concerned about the Caribbean region. This led, in October 1983, to our "incursion" (the euphemism used for "invasion") to help depose a leftist government in Grenada. Among our concerns at the time was an airport being built by Grenada with Cuban funding and personnel. While the benefit to Grenada of an airport capable of handling big planes filled with tourists would be significant, the White House no doubt worried about Cuban influence among the newly independent microstates of the Caribbean. In addition, we feared that the airport would be used by Cuba as a refueling stop for flights between Cuba and Africa in support of Marxist guerrillas in that continent. Obviously, our attention on the Caribbean and Central America in that period was all a result of the perception that Cuba posed a legitimate and present danger to U.S. interests, including to our physical security.

South America, on the other hand, was somewhere out in the distance. Henry Kissinger is alleged to have said years earlier, in reference to the relative lack of importance of South America, that it "is a dagger aimed at the heart of Antarctica." Of course, Kissinger returned later on to shape policy in Central America by heading the Kissinger Commission, which recommended, among other U.S. actions, massive development assistance support for Central America.

Q: [Laughter.] I used to ask that Antarctica question when I was on the Board of Examiners and asked, "What does that mean?" The prospective Foreign Service Officers would look kind of blankly at me... [Laughter.]

ALMAGUER: Sadly, a lot of things were churning in South America that our senior policy makers were failing to notice or purposefully ignored. This was the tail end of what we now know to have been a horrific period of human rights violations in Chile by the Pinochet regime, which of course lasted into the early '90s [1974 – 1990], but we tolerated a regime that had undermined the foundations of political democracy in Chile. To its credit, the Pinochet government did impose a free-market economic system that to this day marks Chile as the most successful and prosperous country in Latin America, but at the cost of enormous human suffering in the 70s and 80s.

Argentina of the 70s and 80s was perhaps even worse off than Chile in so many ways — and some of the problems that we have seen in Argentina in recent years derive in part from that period of military brutality — and so was the case in almost every country in the region. It wasn't until the early 1980s that we began to see a shift towards democratic rule, mainly because the military governments in South America were exhausted. They basically were running out of options as world opinion and world attention caught up with them. As a consequence, to one degree or another, these military regimes (peacefully, in some cases) began the process leading up to political democracy that now prevails in the region. In my view, we played a secondary role in South America during those years (except where we feared a communist take-over) and did not provide enough of the moral leadership. The Carter Administration's focus on human rights had limited impact in South America and the Regan Administration showed little interest in pursing the subject.

War on Drugs and the Role of South America in U.S. Foreign Policy

Q: Let's focus a bit on the so-called "war on drugs."

ALMAGUER: The issue that did catch the Administration's attention and that, in fact, went on to become our primary interest in South America for the next 20 years, was the war on drugs. Then, as now, close to 100 percent of all cocaine comes from South America. At the same time, Mexico was the source of a significant amount of heroin in the U.S. market. Hence, the region that I focused on during the 1983-86 period was beginning to gain attention in Washington primarily because of drugs. Beginning in the 1980s that became our fundamental interest with regards to South America. It was a legitimate concern obviously, but the tendency was to look at the narcotics issue as a

supply-driven problem — if somehow Bolivia, Peru and Colombia would cease producing this stuff, then young American kids would not have to endure the suffering of becoming cocaine addicts. In the 1980s we also had a crack epidemic, which made the issue of stopping coca and cocaine production at its source politically more compelling.

Looking back on my time in the South American Office, much of it was consumed by the narcotics issue. For those of us who were looking to get resources from the Administration and from Congress to promote some of our key program objectives, particularly helping to support emerging democratic regimes in the region, fighting narcotics production became the rationale we successfully used. Many, including myself, came to believe (perhaps naively) that if we engaged in democracy building, economic development and social programs in health and education, a reduction in coca production would follow. We underestimated the value of cocaine at its various stages of production, from the coca leaf to its ultimate stage as street cocaine at the retail level, and we clearly underestimated the power of the marketplace to exert itself, despite all of our efforts to defeat market forces. I frequently joked that we were the only U.S. assistance program dedicated to defeating free market forces, which was the opposite of what we were trying to do everywhere else. Our commitment to free market forces did not apply to this product, for obvious political, social and health reasons.

Q: This is comparable to other times when, in the effort to stop Communism, we would support authoritarian rulers who did not share in our belief in democracy.

ALMAGUER: That's right. We understood that the large quantity of drugs being consumed in the United States and, to a lesser degree in Europe and in South America itself, was at the root of the problem and that the market was responding to demand. Nevertheless, it was politically easier to focus on supplies coming from Latin America, as opposed to the demand coming from our city streets. Let's face it: If all the cocaine and all the heroin in the world would disappear today, chances are that entrepreneurial chemists would meet the lack of supply with synthetic substitutes, which, in fact, is happening. Nevertheless, our mandate was clear: stop the supply of drugs from South America.

The challenge for USAID was to prove that its intervention in alternative development programs — designed to replace coca production with licit products that farmers could place in the marketplace relatively easily and profitably — would work to reduce supply of the coca leaf, particularly if done in concert with an aggressive coca eradication and law enforcement effort. I was a strong supporter of these alternative development programs, particularly in the Chapare region of Bolivia and in the Upper Huallaga region of Peru, which together accounted for more than 60 percent of coca production in the world. A similar program in Colombia was, at the time, not deemed as feasible from USAID's perspective since Colombia presented a much more dangerous environment for development workers, including guerrillas and cocaine-producing labs under heavy protection. Further, the Colombia coca fields were much further away from licit markets, thus making it unlikely that commercial agriculture could succeed there.

It is worth noting for those not familiar with the product that cocaine is derived from the processing of coca leaves into a paste that is subsequently converted into marketable cocaine. The alternative development model was predicated on the hypothesis that if farmers in coca-growing regions were given an alternative, they would move towards licit crops. This approach, while successful in many ways, proved to be more complex than theory would suggest.

For official travelers to those two regions (Chapare and Huallaga) in the 1980s, it was an amazing sight, with visitors observing coca bushes growing on the sides of the hills and as far as the eye could see, with roadbeds used to dry the leaves. Visiting these regions became routine for Washington policy-makers interested in the subject. Many of these visitors, particularly members of Congress, would come away convinced that the solution to the cocaine problem in the U.S. resided in these settings. It was far easier to demand eradication of the coca bushes than to attempt domestic solutions. The reality, of course, was more complex. Most of these farmers had limited alternatives for making a living and they were only a small part of the long, complex and secretive chain from coca bush planting, leaf harvesting and product refinement to cocaine production (usually in Colombia for coca from Peru and Bolivia) and transportation through a complex chain that ultimately resulted in huge profits for the participants beyond the small-time producers in Peru and Bolivia. Going after the easiest and most vulnerable target without a stronger commitment to disrupt the other less visible elements in that chain frequently resulted in clashes with these farmers. It also led many international observers to conclude that the U.S. was unfairly targeting the most vulnerable link in this chain.

The other aspect that outsiders tended to underestimate was that coca production was a reality of the Andean highlands for a millennium. Used primarily for chewing, it obviously had some narcotic effect on the body if chewed raw, but not the impact of the processed cocaine. Presumably, it was helpful in treating toothaches and headaches, particularly headaches produced by oxygen deprivation in the highlands. To this day Americans and other travelers to the Andean highlands drink coca tea, which is considered beneficial for dealing with high altitude sickness. In La Paz, the world's highest-altitude Foreign Service post, Americans and other foreigners, including those in the official U.S. community, drank coca tea regularly and it was no more addictive or damaging than coffee or similar products of mass consumption. The exception to this common practice of drinking coca tea were U.S. military and law enforcement personnel and others subject to periodic urine tests, since traces of the product would be detected, creating potential security clearance problems for those individuals. In addition to its medicinal aspects, the coca leaf was also used for religious rituals by the indigenous populations of the region. Flying in from the outside world and telling these people to "give it up," was asking for more than giving up a source of livelihood; it was asking for an end to cultural practices deeply embedded in these societies that were traditional by nature and suspicious of outsiders, whether from their own capitals or from far away countries.

The coca and cocaine industry is fascinating because in every way it shows the free market at work. It is so lucrative that Colombian cartels, which at the time controlled the

cocaine business, were able to provide technical assistance to the farmers and take care of the transportation of the raw product from the farm gate to the delivery point for processing and distribution. Similar to the way USAID has helped farmers, directly or through governments and NGOs, to produce better crops, the Colombian buyers would work with the farmers to improve their coca crop yields. This was facilitated by the fact that coca bushes don't need all that much attention since the plant is indigenous to the area and it does very well, particularly at the more temperate altitudes — around 2,500 feet above sea level — just above the jungle canopy and just below the more rugged and colder climates above that level. If one keeps in mind that the Andes form the second most extensive and highest mountain range in the world (exceeded only by the Himalayas), there are plenty of potential coca growing areas in South America. Even if we had managed to clear out all of the coca in one area, there were many other suitable areas, constrained only by access to viable transportation.

Most of the governments in the region at the time complained bitterly that they could not engage the U.S. at its most senior levels, particularly members of Congress, on issues unrelated to drugs. South American government officials soon learned that to seek U.S. help in other areas required, at the very least, a perfunctory acknowledgment of the cocaine production problem. Attempts to elicit from U.S. officials at least some acknowledgment of the U.S. consumption problem rarely met with a satisfactory response from the U.S. side. While it is true that many South American government functionaries and law enforcement personnel were corrupted by the drug production and marketing industry, in my opinion it was not as widespread at the time as we assumed. Corruption in more traditional ways (e.g., kickbacks for government contracts, nepotism in public office, banking scandals, etc.) was a greater problem. This changed over time as the cocaine business became even more lucrative, but the source of the payoffs and other corrupt practices were the drug cartels and not the small coca farmers. To add to the challenge for governments in the region, as they moved towards electoral democracies, usually with our strong backing, the emerging political leadership became more sensitive to prevailing local views. Candidates for public office could no longer impose their will on resistant communities. Hence, as electoral democracy came to the region, going after small farmers as targets of our "war against drugs" became an even greater uphill fight.

With regards to Colombia, I wrote a phase-out plan for Colombia in 1984, and USAID actually phased out our program there in the next couple of years. Ironically, if one looks ahead to the early 2000s, Colombia went on to become the largest USAID program in the Western Hemisphere [laughter] and among the largest in the world. While Colombia was afflicted with internal guerrilla operations for half a century and the U.S. maintained a significant counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism presence in that country, for USAID in those days the war against drugs in Colombia was a real war in which other U.S. Government assets were better placed than USAID to deal with that country's drug-related problems.

By the time I completed my three years as head of the USAID South America office, we were mostly out of Brazil, except for residual efforts (in extensive coordination with the Brazilian government and local NGOs) on family planning and agricultural research.

While I did not advocate for a more robust USAID presence in Brazil (which the Brazilians themselves would have rejected), I think it was a mistake to go from having the world's largest USAID program to having next-to-nothing. It was my view then, and I continue to believe, that countries like Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Chile and Uruguay, which have achieved "Middle Income" status, should have become our partners in development, with greater links (and official U.S. encouragement and financing) to U.S. universities and "think tanks." That would facilitate peer-to-peer interaction on applied research and in areas such as environmental practices, prevention of health epidemics, judicial reforms, etc. This would have allowed them and us to learn from each other and to share "best practices" across national boundaries. Cutting off these countries prematurely was eventually reversed in some instances (e.g., Colombia). However an opportunity was lost for meaningful partnership just as these countries were emerging from political repression and searching for meaningful responses to economic weaknesses and social frustration with weak government responses to legitimate social demands for better government services in health, education, road, etc.

Q: Is there any way to have joint funding to support these ties? I would think it would be to everybody's advantage…

ALMAGUER: I did manage to get an earmark for what we called an "Advanced Developing Country Strategy," which was primarily geared at Brazil and Colombia to foster these partnership efforts. If I recall correctly, we started off with about $900,000 for the entire continent. Over time, however, instead of growing, this pot of money shrank and lost a great deal of its capacity to effectively inject the relationship that I thought was needed. While I thoroughly enjoyed my time in Washington focusing on South America, the region was not in most "Official Washington's" radar screens. Hence, at times it was frustrating. The one aspect of my efforts in the South America program that brought me great satisfaction was the fact that my "Big Boss," USAID Administrator McPherson, was personally engaged and interested in the region, when few others were. This in part reflected Peter's interest in the region going back to his days as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Peru in the 1960s. I joined Peter in his travels to South America on several occasions and this served to reinforce my voice in the interagency process that helped define U.S. interests in the region. Peter was well regarded by Secretary George Shultz and by the Reagan White House.

Q. What about Mexico?

Mexico Earthquake of 1985

ALMAGUER: One of the highlights of my time in Washington was our response to a major earthquake that struck Mexico City early in the morning of September 19, 1985. The federal capital suffered a magnitude 8.1 earthquake; intense by all standards and particularly devastating when centered on a major urban area. USAID's presence in Mexico was minor: one American officer and one or two Mexican employees at the Embassy working principally on scholarships and family planning initiatives. For some reason, I was not at work that day (I believe that my wife and I were purchasing a car.)

Soon after the news reported on the devastation in Mexico City, I received a call from USAID Administrator McPherson. Those were the times before cell phones; I have no idea how he tracked me down, but the gist of the call was that he wanted me to head down to Mexico City and coordinate the response that would soon be coming down from USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA). OFDA has a stellar history of responding to natural disasters around the world in a timely and well-coordinated way. While I admired the work of OFDA, I was certainly not an expert on disaster-response activities. Nevertheless, by 6 p.m. that night I was on my way to San Antonio, Texas to join a military team being assembled at Lackland Air Force Base to provide basic support. By dawn the next morning I was aboard a C-5A —

Q: Our largest military transport carrier.

ALMAGUER: Exactly. It was loaded with tents and blankets and many other emergency supplies. My task was to coordinate the enormous outpouring of support that was coming in from the United States, both official and from NGOs, private citizens, etc. This was my very first intense dealing with the management of a U.S. response to a natural disaster. I soon realized that the best we could do was to try to manage the chaos surrounding this type of outpouring of U.S. support by identifying key areas where our support was necessary and prioritizing my time on those issues. At the same time, we had to deal with Embassy/ USAID coordination, OFDA/ military coordination, and U.S./ Mexican coordination at various levels. Turf issues were inevitable and contradictory guidance a constant challenge. If it had happened anywhere else, I'm sure there would have been a significant American response; but Mexico City was practically next-door, and both Official Washington and countless U.S. NGOs wanted a role. Further, *CNN* [*Cable News Network*] already was becoming a factor. Everything we did was potentially newsworthy. *CNN* and other media were particularly interested in humanitarian aspects of the response that made it newsworthy. Good examples were the first responders from Fairfax County, Virginia, as well as the Dade County, Florida, dog search teams. News cameras would follow them everywhere. In addition to the challenge of coordinating all of these various players, we had significant issues with the Mexican authorities. They wanted assistance, but understandably, on their terms. Further, they, too, had multiple actors engaged in the response, including the civilian government agencies, the Mexican military (which divided Mexico City into quadrants, which each military service named as responsible for that quadrant). Also, the Mexico City government was its own player, with multiple agencies, including hospitals, the Metro system and others eager to retain authority for their part in the response. I will give you a couple of examples of the challenges we faced.

According to the dog rescue teams from the United States and Israel, there was a better-than-even chance at that early point that they would find a number of children alive under the rubble of a children's ward of a hospital that had collapsed. The site was precarious for the workers there. One of Mexico City's subway lines ran under or near it. The local Mexican authorities were keenly interested in showing the world that they were back on their feet, so they wanted to re-open the subway line. Every time a train ran under the hospital, the ground shook, endangering not only potential survivors, but also our own

rescuers. Trying to deal with Mexican authorities and with our own rescue workers, who were losing patience with our failure to stop those trains, became a nightmare!

As noted earlier, the city was divided into four quadrants by the Mexican authorities: One quadrant belonged the navy, another quadrant belonged to the air force, the third quadrant to the army, and the fourth one to the police. We in the Embassy had a naval attaché, an army attaché, air force attaché, and another in charge of cooperation with the police. Each of our attachés had bonded with his respective counterparts. When one is dealing with a widespread disaster of this nature, one can't just split the pie this way. What tended to happen was that each attaché, understandably, would favor the requirements of the quadrant overseen by their military counterparts. Consequently, there were immense coordination and information-sharing challenges within the Embassy.

Our Ambassador in Mexico at the time was Jack Gavin [John A. Gavin], a fascinating character. He was a well-placed actor with strong ties to the Reagans. He looked good; he dressed the part in impeccable manner. I'm convinced he had suits in his closet ready to wear for the right occasion, including disaster attire. He actually was well regarded by the Embassy team and very helpful when I would raise with him specific coordination issues.

As we were trying to organize the disaster response effort, as it too often happens in these cases, word came down that President Reagan would be sending First Lady Nancy Reagan to Mexico City to express their condolences to the Mexican people and authorities. Our Embassy in Mexico City was a large structure with an inner courtyard, with offices on the outside perimeter and the corridors facing the courtyard. I would guess that it was a six- or seven-floor structure. One of the earliest decisions we made was to cordon off the corridors facing this courtyard and use them to set up the various U.S. disaster response teams that had come in at our request — the firefighters in one place, the dog and rescue teams in the other, etc. — and each of them with its own complex communications gear, working 24 hours a day to mount a significant response. On the second day, after everyone had set up "permanent" operations there (which took a significant amount of time from the actual response), we were informed that Mrs. Reagan would be visiting the Embassy for about ten minutes to thank the folks there for their work. We were then informed by the Secret Service Advance Team that we had to: "… get rid of all that stuff. You can't have all that gear around here. It's dangerous from a Secret Service perspective!" Needless to say, the folks who had worked long hours and under time pressure to mount the gear that would help them implement their assistance efforts were livid. For what eventually turned out to be five minutes of waving by Mrs. Reagan to the assembled masses, everyone lost a day's worth of effort. I'm convinced that had Mrs. Reagan known the negative impact of that visit on relief operations, she would have said, "Oh, no! That's not what I want them to do."

Q: And this so often happens.

ALMAGUER: … and I mention this story not to criticize VIP visits but to underscore that those visits have a real cost. Those VIP visits can easily undermine the efforts that precipitated the visit. It would help if these visitors were told up-front of the negative

impact the visit would have on the U.S. emergency response. I am sure that in most cases those visitors would likely curtail the visit or insist that every effort be made to preclude what happened in this case

Q: Could you talk a little bit about the problem of the Metro, the subway?

ALMAGUER: I did not have direct contact with the Mexicans; my job was to intermediate at the Embassy — basically, I was sitting at the command center trying to trouble-shoot, plan ahead and untangle any of the inevitable problems that these emergency responses entail. When the rescue teams would come to me, or on the radio, as most often happened, and said, "We have ten guys crawling through rubble, we got 20 dogs doing the same, the Israelis have similar teams, and every time the train comes by, everything shakes, and we can't hear sounds," I would go to the appropriate person at the Embassy, perhaps the political counselor or the commercial counselor or the DCM, and say, "We need to do something." They would then make the appropriate local contact and come back and report that it was impossible because the Mexican authorities in charge of transportation said that the Number One priority was to restart the public transport system, etc., and then we would join forces up the chain to get a better response. Eventually, we would get these things resolved, but almost always requiring the highest-level pressure (i.e., the Ambassador). Having commented earlier on the Ambassador's impeccable sartorial style, I must say that I or any of his senior team could go to him and say, "Mr. Ambassador, this is happening," and almost inevitably he would pick up the phone and call somebody higher up in *Los Pinos* (the Mexican presidential home) and engage them at that level. Inevitably something would happen. I came way quite impressed with him.

Q. What about media coverage?

ALMAGUER: The thing that became evident very quickly was the impact of *CNN* and the new 24-hour news cycle and satellite feeds. If one just listened to *CNN* and other media, one would have thought that Mexico City was devastated. In fact, on the second day that I was there, I took a helicopter ride over Mexico City with the Ambassador and discovered that, in fact, far from devastation, most of Mexico City was okay. A few bricks coming off many houses and things like that were common. However, the severe damage was highly localized and in different locations around the huge Mexico City metropolitan area. Ultimately, what it really boiled down to is the effects of corruption. Almost inevitably, the buildings that collapsed were public structures, either public housing or public hospitals or other showcase buildings where, as the engineers subsequently confirmed, those structures that suffered most had insufficient beams, had watered down concrete, etc. Much of what happened on that day could have been avoided had Mexico had institutions in place that enforced safety standards and fewer government agents and private sector contractors lining their pockets at the expense of quality controls.

Q: I was consul general in Naples, and we had a bad earthquake in 1980 in the southern part of Italy, and we were deluged with people, not just Americans, but Europeans, as

well, sending barrels full of used clothing, including evening dresses. Did you have that problem?

ALMAGUER: In fact, it became a humongous problem for us because many of the organizations that donated were well plugged-in politically, and they were donating on behalf of Mrs. Reagan, or they were donating on behalf of some other important political personality, and their warehouses were totally full with this stuff. In recent years, OFDA (Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance) guidance makes it clear that money is far more preferable than donation of clothes. Heaven knows what happens to most of those clothes and other material gifts. They probably disappear.

Colombia Volcano Disaster

ALMAGUER: Having had that Mexico experience — I was there for about two weeks — it seems as if I was destined to become a disaster "first-responder." I had been home for a less than a month when we had another one: one of the most incredible disasters in the Western Hemisphere in our time, and yet it somehow disappeared from the news quite quickly. I guess *CNN* was not there to cover it. I am referring to the November 1985 eruption of the Nevado del Ruiz volcano in Colombia, near the town of Armero. Nevado del Ruiz is an active volcano with an icecap, and it erupted in the middle of the night, creating a channel of mud less than a mile wide by 50 to 60 miles long, rushing right through the middle of the of town of Armero. It was essentially hot mud, but traveling at enormous speeds. Very quickly almost 25,000 people were killed, most in their sleep. Flying over the area in a helicopter a few days later was uncanny! If you were on either side of this river of mud, you survived and may even have not been aware of what happened until daylight; for those in the path of the torrent of mud, they never knew what hit them. The town had been divided in half by this wall of mud.

This was a case that focused our attention on lessons learned and what we could do to prevent similar disasters in the future. By the time first responders reached the site, there was not much they could do, except for the clean up effort. It focused everyone's attention on the need for enhanced early-alert systems. As a result, a number of programs were set up in Colombia and elsewhere to install alert nets and sirens and other mechanisms to help communities prepare to evacuate quickly when something like this happens. In Latin America, many significant population centers are vulnerable. Ecuador, which I'll get to later, is a good example. Too many towns sit atop fault lines and near active volcanoes, waiting for a disaster to happen. While earthquakes are not predictable, much can be done to prevent needless deaths with appropriate building codes, and much can be done to mobilize people as active volcanoes begin to show signs of possible eruptions.

So, it seems that narcotics and natural disasters consumed a great deal of my time during this period. I certainly learned a great deal during this assignment, not only about these subjects but also about how Washington worked, how policy decisions are shaped and how important it is to cultivate networks of people throughout the bureaucracy if one is to be successful at achieving desired results.

Q: Going back to Mexico again, I draw on my experience in Italy. Supplies came in and then disappeared; it was in a corrupt region. Did you have a problem of local corrupt lords in Mexico?

ALMAGUER: It was true in Mexico and it is true almost everywhere. All too often, once American oversight ends, goods disappear and wind up either in the black market, or as the personal property of the local or regional chief. Many attribute the collapse of the Somoza regime and the rise of the Marxist Sandinista regime to the Managua earthquake of 1972, which leveled downtown Managua. As is typical, the world community responded to that disaster in a big way; except that in this case it seems that every brick and every nail wound up in one of the Somoza ranches or in one of the Somoza family's many businesses. The crass behavior of the Somoza family in that instance is part of the folklore of Latin America, and Central America in particular. I remember years later in Honduras and talking to President Flores [Carlos Roberto Flores Facussé] soon after the Hurricane Mitch disaster, and one of the things that he said was that, "Whatever we do, we have to make sure that the Somoza example is not repeated here." With the advent of democratic regimes and 24-hour news services with world-wide coverage, it is more difficult for politicians or a regional "big shot" to get away with what happened in earlier periods, which is another good reason to promote democratic governance and to support a vibrant and free press as part of the USAID kit of responses to natural and man-made disasters.

Q: Should we go back to the War on Drugs?

ALMAGUER: On the narcotics side, I had some fascinating experiences. In at least two occasions I actually joined a team of DEA [Drug Enforcement Administration] agents in a helicopter to spot and watch them blow up cocaine labs. I would not want to do that for a living, but I'm glad I had the experience. One has to admire the folks who do those kinds of things.

Q: How did you find the DEA? That Agency has often seemed to have a troubled relationship with embassies. They tend to be operators; they have a task and they want to do it, brushing aside diplomatic niceties and all that. How did you work with it?

ALMAGUER: It was an interesting challenge. When I served in Bolivia, '96 to '99, there were some 68 DEA agents in the country, which made them the single largest U.S. agency working in Bolivia (not counting USAID's 100 plus FSNs). What I learned early on was how difficult these foreign postings were for DEA families. DEA agents are transferred periodically, but typically within the U.S. When a DEA agent and his family (I never met a woman DEA agent at the time) were transferred to a place like Bolivia, frequently it was a major culture shock for the mostly-unprepared family. One of the challenges that an Embassy faces in supporting these families is that they may not fully understand the dynamics and constraints that face the official American community at the post. Trying to bring those families into the community was a bit of a challenge. I faced a similar challenge later on in Honduras, where we had a number of federal agencies

represented (e.g., Housing and Urban Development and EPA – Environmental Protection Agency) that had limited experience serving overseas working under the umbrella of the Ambassador and Country Team and living in a fish bowl. Foreign Service Officers and families are trained on what to expect. For employees outside of the traditional foreign affairs agencies, the culture shock is often magnified by lack of preparation and by being unclear as to where support services might be available. Most of the DEA agents were wonderful guys - and heroic in some cases. Their job was to go out there and destroy labs, disrupt supply lines, identify the traffickers, and things that required them to be active and always in search of the bad guys. The analytical stuff was someone else's business and the niceties of diplomacy often misunderstood as being soft on the enemy! Trying to constrain law enforcement officers from whatever agency they come from is a challenge insufficiently addressed at Ambassadorial Seminars and other similar training programs. The challenge may be addressed successfully when the Ambassador and the Country Team engage these colleagues in ways that make them feel supported and engaged in the broader U.S. Embassy community. This requires a great deal of coaching and understanding on the part of the Ambassador. The State Department often refers to itself as a "platform" on which all the other federal agencies participate, but under an established framework that recognizes the Ambassador as the ultimate authority in country. One of the roles that State must play is to serve as a mentor for these other Federal agencies that have no overseas experience and to help prepare their staff for overseas realities before they go abroad. I am not sure how much of that goes on these days as more and more Federal agencies play a role overseas, but it is always best to prepare at home rather than waiting for the mentoring and coaching to take place at the Embassy.

Q: How did USAID work with the DEA in these countries?

ALMAGUER: USAID has always been concerned (at least in the years in which I served) about not being identified too closely with public safety programs (e.g., police training). Public safety was part of the USAID mandate until the '70s. But USAID phased out those programs after the kidnapping and murder of an officer in Uruguay. It was an over-reaction, in my view, and one that, over the long term, proved costly. It became increasingly difficult to promote rule of law, protection of human rights and similar democracy-building efforts without bringing in the law enforcement elements of this equation. It was only when we brought those separate efforts closer together (i.e., democracy initiatives and law enforcement) that we began to see some positive impact. But we would have to go forward to the 1990s before we began to see the positive effects of a more collaborative working relationship.

Q: Let's take Bolivia when you were in Washington in the 80s. You were trying to do something about reducing drug production, but the difference between raising coca, from which the farmer derives a good income, and raising oranges, from which he gets little, is significant. Could you reimburse the campesinos to make it worth their time and effort?

ALMAGUER: We experimented with a number of approaches, but some of them would not be politically viable, either at home or in the field. Giving U.S. taxpayers' dollars

directly to coca growers would no doubt be politically a "tough sell" at home. I used to argue that doing something that brings less money but is legal is more appealing that doing something that was lucrative but illegal. This argument has resonance in the U.S. or Europe, where there is a good chance that doing something illegal will buy you time in prison. But that argument has limited resonance in places like Bolivia, where law enforcement and the legal system are dysfunctional, subject to bribery, and so on. We were always trying to balance the carrot and the stick, and not always succeeding. U.S. domestic realities also limited our options. For example, if you ask the typical American, "Would you like to continue to see unchecked all of the illegal cocaine that's coming into the country?" The answer would be, "Absolutely not!" "Would you rather buy oranges from Bolivia or cocaine?" Everybody would say, "Oranges, of course." But when you get down to specifics, the issue becomes more complex. When we were trying to expand citrus production in Bolivia, the Florida congressional delegation, influenced by the Florida citrus producers, was adamantly opposed. In fact, to this day, there's an item in the Foreign Assistance Act that limits assistance in the citrus industry. Hence, we could not fully exploit that potential avenue for converting coca producers into producers of licit products. The sweater industry raised a similar challenge. Bolivia and Peru, with major herds of llamas and alpacas, could have become major sources of quality sweaters and similar manufactured goods in the U.S. Someone calculated that if Bolivia and Peru could market abroad all the sweaters they could manufacture, it would raise their GDP by 10 percent. If all of that expanded production were to be sold in the United States, it would not amount to more than two or three percent of the American sweater consumption market. Yet, when we were working on a sweater production project in Bolivia during the '80s, the trade association for sweater manufacturers in the United States was up in arms. They went to the Hill and complained that American taxpayers' dollars were going to subsidize foreigners so that they could sell products that would be competing with comparable American products. These examples highlight the challenges USAID and our counternarcotics efforts faced: We would insist that these farmers stop growing coca plants but we had limited enforcement tools and were restricted on what we could do to help them break into new licit markets.

Q: Yes.

ALMAGUER: As we move forward to my time in Bolivia in the late '90s, almost all crops and products that we were helping these coca farmers to produce were geared at either the South American or Japanese market in part because of fear of the impact that the licit products would have on United States producers of similar products. So this was a constant challenge for us. I shared this conundrum with visiting Congressional delegations (CODELs) and with their staffers on the Hill. When they visited the country and saw for themselves the issues we faced, they understood far better than when the issue was discussed over coffee at some Hill office. This is why I always encouraged more CODELs, even if they robbed the Mission of time and required a great deal of effort on our teams overseas. Nothing was better than seeing the problems first-hand to help draw the right conclusions. It is too bad that CODELs have become so unpopular with the voting public. Our legislators need more — not less — exposure to the real world in which we work.

Q: Did you have problems, in your work in South America at that time, with corruption that comes out, you know, great money and all?

ALMAGUER: Let me postpone that answer until we discuss my time as mission director in Ecuador, which is next, because in Ecuador, within weeks of arrival, the issue hit me in a big way. But yes, corruption in my view is a root cause of underdevelopment, along with lack of education, and poor public services and infrastructure.

Q: Let's talk about other issues that may have been percolating in Latin America at the time you were heading the South America Desk….much to your pleasure, I imagine.

ALMAGUER: Much to my pleasure, because at the time, my superiors would spend 90 percent of their time on Central America, five to seven percent of their time on the Caribbean, and three percent on South America and Mexico. I loved it because that gave me have a great deal more say - since nobody else was paying attention to my region [laughter]. As a consequence, I soon developed a reputation (a positive one, I hope), particularly with Hill staffers, as the person to go to when they had questions about what was going on in South America.

Q: Could you talk a little about the broader issues affecting South America at the time?

ALMAGUER: President Carter's human rights emphasis during his presidency had a delayed impact. Much of what can be said about Carter, whom I respect a great deal, relates to his post-presidency. Indeed, one of those positive things that occurred after he left office, but which in my view emerged from his emphasis on human rights and democracy, was the end of military dictators and the emergence of weak but viable democratic institutions in the region. By the time he left office in January '81, Ecuador and Peru had had democratic elections, the Argentinean military were exhausted and their horrible track record of murder and human rights violations was beginning to be exposed to a shocked world, and the worst of the repression in Chile was ending. Even in Paraguay, a decades-long dictatorship was on its last legs. The worldwide oil crisis of the '70s, which hit Latin America in a big way (except for oil-rich Venezuela), lingered on into the '80s. To this day, the '80s are known in Latin America as the "lost decade." Per capita income in many countries in the region was lower in 1990 than it had been in 1970, a tragedy indeed. But this crisis served to further weaken the military regimes, which basically lost their ability to deal with this reality.

When I was head of the South American Office, I made my very first visit, in October 1983, to Bolivia, and there I saw scenes that were beyond belief! The city of La Paz, where I subsequently lived and a place I learned to love, had soup kitchens everywhere! The exchange rate hit 1.8 million pesos to one. It was the worst case of hyperinflation since the Weimar Republic in the 1920s. In fact, hyperinflation was so bad that a number of economists, including a young Jeff Sachs, who went on to become probably the best-known development economist of our times, flocked to Bolivia to study the problem and to identify solutions. Sachs got his start in Bolivia as a young Harvard researcher and professor studying hyperinflation, went on to propose approaches to the problem that

helped to stabilize Bolivia's economy and today sits at the table with world leaders tackling the most complex development challenges.

So here we were in Bolivia, trying to wean the country out of the coca production business, which at the time was providing Bolivia with perhaps 50 percent of the country's gross income, despite the fact that there was little else of economic consequence going on. There were food shortages and limited access to hard currency, leading the ruling authorities to print even more useless pesos. What happened in Bolivia is that the military ultimately gave up, having run out of options. They basically told the civilian politicians, "Have your election and whoever wins, we will turn over the keys to him." Indeed, that happened in '85. Similar stories could be told about several of the neighboring countries, where weak but democratic governments gradually took over from failed military regimes.

Now, if you don't mind, let me inject an anecdote here. As background, in 1952 Bolivia had a socialist revolution led by Victor Paz Estenssoro, one of the most renowned revolutionary leaders of Latin America in the 20th Century. This was early in the Cold War and I suspect that if Bolivia had been geographically closer to the U.S., we may have sought to topple that leftist revolutionary government, as we subsequently did in Guatemala in 1954. In fact, Bolivia went through a profound change after that revolution, which eliminated virtual serfdom for the vast majority of its indigenous population (Bolivia had then, and it continues to have — percentagewise — one of the largest indigenous populations in the Americas). But that revolution left behind failed socialist policies and a string of harsh military dictatorships, interspersed with leftist civilian governments. A combination of bad economic policies from the left and repressive social policies from the military regimes that followed had, by 1984, left Bolivia in shambles. By 1985, Bolivia was in dire need of new and enlightened leadership. Elections in that year returned Victor Paz Estenssoro to the presidency. By then he was 85 years old and most of us who followed Bolivia thought that, as a result, the country would go from bad to worse. Shortly after the election, but before Paz was inaugurated in 1985, then-Administrator McPherson and I went to Bolivia to visit with him. Paz personally ushered us in into his modest La Paz home. He then proceeded to tell us that, "One of the greatest gifts that I have is that I can learn from my mistakes, and since I have nothing to lose, because I have no political future, I can repair damages very fast." It was quite an admission from an old revolutionary whom I learned to respect enormously. Over the next two years, he did a spectacular job of leading Bolivia out of the economic and political wilderness in which it had existed in the previous decades. His government proceeded to cut off hyperinflation in what seemed like a few weeks. The government basically privatized everything that could be privatized, stopped the printing presses from churning out worthless pesos, and balanced the budget in a relatively short period of time. The immediate effect was even more pain for the Bolivian people, but the longer-term effect would be a far better Bolivia than the country that he inherited in 1985. He courageously reversed many of the statist policies that he had instituted beginning in 1952. At an old age, he became one of the wisest and most courageous leaders that any country could have. He went on to retire and live out his remaining years in a remote area

of southern Bolivia, quietly growing grapes and out of the limelight. We all should learn more about this towering figure in Latin America's 20th Century history.

In Ecuador, which returned to democratic governments in the late 1970s, they elected in 1984 a politician and businessman by the name of Leon Febres Cordero. A U.S. trained engineer, he had campaigned for office as the "Ronald Reagan of South America," promising to establish a strong market economy and reduce the size of government. The Reagan White House was elated. I will talk more about his time in office when we get to my time as Mission Director in Ecuador from 1986 to 1990.

Argentina, in the meantime, was being stereotypically Argentine, jumping from repressive military dictators to the ever-popular and irrationally populist Juan Peron or his widow. I don't remember the dates now, but Peron always makes interesting reading, whether alive, dead or alive again. [Laughter.] He was married to Evita Duarte de Peron when he first came to power in the late 1940s and had Evita lived she would have become the leader. He was exiled and later came back in the early 1970s, this time married to Maria Estela Isabel Martinez de Peron, or "Isabelita," whom he apparently met at a cabaret in Panama. She then became his successor, with no knowledge of the affairs of state. Argentina just had a bad time from both its civilian and military rulers — and this in a country that prides itself in its European style and sophistication!

Q: Argentina is one of these places that has no problem with an indigenous population, as Bolivia does. It is essentially a European population, with great potential. At the time you were dealing with South America in this '83 to '86 period, what was the standard analysis of why Argentina does such a lousy job?

ALMAGUER: Argentina has all of the advantages that we normally attribute to the success of the United States: temperate climate, good soils, a population base that is well educated, an immigrant population from Italy and Spain that resembled the population that migrated to the U.S. for much of the 19th Century. But Argentina was badly governed from the onset, eventually leading to the semi-fascist populist regime of Juan Peron in the '40s and into the '50s. This relatively affluent society with a strong working class and middle-class values was told that they could have everything: long coffee breaks, plenty of pay raises to match inflation, and a tolerance for corruption as long as the workers felt protected by Peron or whomever else was in power at the time. Many Latin Americans will tell you that Argentines suffer from a sense of entitlement; that they believe that they don't have to work all that hard to succeed and that the State owes it to them. Whether this is an unfair characterization or not, it is certainly a part of Argentina's reputation in the region.

Q: Was USAID during this time supporting young Latin Americans coming to the United States to get educated?

ALMAGUER: To some degree, yes. We were in competition with the Soviets and with the Cubans in that regard. The Soviet Union had its Patrice Lumumba University for Third-World students (mostly from Africa, but also from Latin America) and it invested

millions of dollars every year to send bright Third-World students to Lumumba. In retrospect, I wish they had sent a lot more because I never have met a person who had spent any time at Lumumba U. who came back enchanted by the joys of never-ending winters in Moscow. [Laughter]. And if you happened to be dark-skinned in the Soviet Union, you were clearly a second- or third-class citizen and treated as such by Muscovites. Most former students with whom I have spoken over the years seemed offended by the enforced segregation that existed at Lumumba.

Q: They called them "black monkeys."

ALMAGUER: Africans suffered the worst, but the Latins came in second. At least in Cuba, the other communist regime eager to recruit young students from Latin America, those students shared a common language and enjoyed the Latin rhythm of the tropics. Cuba was a popular destination for Latin American students, particularly for lower-income students and many came back praising what they saw in Cuba. While we worried more about the Soviet Union at the time, Cuba was our real competition for the "hearts and minds" of these students. During that period we received substantial amounts of scholarship money from Congress to help counter Soviet and Cuban scholarship programs. The problem for us was that our costs were prohibitive. And we are talking about the 1980s, when it cost about $25,000 to place a Latin American student in a U.S. university. Today, we would be talking well in excess of $100,000. We could justify some of those costs during the era as the price we paid for our efforts to counter the Communists. Today, it would be politically impossible for USAID to invest those sums of money to send Latin American students to the U.S. It is a shame, nevertheless, since these scholarship programs were among the most successful of USAID's initiatives. They helped to create a cadre of U.S.-trained Latin Americans, many of whom went on to become private and public sector leaders in their respective countries and mostly well disposed to the U.S. and to the values we espouse. We were reaching important segments of those societies with these scholarships, which, combined with the numerous well-to-do Latin Americans who send their kids to the U.S. for their education, helped create a foundation for a more democratic and free market-oriented Latin America.

Q: Well, during this particular period, how important was the influence of Cuba in South America?

ALMAGUER: It was important. It's hard to believe that Castro was 33 years old when he took over — a young, good-looking, charismatic leader with the ability to arouse political passion at a time of social and political awakening in Latin America. The stereotype of the sleepy Latino with his big sombrero was long gone, and yet people, by and large, were not seeing much of a change in the political leadership of their societies. In fact, as the West progressed, Latin America was falling further behind. At the beginning of the 20th Century, Latin America accounted for about 20 percent of world GDP. By the end of that century, thanks to the growth of the Asian economies and post-World War II growth in the U.S. and Europe, Latin America seemed stuck. By 1999, it contributed less that 5% to the world GDP. Progress was being made, but slowly, and not keeping up with

economic and social progress elsewhere. Castro offered an alternative, which had a great deal of appeal.

The area in Latin America that we worried about the most at that time was Central America, obviously the region nearest to home and where a great deal of political turmoil was occurring at the time. Ironically, despite its many on-going challenges, Central Americans today are among the most pro-Americans of all the Latin Americans. As we move geographically further south, the less impact the United States has. Our cultural ties are not as strong and the well-to-do classes send more of their children to study in Europe and have broader business ties in that continent. In contrast, every businessperson in Central America probably has a U.S. business partner. Japan was a growing presence in South America in those years. Recently, we have seen a great deal of engagement in that region by Indian and Chinese business interests. Too many Americans seem to have agreed with Kissinger that "South America was a dagger aimed at the heart of Antarctica." With perhaps the exception of Brazil, whose huge population cannot be ignored, South America has not been fertile grounds for U.S. commercial interests. Examples to the contrary can be readily found, but the reality remains that South Americans are our distant neighbors.

One further interesting observation: If you visit U.S. embassies and consulates in Mexico and Central America, as well as in the Caribbean, the visa lines are long and never-ending. On the other hand, if you go down to Bolivia, for example, the lines are nowhere near as long and many seek opportunities in Argentina, Brazil and even Spain. That's not to say that the U.S. is not a big magnet — just look at the large Bolivian community in the Washington, D.C. area. But relatively speaking, South American ties with the U.S. are not as strong as one would surmise.

If you go back to 1967, when "Che" Guevara was captured and killed in Bolivia, I suspect that Guevara probably saw his earlier activities in Cuba and Africa as the precursors to a more "glorious revolution" in South America that he would lead from the heart of South America, in Bolivia, next door to his birthplace in Argentina. Fortunately, that didn't pan out too well for him. He was physically not fit; he had asthma and probably not as good a fighter as he though he was. On top of that, he didn't blend in very well with the forces he wanted to lead. I guess Marx was right when he said that the vanguard of the proletariat would come from the bourgeoisie, rather than peasants. In this particular case, the rural proletariat (the indigenous groups in the Andes) has a difficult time following a well-to-do, white medical doctor from the city. Nevertheless, the repression of Pinochet in Chile, the repression of the Argentine, Paraguayan and Uruguayan regimes, among others, profoundly wounded the pride of many South Americans, who saw Cuba as a potential alternative.

I have not mentioned Paraguay all that much, but Paraguay for long time had one ruler, Alfredo Stroessner Matiauda. Nobody paid much attention to this small, landlocked country. It was as isolated in South America as Bhutan was in Asia. When I visited there in 1983, an 1860 locomotive ran between Asunción and Puerto Stroessner (now Ciudad del Este). Stroessner himself was, as his name implies, a German-Prussian type. One of

the most uncomfortable times that I had when I visited Paraguay in 1983 was being introduced to Paraguayans of German decent who still had thick German accents. [Laughter.] One did not want to dwell too much on where they came from. The same was somewhat true in Bolivia, where at around this time the "Butcher of Lyon" Klaus Barbie was captured in a club in downtown La Paz. German Nazis who managed to escape to South America after the war found kindred spirits — or at least people willing to look the other way — in Bolivia, Paraguay, and Argentina.

Q: Did you feel, going back to the early 80s, that Marxism was in danger of taking root, or was this a university thing where the kids would go to proclaim Marxism…?

ALMAGUER: The peasants, who were the vast majority, continued to lead their difficult lives as they had through the centuries, with a strong family and community-based society, deeply rooted to the land where they were born. It was the emerging urban middle-class young folks, particularly at the university level and even some in the upper classes, who developed an intellectual taste for the Marxist revolutionary philosophy espoused by Castro and "Che" Guevara. Fortunately for us, this leftist revolutionary philosophy did not develop the deep roots that we all feared at the time. I had a doctor friend of mine; a gynecologist and dean of the medical faculty at the University of Honduras in Tegucigalpa. He noted that medical students had two sets of textbooks — one produced in the United States and one produced in the Soviet Union — on childbirth. He gave the example of teaching how to perform cesarean operations. In the United States doctors prefer a horizontal incision, whereas apparently in the old Soviet Union they preferred a vertical one. My friend pointed out that the vertical incision was easier since it follows more closely the abdominal muscles. On the other hand, horizontal incisions are preferred in the West for aesthetic reasons. The younger med students quickly took sides: those who believed in the Marxist philosophy would insist on doing the incision vertically. However, as my friend put it, by the time these students got to be fourth- or fifth-year students in medicine, they began to ask truly important questions, such as, "How much do you charge for this operation?" [Laughter], and all of a sudden my friend's fear of Marxist indoctrination began to dissipate.

So with very few exceptions, leftist uprisings and groups did not do well over the long run. In Peru, "*Sendero Luminoso*" ("Shining Path", a Maoist guerilla insurgent group) was a group of fanatics more akin to Pol Pot in Cambodia; its ideology rooted in Maoist Marxism and committed to the violent conversion of the masses. In the end, it could not succeed with its indiscriminate violence. Instead, it moved much of Peru politically to the right. The guerillas in Colombia initially rooted their philosophy on Marxism, but, in fact, they soon became more committed to their control of the cocaine production and marketing business than to the Marxist philosophy, even though they spoke in Marxist terms when explaining their never-ending role as guerrilla fighters for the alleged benefit of "The People."

Fortunately for us, Marxist ideology never really took hold, except perhaps in the small and often elitist academic and literary communities. Nevertheless, most Latin American governments and people are somewhat left of the U.S. political center. Latin Americans

are closer to Europeans in that regard. Europeans believe in a social safety net, and the Latins are always striving in that direction. We in the U.S. tend to be more skeptical of the ability of the public sector to provide that social safety net. Ours is a society centered on the individual; the Europeans tend to be more centered on broader societal norms and services. Latin Americans fit that European pattern. Even the staunchest free-market thinker in Latin America probably is more comfortable among European social democrats than among hard-core fiscal and social conservatives in the United States. This is a cultural divide that we often forget as we preach the gospel of free-market economics. This explains why right-of-center politicians in Latin America often speak of "capitalism with a human face" when speaking in support of market-oriented economic reforms.

Q: On the relations' side, how did you find working with USAID, not just within ARA, but also with the broader State Department? Was that a difficult job?

ALMAGUER: No, not at all. Working in Washington across bureaucratic boundaries is always more difficult than overseas. But I never saw it as one of my major problems. On the contrary, having allies at various levels within our bureaucracies was extremely useful and I seem to have been good at it, easily mingling across bureaucratic boundaries.

Q: Who was the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs … I think you had a couple, didn't you? It was Tom (Thomas O.) Enders when you got there?

ALMAGUER: Tom Enders was there (1981 – 1983 and Tony [Langhorne A.] Motley [1983 – 1985]). The most significant one during my time was Elliott Abrams.

Q: Did you sit in on planning meetings, or was so much of it just concentrated on Central America at that time?

ALMAGUER: So much attention was concentrated on Central America that none of those guys had much time to engage on South American issues. After George Shultz became Secretary, Shultz did go down to South America once or twice. But let's face it, South America did not feature prominently.

Q: Were you there when Ronald Reagan made a visit —

ALMAGUER: When he went to Brazil and said how pleased he was to be in Bolivia? Yes. I wasn't physically there, but I was very unhappy when I heard about this *faux pas*. Even if it was a simple error, it confirmed for the leaders of South America that the United States didn't care very much about South America. The way they saw it was that that U.S. interests in the region were two-fold: Don't allow the Communists to take over, and don't send drugs to the U.S. They perceived that U.S. talk about democracy and human rights was just that — talk. As long as U.S. interests were not directly affected, many of the military leaders perceived that they could carry on as they always had. Certainly, U.S. pressure on human rights, which characterized the Carter period, was no longer being felt.

Q: I'm trying to capture the atmosphere during this '83 – '86 timeframe. Were you of glad that you weren't involved in Central America? I mean, was this a radioactive area that you felt you might really get burned if you got too close to it?

ALMAGUER: Actually, to some degree it must have been exciting to be focused on Central America at the time because you were at the heart of what was going on. There is no question that a number of good officers were badly burned. We all know Foreign Service officers, both from USAID and State, whose careers came to an early end because they may have developed views contrary to the line espoused by the Administration and the "hard-liners" in Congress. As I have noted earlier, an aspect that was beneficial to me, from a career perspective, was that during those three years that I was running around the State Department Building talking about South America, I managed to develop more visibility and gained trust as an expert on South America whose views were considered objective, not only within USAID and State, but also on the Hill.

I have previously mentioned and praised the USAID Administrator at the time Peter McPherson. The Reagan Administration did not come into office convinced on the goodness of foreign aid as a foreign-policy tool. Yet, during the Reagan administration USAID had a burst of creativity — thanks to Peter. He was a dynamic guy, very engaged, and he happens to have been a Peace Corps Volunteer in Peru in the '60s. Whatever else was occupying his time — and the pressures on him were enormous — he always showed more interest in South America than my immediate bosses. I took several trips to South America with him. Those trips further enhanced my high regard for Peter … and he had crazy work habits. One day he called me on Thursday afternoon and said, "How would you like to go to La Paz with me?" I said, "Well, great! I'd be delighted." Now, bear in mind that La Paz is a little further away from Washington than Central Europe … about the distance to Warsaw (except, of course, that time zone difference was not an issue when traveling to South America). I said, "When do we leave?" He said, "Well, tomorrow after work." This is Friday. "And when will we come back?" "Well, Sunday night." So we basically got on the plane at 8 p.m. on a Friday night, traveled all night, got to La Paz at 8 a.m., did a lot of work on Saturday, and on Sunday got on an airplane, landing at National Airport at 10 p.m. Sunday. When we arrived in D.C., he said, "Would you like a ride?" I said, "Well, in which direction are you going?" "I'm going back to the office," said Peter. That was Peter McPherson! He's a wonderful guy with whom I keep in touch.

USAID Ecuador (1986 – 1990)

Q: Well then, Frank, what happened in '86?

The move to Ecuador

ALMAGUER: In 1984, Ecuador held presidential elections and the outcome delighted the Reagan White House. That country elected as president a tough-talking guy, Leon

Febres Cordero, who had studied engineering at Stevens Institute of Technology in New Jersey. He campaigned on the promise to lead Ecuador on the road to a prosperous market-driven economy. He said a number of times that he would govern as the "Ronald Reagan of South America." His campaign advisors were from the firm of Black, Manafort, and Black, the same cast of consultants that ran the Reagan campaign in 1980. The White House gave him early on a state reception, a very unusual honor for a Latin American leader. It was the first time I participated in a White House ceremony of that nature. I didn't get invited to the dinner, which is usually reserved for "high rollers," but I was invited to other portions of this state visit. It as all pretty fancy stuff and a reflection of how happy the White House was to have a kindred spirit in office from a region and a country that tended to tilt left.

The USAID Mission Director in Ecuador, Orlando Llenza, was getting ready to leave in 1986. I had visited Ecuador a number of times, including a couple of times with McPherson. When the time came to select a new Mission Director, Peter said to me, "You're the man that we want there working with a government that we care about; the White House is interested in everything they do." So, in August '86, my wife, our two kids and I left Washington on a new adventure, this time made even more interesting by the kinship President Reagan felt for President "Leon" (as everybody called him).

This transfer was a bit difficult on the personal side because by then our 13-year-old son would be entering high school (9th grade) and our soon-to-be 11-year-old daughter would go into sixth grade. I vividly remember our daughter crying on our way there, "Daddy why do you have to do this? Mommy, do I have to go?" That hurt a great deal.

Q: I think most of us have gone through this. Kids leave their friends behind.

ALMAGUER: It was a painful transition for both of them. My son was more accepting; my daughter had a more difficult time accepting this and subsequent moves.

Quito is a beautiful city surrounded by five snow-capped volcanoes. If God wanted to build a city in the most beautiful place, this was it. It just so happens that those volcanoes do have a tendency to erupt from time-to-time and the earth around them shakes quite a bit. The city at the time had about one million residents; today it probably has more than two million people. While we were only a four-hour plane ride from Miami, the location, surrounded by mountains, colonial vistas and a large indigenous population, made it seem remote. We knew we now were overseas!

They gave us a 15 percent post differential because of the altitude (around 9,200 feet above sea level, making Quito the second highest capital city in the world after La Paz, another city in which we would subsequently serve). But it really was a nice place and our house was both pleasant and equipped with most conveniences — perfect for teenage kids. And I was in hog heaven because the White House was telling us to do everything possible to show our support for Leon, even if the funding levels for our programs had to remain relatively low due to funding pressures from Central America and other foreign-policy priority countries. I already had met the President and many of his cabinet

members on their earlier visits to Washington. Further, the Ambassador at the time, Fred [Fernando E.] Rondon, was a good friend with whom I had worked closely when he served as ARA's Director of Andean Affairs. For me Quito was homecoming; the world looked good.

Salary supplementation scandal

I had been in Ecuador all of four weeks, still planning for a great, crisis-free tour, when one of my senior officers at the mission asked me to sign some vouchers. I thought it was rather unusual because in a typical well-staffed USAID mission the Mission Director rarely has to sign individual "services rendered" vouchers or approve the advance of funds. There are various check points along the way — including the Controller, the Contracts Officer, the Program Office and the Project Development Office — each of which has a role to play in certifying project expenditures against services rendered, or goods delivered. Once in a while, someone in that chain of offices may recuse themselves for some reason. In this case, the officer pointed out that my predecessor had been signing these vouchers for disbursement of funds to an NGO (non-governmental organization). I said, "What's unusual about this one versus all the other NGOs with whom we work?" She responded by saying said, "Sir, I have to share this with you but it's a little uncomfortable …" She explained that the president of Ecuador, Leon Febres Cordero, and some members of his senior team allegedly had approached the previous mission director and said, "We can't hire the business people that we need to make a difference and transform the country." The president correctly had pointed out that government salaries, even for the most senior executives, were puny and the people he needed were making international-level salaries as bankers, industrialists and investors. He obviously made a strong and valid case that it would be difficult to recruit top-talent for his administration — an administration so highly regarded in Washington, and by the White House in particular.

This is not an uncommon predicament and one to which USAID has responded appropriately in other settings. In this case, however, in lieu of a transparent program of salary supplementation, the president's staff and the mission director came up with a less than transparent approach to the problem: They created a fictitious foundation which received a grant from the USAID mission in Ecuador. From what I learned, key ministers and even some other senior officials below that level would draw payments on a regular basis from the foundation created for this purpose. It took me a while to absorb what was going on. I started from the assumption that this was a valid response to a valid problem. What seemed unusual was its lack of transparency and the clearance and approval process, which was irregular. My first reaction was to attribute all of this to the inexperience with USAID procedures for project approval on the part of my predecessor. After all, he was an unusual appointment. Almost all USAID mission directors are career people. It is very unusual to have a political appointee. In this case, the Reagan Administration had appointed Orlando Llenza to serve as USAID Ecuador Mission Director. Orlando had been an Air Force major general and most recently had served as head of the Puerto Rico Air National Guard. My recollection, which may not be exact, is that after retiring from the military he became involved in Puerto Rico and Republican

Party politics. He apparently aspired to an ambassadorship, but settled for a mission directorship. He looked the part and even kept his Air Force general's flag on display in his USAID office. I found him very pleasant to deal with when I was heading the South America Desk back in Washington. My sense was that he was well liked by his staff, who nevertheless were somewhat intimidated by his military demeanor. Further, he no doubt felt the pressure from Washington to respond to Febres Cordero's initiatives whenever we could. As I understand it, Llenza and Febres Cordero developed a good personal relationship. After he left, there were some rumors — which I never attempted to substantiate — that Febres Cordero and Llenza had some business ties in Miami.

Whatever the circumstances leading up to it, the USAID Mission had developed an arrangement to support the Febres Cordero Administration's needs for high-quality senior executives in a manner that made some of the staff in the mission uncomfortable, but at the same time somewhat intimidated by the general. Under other, more typical circumstances (i.e., with a career mission director), it is likely that mission staff would have prevailed upon the mission director to provide a solution to the problem in a more transparent manner, with the typical checks and balances. The bottom-line is that while mission staff were uncomfortable, they went along with this unconventional arrangement that could be in violation of USAID standard operating procedures.

As I began to dig deeper into the matter, my discomfort grew. Some of the findings bordered on the sleazy side. For example, the minister of agriculture, who was among the richest men in the country and head of its largest commercial bank, had his ministerial salary topped from perhaps $30,000 per year to maybe $150,000. Since he probably did not need the money (after all, he continued to serve with his private bank and frequently received official visitors at his bank headquarters), he appears to have used part of the supplement to maintain his mistress in a suite at the Intercontinental Hotel in Quito.

Q: It was a normal business expense [Laughter.]

ALMAGUER: Here I was, four weeks into my first mission directorship, in the country of my dreams, with President Reagan's favorite South American president and saying to myself, "If I call my bosses in D.C., they are not going to believe me or suspect that I am against the policies being pursued by Febres Cordero. Further, how much does the Ambassador know and how will this impact his tenure?" I spent a sleepless night, but I knew what my only option was. The next morning I did two things. First, I went to see Ambassador Rondon. As I noted earlier, Fred and I had worked together in Washington and I respected him a great deal. I laid out for Fred what I was just beginning to understand. As I anticipated, Fred shared with me that Llenza had explained to him the need for salary supplementation for key officials and that he (Rondon) understood that Llenza had found a way to do it in a manner that would keep it low key (i.e., out of the Ecuadorian political limelight), but respecting standard USAID procedures. Fred was not familiar with the mechanics of the program – ambassadors normally don't need to get into those mechanical details - but supported the program in principle and understood the political advisability of keeping the program as low key as possible. I had (and continue to have) full faith in what Fred shared and had anticipated that the salary supplementation

program had his support (as it would have had support in Washington had the USAID Mission managed it in more conventional fashion). But now, with evidence that Mission staff had gone along with a less-than-transparent approach, involving a dubious NGO, and with the knowledge that the program appeared to have unintended beneficiaries (e.g., the minister's mistress), in addition to a longer list of beneficiaries than originally contemplated, our problem would be significantly more complicated to resolve without implicating some of our Mission's senior staff and without it becoming the subject of a major investigation by the USAID Inspector General's Office.

It was sad and frustrating. The program would have been perfectly legal (if politically sensitive) had a more conventional approach had been followed. Budget supplementation, for example, was normal practice when USAID supported a local government program that it favored. But we could not engage in "under-the-table" use of taxpayers' dollars — at least not without very high-level support back at Headquarters. I did not have the mandate to permit this to continue without Washington's authorization and I was not about to resolve it in-house, knowing full well that this would make me an accessory after the fact if I merely stopped it without involving Washington.

Hence, the second thing I did that morning was to call my immediate superior in Washington, the then-Assistant Administrator for Latin America, Dwight Ink. Dwight was an unusual political appointee. He had devoted most of his career to troubleshooting government programs. He and I had developed a good relationship in Washington and I could always count on him to be a good ally. He saw me as someone like himself, who cared about management almost as much as we cared about the substance of the programs we managed. His multiple prior assignments in public office included closing down what remained of OEO (Office of Economic Opportunity) in the early days of the Reagan Administration and oversight of an Alaskan earthquake relief program. But Dwight had a tendency to over-manage. I knew that once I made that call to him, nothing in the mission would ever be the same — but I had to do it.

Dealing with the Mission's senior staff who had knowledge of the program was perhaps the most traumatic element of this difficult episode. After all, I was dealing with good, hardworking officers who cared about development and about our program and who had welcomed me warmly. The inevitable questions from me to each of them was, "What did you know, when did you know it and what did you do about it? The answer universally was, "Yes, we knew it was irregular but it was not for personal enrichment of anyone on our staff and it reflected the Administration's strong support for the Febres Cordero team." Further, many were delighted to work in an environment in which the local senior authorities shared our strong institutional support for free-market economics. In addition, most of the local officials receiving salary supplementation were top-notch professionals who went to school in the U.S., spoke English fluently, and were easy to like and respect professionally. The bottom-line was that many in our staff were willing to follow orders from a mission director whom they liked but also who easily intimidated them with his military demeanor. Further, they felt that support at the Embassy and in Washington for the Febres Cordero government was so strong that raising issues on the mechanics and

potential misuse of project funds (due to the lack of normal safeguards) would not be well received.

I really found myself in a deep crisis of conscience. I was opening a Pandora's box that could negatively affect my friend, the ambassador, my good colleagues in the mission, and generate heat in Washington for a program that enjoyed so much support in D.C. Further, despite the normal challenges of any mission, this was a high-morale post, staffed with people generally pleased to be there, a post with good schools and decent amenities for families. In that setting, if the well-placed boss (Llenza) said to go ahead and implement a project that raised some ethical and legal questions — or, at the very least, procedural questions — some chose to go along with it, despite some discomfort. I am sure that's what happened in this case.

On the third or fourth day of the crisis, I had not signed the voucher to allow the next set of salary supplementations to be paid. Hence, when the ministers or their emissaries showed up to collect their money, it wasn't there. Soon, the inevitable happened and the complaints from these high-level officials started to come in; some were directed at officers within the Mission. Others went directly to the Ambassador. No doubt, the finger was pointed at the new Mission Director. …

Returning to my phone call to Dwight Ink, as anticipated he took in every detail that I could share with him and peppered me with questions. He must have had me on the phone for three hours. Equally anticipated was his decision to get personally involved. At one point in our conversation he said, "I'm getting on an airplane, and I'm going to fly to Ecuador." He added, "Don't touch anything." He came down a couple of days later for some of the most intense meetings one could imagine.

I could regale you with a number of individual stories involving good people caught having made bad decisions and who were now the subject of intense interest on the part of the stern and universally-disliked USAID Inspector General, retired Marine General Herbert Beckington. He had been briefed by Ink and, like a pit bull, he went after everyone at post who had a role in creating a façade of a project for purposes that were different from the stated objectives of the grant. Even I, as the person who blew the whistle, was subjected to intensive grilling from the IG, who had me fly to D.C. for the interrogation.

Suffice it to say that by the third month that I was in Ecuador, several of my most-senior team members had been removed and for some of them this was the end of their careers with USAID, since future promotions were not likely to happen (although at least one officer in that group did manage to overcome this episode and move up the chain in another bureau of USAID). USAID inspectors and auditors came to Quito soon thereafter and what they subsequently discovered was that close to a million dollars of USAID funds that had been handed out, under false pretenses, in support of a program that had not been duly authorized by USAID up the chain of command, as required and expected.

There was enough evidence there to indict the former mission director, who by then had left the agency. I am not aware whether the IG sought charges against him, but I suspect not — particularly since it was clear from the beginning that decisions made were not for personal benefit, but for a perceived need to support a government that retained strong support in Washington. As an example of that support, then-Secretary of the Treasury James Baker is alleged to have said that the then-Finance Minister of Ecuador (and one of the beneficiaries of the salary supplementation program) was perhaps (at the time) the best Minister of Finance in the Americas. The deputy mission director was perhaps the one whose career suffered most. Many assumed that he would be indicted for dereliction of duty since, particularly when a politically-appointed boss is in charge, the career deputy is expected to be the "eyes and ears" of Washington audiences on the management of the mission, and he was well aware that the program was irregular by any measure. He apparently soon left the agency. I recall that the Justice Department was ready to issue indictments, but backed out without any public acknowledgment. The combination of retirements of some of the officers implicated, and the fact that no one in the mission had any personal gain, led the DoJ to drop potential legal charges.

With regards to the Ecuadorian government, relations with me were problematic for a while. The longest car ride of my life was driving with the Ambassador to see the president to explain to him that these payments to his ministers were over, while reassuring him of strong continued U.S. support for his free-market-driven economic reforms. He obviously was not happy but suggested that he knew very little about the program, which was not a credible statement. Nevertheless, he did not explode in rage, as he was known to do. Rather, he accepted the decision quietly. I think he realized that they had a good thing going for as long as they had it, but that it would not last. Further, he did not want a big political scandal spread all over the local media.

As I look back on my career, my first three months in Ecuador were one of the most wrenching and professionally difficult times of my life. I was correct in exposing a program that had good intentions but had been executed improperly and open to misuse. Nevertheless, it pained me to hurt colleagues who were badly led but who, notwithstanding the leadership problem under a political appointee, should have blown the whistle.

The second challenge was the inevitable leak to the local media. When the Ecuadorian opposition learned about this, they managed to gain local media attention in a sensationalist manner. The president and his cabinet were labeled as crooks. At one point, in the aftermath of public exposure, local television channels set up cameras in front of our office building waiting for me to come out for an interview. I managed to sneak out another door but the scandal in Ecuador went on for a while until the next scandal (fortunately unrelated to the U.S.) grabbed the Ecuadorian media's attention.

Relations between the White House and Febres Cordero were never the same after that, and not only because of this incident. There were other episodes, unrelated to USAID, which increasingly tainted the Febres Cordero administration. The era of "he may be a crook but he is our crook" (to paraphrase a point alleged to have been said in the 1930s

by FDR, in reference to the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua) was over. Exposure of corruption was not as readily accepted in the 1980s as it had been in prior generations. The "Ronald Reagan of South America" proved to be a difficult partner, a divisive figure with a volatile temper and a less-than-stellar track record in fighting corruption. He talked a good game, impressed everybody, spoke "American" English from New Jersey, and truly believed in free-market economics, but he was less interested in fighting corruption or in strengthening legal institutions. Febres Cordero and his team were very bright guys who knew what needed to be done to lift Ecuador out of its Third-World impoverished status, but who ruled in the style of the classic *"caudillos"* of old (i.e., strong-armed populist rulers who disregarded the basic principles of democracy). It was a difficult and painful process to watch the disintegration of a government that had so much promise.

I was fortunate because I had very strong allies backing me during these difficult days: Administrator McPherson and Dwight Ink, the Assistant Administrator for Latin America. The Ambassador, although caught in an uncomfortable situation, also gave me his strong personal support. I subsequently received a Presidential Meritorious Service Award and a USAID Distinguished Service Award, not only for exposing corruption but also for restoring the Ecuador Mission to good health after a traumatic period. It was one of those events that fundamentally shape one's career. From then on, I placed a great deal of emphasis not only on corruption issues, both internally and externally, but also on the need for USAID to focus on good governance as a central element of combating poverty and underdevelopment.

Q: What happened to your staff? You say that some left. How did this affect the rest of your staff?

ALMAGUER: It shook up everyone in the mission. It left some staff members suspicious of my intentions. I am a strong believer in collegiality and seek to assure staff wherever I am that I mean it. In this case, even those who were not involved in any way probably were of two minds, "Yes, the salary-supplementation project was ill-conceived and some of our colleagues were not too smart in how they handled the Febres Cordero team, but the ones who really suffered were not the perpetrators in the Ecuadorian Government or the former Mission Director, who did deserve some punishment; rather, it was the career USAID staff who paid the greatest price." Bureaucracies are like living organisms and the people who left were good friends with many of the colleagues who stayed behind. I assume that many questioned why I escalated the issue as high as I did. Some probably believed that I could have stopped the project without punishing anyone. Hence, it took a while for me to regain the trust and collegial relationships that I value. I believe that, at least for a while, my hallway reputation at USAID in Washington was that I was a strong manager and strong on fighting corruption, but perhaps willing to throw people under the bus as a result. I never saw myself in that management style and it pained me for sometime afterwards.

With regards to the replacement team that was brought in to replace those officers who left, I was extremely happy and fortunate. Almost all were very good — handpicked to serve in a crisis situation. At the same time, many of the Ecuadorians on our staff were

elated to see the Ecuadorian government exposed for what they claimed to have known all along — that Febres Cordero was a *caudillo* and could turn on anyone who crossed his path. While most Ecuadorians in our staff may have shared in the belief that Ecuador needed to move away from its failed protectionist and inward-looking economic policies, most saw Febres Cordero as the wrong person to sell the product.

Q: Did this incident have any effect on the president?

ALMAGUER: Yes, it aroused the opposition to attack Febres Cordero and his team more openly. The opposition used this case as an example of corruption in the Febres Cordero government. Rodrigo Borja Cevallos, his successor, used this case as one of the many examples he used in his ultimately successful campaign, pointing out that "even his friends the Americans could not stand the level of corruption that characterized the Febres Cordero government."

Q: What about the work? If you have the minister of agriculture and others in a huff because these supplements to their income were stopped, it must have had an effect on their interaction with USAID and with you personally.

ALMAGUER: I certainly anticipated that and feared that I was going to spend a couple of difficult and lonely years until the next election. It was tough at first, but the scandal — as these things are prone to do — began to move from the front pages as other newer issues began to occupy the media and the politicians' time. Further, politics is a brutal sport and those who engage in that profession tend to have thicker skins than most. If my memory serves me right, there were some 12 people who received salary supplements directly from USAID, with others in an indirect way, like the mistress. [Laughter.] Half of them probably thought, "Gee, it was good while it lasted." One of them told me: "I didn't ask for it; I was going to join Leon (Febres Cordero) anyway. I was still going to accept being a minister, whether they paid me well or not, because I wanted to do it. The fact that they gave me this extra inducement was great. Too bad you cut it off, but I understand it." What I experienced mostly was not only acceptance, but also respect at a personal as well as at the institutional level. The way I liked to explain it to those who raised it was that this was a demonstration, along with the Watergate scandal and others, that Americans and its government make mistakes and have human weaknesses like everybody else, but we also have institutional checks and balances that inevitably lead to corrective measures. Our democracy is strong over the long run because we are public about our mistakes and try to learn from these episodes. When something goes awry, sooner or later we will correct it. And no one is above the law.

Most of the beneficiaries of our salary supplementation program eventually quit, but almost always because they had crossed the president in some way, which was easy to do, given his personality. Soon I was able to engage the government in most of what we did. But the fact is that much of the Mission's focus was moving away from institutional support to government programs and shifting towards strengthening the private sector at all levels, including business groups and NGO programs.

Q: What happened to the young lady at the Intercontinental Hotel [laughter]?

ALMAGUER: I don't know what happened to her. I'm sure she was evicted soon thereafter. I never met her, but I know the inspectors and auditors talked with her. I think that it is worth noting that sometime afterwards, my wife and I hosted a dinner at my house for visiting dignitaries and among the invited guests were the minister and his wife. They both came to the dinner and both were very gracious.

Q: What was USAID doing in Ecuador?

The USAID Ecuador Program

ALMAGUER: In the 1970s commercial-grade oil was discovered in sufficient quantities to convert Ecuador into a significant player in the world market. It joined OPIC (the cartel of the oil-producing states). What Ecuador lacked was the infrastructure and institutional base. The country had both weak public institutions and a nascent private sector that needed much mentoring. We helped finance a number of cooperatives (including housing and agricultural cooperatives). USAID also supported the private sector in a number of ways; for example, by helping to strengthen local chambers of commerce and associations of entrepreneurs.

We became very engaged in supporting environmental-awareness programs. For such a small country, Ecuador is uniquely blessed with a variety of natural resources unmatched anywhere, including some of the tallest mountains in the world, highland agriculture, Amazonian jungles, and of course the world-renowned Galapagos Islands, made famous by Charles Darwin. We worked closely with local foundations and others to improve environmental education in school, citizen awareness, and mitigation efforts around the country. This may have been among the earliest and most successful environmental programs in Latin America.

We also helped guarantee seed capital for a number of emerging businesses. For example, Ecuador at the time had the potential for exporting flowers to the United States and we fostered that agribusiness sector, which ultimately enjoyed a great deal of success.

Q: The same as Colombia?

ALMAGUER: There was plenty of room in the United States fresh-flower market for both Colombia and Ecuador. In fact, Colombia and Ecuador soon became the leading exporters of fresh flowers to the United States. Prior to our involvement in the sector, Ecuador did not have much of an industry in the flower business.

Q: You mentioned flowers, I saw a movie about the environmental problem in Colombia caused by that country's cut flowers industry. It can be quite unhealthy for the workers. Did you run into this issue?

ALMAGUER: There always was a concern for the environmental and health impact of USAID-supported agriculture and agribusiness programs. However, I don't recall that there were unique environmental or health issues in the cut flower business — no more so than in other agricultural endeavors. There always has been a problem with the indiscriminate use of pesticides, which can have serious impact on the soil and rivers, as well as on the health of those around the chemical being used, but I am not aware that there were unique problems in the flower industry.

Q. What else was USAID doing at the time you were there?

ALMAGUER: We also provided a great deal of assistance in the health and family planning sectors, helping to ensure that the more remote indigenous populations and the poorest urban *barrios* (neighborhoods) received expanded quality health care services. The health sector has always been an important area for USAID because health conditions of the most vulnerable population in most developing countries, including Ecuador, tend to be substandard. Health conditions are not only a social or human issue. Poor health conditions contribute to low productivity, absenteeism and reduced family income. The overwhelming percentage of the Ecuadorian population lived in extreme climate settings: the bleak, damp and cold highland regions of the Andes and the tropical heat and humidity of the Amazons region of eastern Ecuador and the coastal tropics to the west. All three geographic regions were part of our target areas for poverty reduction and quality of life improvements.

Q: Did you get involved in the Peru-Ecuador business? Did that impact on you at all?

ALMAGUER: It did not because at the time the two countries didn't talk to each other.

Q: [Laughter.], Is there anything else we should discuss in Ecuador?

ALMAGUER: Yes, there are several interesting events in my time in Ecuador that we should discuss, including earthquakes and elections.

Q: Okay

Natural disasters

ALMAGUER: In September 1987, Quito and much of Ecuador suffered from a massive earthquake requiring significant U.S. and other international assistance. The official reports show that it was a magnitude 6.8 earthquake, but for those of us awakened in the middle of the night with crying children and lights out, it seemed like an "end-of-the-world" experience. Fortunately, for those of us in sturdy homes, the earthquake was more scary than damaging. For a number of Embassy and USAID personnel who lived in the fashionable high-rise district in the eastern part of Quito, it was an experience never to be forgotten, as buildings swayed and even refrigerators were toppled to the floor. My family certainly will never forget that night. More significantly, the earthquake ruptured the oil pipeline from the oil fields in the eastern jungles of Ecuador through the high

mountain passes of the Andes and downhill to the coastal region to the west. This set back the oil industry and Ecuador's oil-dependent economy by several years. The earthquake also severed the only road crossing the eastern ridge of the Andes (and paralleling the pipeline), leaving the Amazon region disconnected from the rest of the country. Human casualties were not as high as originally feared, but the toll was never properly quantified. I would estimate that some 2,000 people, mostly in remote areas, were killed.

Q. What was USAID's role in the aftermath?

ALMAGUER: Within hours, USAID's OFDA (Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance) in Washington was mobilized. There was the usual and highly efficient response from OFDA and its U.S. Military support team. This response included temporary shelters, medical attention and food distribution to camps along the now-severed road to the Amazon. With the help of the U.S. military, a number of "Bailey bridges" (pre-fabricated truss bridges used by the military to forge rivers in wars and for events such as this one) were put in place for the temporary opening of the road destroyed by the earthquake. The USAID response was prompt and very well received. Once again, I saw OFDA in action and continue to feel that it is one of the most-underappreciated faces of America when the world is suffering from calamities.

While we did a great job responding in the aftermath of the earthquake, we were less successful in the U.S. commitment to build a new road to the eastern Amazon region. Both the Ecuadorian engineers and our USAID advisors were in full agreement that the effort should have focused on rebuilding the old road, since its alignment was considered the best of various complex engineering options. Nevertheless, Washington had other ideas. Ecuador continued to be a popular place for U.S. officials. The U.S. military, which had struggled over the years to develop relationships with the military in Ecuador, jumped at the opportunity to be helpful, volunteering to send U.S. National Guard and Corps of Engineers experts to support the effort. From the U.S. military perspective, this was both an opportunity to create partnerships and to conduct road-building exercises in mountainous and jungle terrains. They quickly decided that the best way would be a new alignment that would bypass steep mountain passes. I vividly recall a hair-raising helicopter ride through fog-bound terrain along the mountain passes with the Ecuadorian minister of public works and other officials, along with U.S. Army Corps of Engineers personnel from Washington. The Corps of Engineers concluded that the way to go was through a new alignment in lower and — as they learned later — less stable terrain. The Ecuadorians were adamant that the alignment chosen by the Corps of Engineers was doomed to fail, but the U.S. military was not in a mood to listen. It was very clear to me and other USAID colleagues that the U.S. military's approach was driven primarily by the desire to test engineering challenges and capabilities versus more practical considerations. Sadly, the U.S. military won this fight, but lost the battle. After deploying millions of dollars in equipment and hundreds of rotating National Guard units, they discovered that what the Ecuadorians were telling them was based on real experience. The U.S. military was never able to complete the project and saw much of its equipment swallowed by rivers that turned from placid to raging currents overnight or sunk in the

muck. In the meantime, the Ecuadorians managed, on their own, to re-open the road that should have been the target of our assistance from the beginning. I mention this story not to criticize the U.S. military response, which often has been quite good, but to highlight the contradictions under which it operates. To justify the type of deployment that we saw in Ecuador, the military requires that it serve as a training experience. And they do learn a great deal. But that objective is not always in sync with the more urgent need that the host country faces.

Q. I understand that while you were in Ecuador George H. W. Bush, then vice president came to visit. How did that go?

ALMAGUER: The visit went very well. Vice President Bush came to Ecuador to express the sympathies of the American people as a result of the earthquake disaster that had afflicted Ecuador a few weeks earlier. At the same time, the visit was intended to reinforce U.S. friendship for President Febres Cordero. By now, the U.S. was well aware of Febres Cordero's many shortcomings. Nevertheless, Febres Cordero continued to be closely aligned with the U.S. across a range of issues in the region and internationally. It was a one-day visit, and I was very much involved in planning and supporting the visit.

A couple of funny incidents come to mind: I was "responsible" for the presidential palace part of the visit. My job was to make sure that everything in the presidential palace was ready for the Vice President's visit and synchronized at all levels. One of the things that I had to do was to usher in the Secret Service dogs in and around the president of Ecuador's office and private quarters (where the Vice President would be having lunch). I vividly remember going to the palace early in the morning of the visit, along with members of the Vice President's Advance Team and Secret Service detail. One of the things that the Secret Service team insisted on was to be allowed into President Febres Cordero's office with a search dog. This early in the morning we had pretty much total control of the presidential suite, so we went into his office. While there, and much to our surprise, the president walked in and spotted the dog and all of these folks in his office. Febres Cordero, never an easy guy, was outraged. I apologized and explained the need to do what we were doing. After a great deal of grumbling, he allowed us to continue, but he promised that the next time he came to Washington, he would demand that his own security guards check out the White House. … This funny incident (in retrospect, since it did not seem funny at the time) demonstrates something that Latin American leaders, including our friends, often point out: We insist on doing things that come across as arrogant and self-important. These actions are often interpreted as demeaning. I can sympathize with that since we would never allow some search dog from another country to roam around the Oval Office.

The other incident that morning involved the Vice President's official vehicle, which had been flown in from Washington. The Secret Service did not like others to assist them in the conduct of their job. However, we insisted on reminding them that Quito was at about 9,500 feet above sea level. I know nothing about car engines, but I know that at that altitude car engines did not work well unless properly calibrated. The Secret Service failed to heed our warning and, sure enough, as the vehicle carrying both Vice President

Bush and the then vice President of Ecuador approached the colonial center of Quito, it stalled going uphill. I was on a bus two or three vehicles behind and witnessed the frustrated Secret Service team as they tried to deal with the problem. They eventually had to transfer the two Vice Presidents to my USAID vehicle, which had been designated as the back-up vehicle. This episode also ended well, but with a number of red-faced U.S. Secret Service personnel!

The visit itself went extremely well. Vice President Bush came across as an easy-going person. He remembered everybody's names, shook everyone's hands, said all the right things - a very gracious gentleman. Watching him work the floor that day left me with a very good impression. I could well imagine him charming world leaders with his warm style, and modest and caring demeanor. I saw him as someone who would easily gain the support of the world on issues of high priority for the U.S., as we subsequently saw in his handling of the fall of the Soviet Union and in the first Gulf War.

Q. Earlier you mentioned that there were two things you wanted to talk about. One of them was the earthquake and the other was about elections.

1988 Ecuadorian elections

ALMAGUER: Yes. I wanted to raise this subject because by this time (the late 80s), USAID was increasingly interested in using its resources to foster democratic institutions and the rule of law. There was growing recognition that improving social and economic conditions of our traditional target groups would require a strong commitment to good governance, rule of law, and other democratic values. In 1979 Ecuador became the first in a wave of Latin American countries that restored democratic regimes after having gone through a generation of military rulers. As the first of the formerly military-run governments to move towards democratically elected governments, Ecuador took pride in having been at the head of this new wave of democratic governments.

When I arrived in Ecuador in 1986, Febres Cordero was half way through his presidency. Democratic transitions were not yet assured. Nevertheless, we were hopeful for Ecuador. The first democratically elected president of Ecuador in this new era, the populist Jaime Roldós Aguilera, had died in a plane accident in May 1981, just two months before Omar Torrijos did, and Roldos' vice president (Osvaldo Hurtado) was sworn in. The constitutional process was preserved. Despite his autocratic governing style, Febres Cordero, who was not eligible for reelection, allowed open and fair elections in 1988. This was not a foregone conclusion. "Leon" had a rough few years, including running feuds with parliamentarians, where he lost a controlling majority, and even suffered a kidnapping when soldiers angry over pay issues detained him at a military base for about a day. The Ecuadorian legislature was particularly rowdy and photos of parliamentarians having fistfights and even gunfights made headlines in the U.S. media. There was an ambulance parked in back of the legislative building just in case. … [Laughter.]

Part of this governance problem is due to the fact that political parties in Ecuador and throughout much of Latin America are centered on powerful and charismatic leaders.

Loyalty to one or another leader or party is fluid and retaining support depends a great deal on corrupt practices, including financial incentives, jobs for family and friends, and similar shady operations. Parliamentarians tend to be elected on party slates and not by single-member districts. Hence, once in office, there is limited loyalty to constituents; loyalty is to the political leaders who put them in that position. But others can buy that loyalty and, as a result, governing majorities are not dependent on elections. This means, particularly in a place like Ecuador, that presidents not having the necessary support in congress find ways to rule whenever possible by executive decree. Since my time in Ecuador, there have seen a succession of democratically elected presidents, but very few have been able to complete their terms because they either have been impeached or have resigned under pressure. Their constitutionally elected vice president has taken over, but he or she has been weak, at times leading to early elections. This pattern of instability weakens the fabric of the body politic and of society. Yes, Ecuador, like so many other countries in the region, enjoys democratic elections, but pervasive corruption, pervasive institutional weaknesses, and the use of the spoils system, has made democracy something less than what people were anticipating. As a consequence, and according to recent polls, in most countries in Latin America people say that they support democratic processes but don't see much of a payoff for them. What they see are spiraling unemployment rates, the same old corrupt politicians in charge, and spectacularly high crime rates almost everywhere, because the public safety and rule of law institutions are almost universally weak, ineffective and corrupt. We in the United States see our liberty and democratic values as inherent rights. Democracy in Latin America has yet to be seen in that same light. Hence, it is reversible if the circumstances don't lead to real economic and social benefits for the vast majority of the population.

Q: What happened in those elections?

ALMAGUER: Rodrigo Borja, a center-left politician won and went on to lead the country for four years. He was not the charismatic or bombastic figure we witnessed during the four years of Febres Cordero. He was more in the tradition of center-left politicians in Latin America. He did not dismantle many of the reforms of the Febres Cordero era but his administration was easily forgettable. We enjoyed good relations with his government, but not the kind of hands-on engagement that we witnessed during the previous administration.

What I most remember about the change of government in Ecuador in August of 1988 was the participation of Secretary of State Shultz in the transfer of power ceremony and the graffiti I saw on the walls that day, perhaps capturing the widespread cynicism of the public. The graffiti said, "Today marks the end of the oppression and the first day of the same." (Laughter.)

Shultz had arrived in Quito from a visit to La Paz, Bolivia, where there was an ambush of his motorcade on the road to the airport. By all accounts, this was a serious incident, but it did not affect Shultz's impeccable demeanor in Quito. I applaud the fact that he chose to attend the ceremony at the National Assembly building. Before then, U.S. officials (including me) had followed a policy of not visiting the chambers of the National

Assembly since it prominently displayed an anti-American mural painted by the well-known Ecuadorian master painter and life-long communist, Oswaldo Guayasamín. Shultz stressed to his advisers that what was happening inside the building, the peaceful transfer of power resulting from a democratic election, was more important than what the painting depicted. His gesture received wide praise in Ecuador.

Q. Anything else happened in Ecuador at this time?

Other Ecuador stories

ALMAGUER: I loved the country and its people. I still do. But it was never an easy place in which to work, even under the best of circumstances. I will share one story that typified our challenges in working with Ecuadorian institutions. As I mentioned earlier, we had a great health program. In the context of that program, we brought four vehicles to be converted and equipped in-country to serve as ambulances for one of our projects. Unfortunately, interminable paperwork left them sitting at the port of Guayaquil for a long time, more than 90 days. Once the paperwork was finished, our project team went to pick up the vehicles, only to discover that they were gone! Because they had been sitting at the port for so long, the vehicles were deemed to be "abandoned property" (talk about a perverse conclusion!) and turned over to a local and well-known political leader in that region, who was then serving as Governor of Guayas Province, on the Pacific Coast of Ecuador. We were able to trace the whereabouts of the vehicles and knew that they were being improperly used. We informed the Government authorities that we would suspend most of our programs with the government until we could attest that the vehicles, in good condition, had been placed in the hands of the intended beneficiaries. Soon, the four vehicles were towed to the USAID parking lot, where we determined that it would cost some $50,000 to repair the damages. We billed the government for that amount and were assured by the Minister of Finance, a solid professional, that USAID would get paid. However he also told me that he would have to figure out how, since politically it would be difficult to justify payment on account of misuse of a donated commodity. A week or so later, he called to let me know he had the money. I went to his office expecting a check and received, instead, a bagful of dollar bills, mostly in $20 denominations! That was a lot of cash, adding up to over $50,000! What he shared with me was that the Ecuadorian military ran most of the gambling casinos in the country and that the solution they found was to take their proceeds from a couple of days and transfer the cash to us to satisfy our requirement! There was never a boring day in beautiful Ecuador. We did a great deal of good, but it was never easy.

By the second half of my four-year assignment in Ecuador, the USAID program had hit its stride. Despite a challenging environment, we were doing many good things for which all Americans should take legitimate pride. Our relations with the Embassy team was excellent, even after the departure of Ambassador Rondon. In 1988, President Reagan nominated Richard Holwill to serve as Ambassador in Ecuador. Unlike Rondon, Dick Holwill was a political appointee, but with significant experience in the State Department from the early Reagan years. His personal philosophy and his public persona were shaped by years in the private sector as a consultant and reflected many of the views espoused by

the Heritage Foundation and similar groups. He was not a fan of foreign aid, but was generally supportive of what we did. There was one area, however, where our program clashed with his strongly held view that Federal Government support to prop up the American agricultural sector was inimical to a free and competitive market place. While the issue is an interesting one to debate, it was not one that affected USAID directly until Holwill made the link between that U.S. domestic program and the food programs supported around the world by both USAID and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In some cases, food surpluses generated by a subsidized U.S. agriculture sector was used to meet humanitarian requirements or gifted to NGOs such CARE and Catholic Relief Services in support of their own humanitarian and development programs. In other cases, as in Ecuador, the food was sold locally and "monetized." That is, the product of the sale would be destined for support of joint USAID – Ecuador Government programs. It was an important tool for USAID and for the Ecuadorian Government to help finance mutually-agreed upon development projects. Since Holwill strongly disagreed with U.S. agriculture sector subsidies, it was somewhat understandable to he would object to our use of resources that derived in the first instance from subsidized U.S. commodities. This was one example of how complex foreign aid politics becomes! He agreed that we were using the proceeds well, but he would not agree to future extensions of the program. This matter occupied a fair share of our time and a great deal of back-and-forth with Washington agencies and with the ambassador. The debate was always transparent and above-board. At one level, I was annoyed at having to debate with him on the merits of a U.S. subsidy program that had been in place for generations. On the other side, Holwill was someone with whom we could enjoy sharing a few jokes even as we disagreed. At one point, the Agriculture Attaché, the Director of the USAID Agriculture Office and I found ourselves in the hospital at the same time for unrelated reasons. We could not help but laugh that we were all suffering from an acute case of "Holwillitis." In the end, he departed shortly after George H. W. Bush became president and the issue quickly disappeared from the radar screen. Nevertheless, this is perhaps the only time in my USAID career in which one of our core programs did not enjoy ambassadorial support. We all handled it well, engaging with each other and with the relevant U.S. agencies in D.C. in a professional manner. Holwill was certainly one of the more picturesque political ambassadors with whom I worked.

Returning home

Q. What about your family?

ALMAGUER: My family did well in Ecuador, with my wife serving as the Community Liaison Officer at the Embassy for a couple of those years. Our children went to the small but excellent Cotopaxi Academy. My son graduated from there as the valedictorian of his senior class just before we left. He also earned his Eagle Scout credentials while in Ecuador, thanks to Antoinette's efforts to ensure that the small Scouts program within the American community in Quito continued to be supported. Dan's academic credentials were top-notch and he eventually settled for Williams College, one of the most academically-demanding colleges in the U.S., where he did quite well. Our daughter, Nina, completed her ninth grade at Cotopaxi, as well. It was a satisfying experience, but

she, along with my wife, were ready to come back to Washington and have Nina complete her high school years at home. We left Ecuador in July 1990 shedding some tears.

State Department's Senior Seminar (1990 – 1991)

Q: Where did you go?

ALMAGUER: Before leaving Ecuador I was informed that I had been selected to participate in the State Department's Senior Seminar for the 1990-91 academic year. This was a prestigious assignment and one that I eagerly accepted. I looked forward to spending a year learning instead of battling bureaucratic dragons and saw this as an opportunity to recharge my batteries and to be reintroduced to Washington after a four-year absence.

In early September I became a member of the 33rd Senior Seminar, a fabulous academic and professional experience. All of us who have participated in it were saddened to see the program terminated in 2001 due to budget cutbacks. There's now an active association of former members of the Senior Seminar, who continue to lobby on behalf of resurrecting this program in some form. The Senior Seminar dated back to the Eisenhower years and was modeled on the well-established military concept that senior leaders must be molded and challenged intellectually to assume the most senior positions in our armed forces. While most Senior Seminar participants came from the ranks of the State Department Foreign Service, it almost always included colonel-rank officers from all the military services, from the CIA, from the FBI, from USAID, and from other services (e.g., DEA and NSA). There were 32 officers in my group and all were outstanding in their own specialty and in their commitment to public service.

There were two valuable aspects to the program. One is what we did as part of the academic enrichment program, and the second one was what we learned from each other, our talented colleagues who brought with them multiple skills and diverse experiences.

We were reacquainted with America, visiting every geographic region of the country, and had a chance to interact with key players on various themes and issues of current interest. The experience enriched our knowledge base and understanding of what makes America tick and how policy is shaped. For example, while I had been spending a great deal of my time in the preceding years on trying to reduce the supply of cocaine reaching the U.S., I had limited knowledge of the drug culture in the U.S., except for what one sees in the movies. One of my vivid memories of that academic year was joining a police patrol in Baltimore between 10 p.m. and 3 a.m., cruising on some of the meanest streets in America. In the course of that night I witnessed people abusing drugs of all kinds, violent family feuds fueled by drugs, and aggressive people high on drugs threatening their community and the police officers on patrol that night. It was an eye-opener that gave us a sense for the challenges facing us as a society and those faced by our law enforcement personnel. We also spent at night near San Diego, watching with night-vision goggles dozens of people jumping the border fence, despite its inherent risks. We came away with

a better understanding of how difficult it is to control the flow of immigrants in a society that is not likely to condone indiscriminate shooting of these aliens as they run across the "no-man's land" between the fence and our checkpoints. It gave us added respect for the challenges facing our Border Patrol personnel and for the obvious difficulties we face in controlling the situation.

We spent time in Alaska looking at environmental issues — oil exploitation versus protection of wildlife and other natural resources; old temperate climate forests versus commercial logging requirements. We did the same thing in urban settings. I also had an opportunity to teach for a month at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at the University of Kentucky. Others in my Senior Seminar group did similar things. Then we culminated the year with a visit, in May 1991 to the then-collapsing Soviet Union. We went to St. Petersburg (Leningrad at the time) and Moscow, where we met with key players and visited industrial and other facilities. In Leningrad, we met with Mayor Anatoly Sobchak, a charismatic and progressive leader whom many assumed, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, would some day emerge as President of Russia. Unfortunately, in 2000 he died relatively young of a heart attack (about which some questions remain) before he could live up to his potential. What is most memorable about that particular visit was that at the meeting that my classmates and I had with the mayor, he was accompanied by a very young and stern looking assistant who somehow caught our attention. He turned out to be Vladimir Putin in one of his early jobs as he climbed to power in Russia. We also went to Tbilisi, in the Republic of Georgia, and came back by way of Hungary and Poland. In all three places we gained an understanding of the rapidly-evolving circumstances in Eastern Europe.

Bear in mind that we went to Georgia in May 1991, some seven months before the breakup of the Soviet Union in December of that year. During our visit to Tbilisi, the president with whom we met, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was in effect a renegade whom Soviet Union could have arrested. The fact that the Soviets did not take up arms against this *de facto* government in one of the USSR's constituent republics highlights the state of disintegration of the Soviet Union by that time. On the evening of our visit, we were hosted at a dinner by a number of senior leaders in the Gamsakhurdia Administration. The Georgians clearly misunderstood our presence in Tbilisi and assumed that we were there to offer our country's recognition of Georgia's independence. No amount of explaining was going to dissuade our hosts about the intent of our visit. The cultural practice in Georgia was to host foreign dignitaries over long dinners and copious amounts of liquor. This event lived up to expectations and the more they drank, the more our hosts — through poetry, songs and toasts — proclaimed their hatred for the communist regime and for the Soviet Union. Having us toast to the "death of the Soviet Empire" while the Soviet Union was still in existence was memorable, but perhaps most undiplomatic. But it was great theatre.

Another aspect of the Senior Seminar that merits mention was the fact that each of us in the class took turns organizing one domestic trip and one foreign trip, in addition to periodically inviting guests to our Seminar classroom in Rosslyn (at the former Foreign Service Institute – FSI) from our respective areas of specialization. I organized the visit

to Mexico City and to South Florida. In Mexico I chose to take the group to an impoverished village some 90 minutes from Mexico City. It was the first time for some in the group to see rural Latin America first-hand and to see its contrast with a modernizing Mexico City. The bus ride was memorable for its poor facilities and decrepit condition. To this day, my former colleagues will not let me live down the fact that this was the "bus ride from hell." While I did not plan for a decrepit bus, I assured them that it was all part of my plan for their learning experience for that day!

In South Florida, the focus was on narcotics and immigration. We had an opportunity to visit a detention center for illegal immigrants and better understand the confused immigration laws that give Cubans preferential treatment and limit the kind of support that can be given to refugees from Haiti and elsewhere. We also met with Coast Guard officials and with the various counternarcotics operations located in South Florida. The task of these operation centers is immense and underscored how complex it is to close the U.S. border to illegal drugs and illegal immigrants.

The second aspect of the Senior Seminar was the personal relationships that are established among our fellow participants. It is the type of relationship that endures beyond the classroom. People like Pat Kennedy, now Undersecretary for Management at State, and Jim (James A.) Larocco, who has been a pivotal person in the conduct of U.S. policy in the Middle East, remain good friends and all of us are able to interact with each other in ways that transcend what normally happens in the hallway because we know each other, and we are able to share each other's problems and ideas. The Senior Seminar exposed us to a variety of issues and experiences that made us much better officers. I certainly would advocate resurrecting the program. It is expensive, but I don't believe that short leadership seminars come close to the kind of leadership and experiential opportunities that the Senior Seminar provided us.

Q. Your Senior Seminar experience coincided with the Gulf War, right?

ALMAGUER: Yes, we experienced two dramatic events that year: As the Senior Seminar program was coming to an end, the Soviet empire was collapsing. And, of course, it coincided with the Gulf War led by President George H. W. Bush.

With regards to the Gulf War, we were witnesses to some of the events leading up to the war. We were privy to some of the planning that was going on; we were invited to the Defense Department's Operation Center and briefed by staff from the Joint Chiefs. We also visited a number of military installations across the country and spend the night aboard the aircraft carrier USS Lincoln as it conducted training exercises off the coast of California. What a terrific experience to watch events up close from the Washington side!

Q. What was happening with USAID at that time?

ALMAGUER: That question gets me to my next assignment.

Q. Go ahead and walk us through that.

Leading the USAID Eastern Europe Program (1991- 1993)

Implementing the SEED Act Program

ALMAGUER: Prior to the demise of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the Berlin Wall had come down in November 1989, marking the rapid collapse of former communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. That same month, President Bush signed the Support for East European Democracy (SEED) Act. The intent of the SEED Act was to promote political democracy and economic pluralism, initially in Poland — where the Solidarity movement held sway — and Hungary. The SEED Act called on the President to help those nations during their transition to becoming democratic nations with open economies. In the following months — and in relatively quick succession — the SEED Act went on to cover U.S. assistance in Czechoslovakia (and later the Czech Republic and Slovakia after the break up of that nation on January 1, 1993), Bulgaria, Romania, Albania and the former Yugoslav republics of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Macedonia. (At this point, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo, which were remnants of the old Yugoslavia, were not considered ready for SEED Act support.) The three Baltic states of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania were also included under the provisions of the SEED Act, once free of Soviet domination, since the U.S. never recognized the annexation of those three countries by the Soviet Union during World War II. (With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the countries in the old USSR, minus the three Baltic States, were made part of a separate but similarly managed program for Russia and the other 11 newly-independent states of far eastern Europe/Eurasia and managed at both State and USAID as a separate program, with similar but separate management structures. The former East Germany was also excluded from the SEED Act provisions once it was reincorporated into Germany.)

The SEED Act specifically directed the Administration to focus on helping these countries to create the right legal and economic frameworks necessary to foster the emergence of a vibrant and job-generating private sector. It empowered the Administration to support political and legal reforms, support for labor-market reforms and in other areas conducive to the emergence of free and democratic nations, with a commitment to free-market approaches to economic growth.

The SEED Act placed the coordinating role in the State Department and specifically mandated that this be a multi-agency effort. Funds were appropriated under the Foreign Assistance Act, which made USAID a central player. However, unlike other appropriations under the Foreign Assistance Act, this one was not to be controlled by USAID. Rather, the framers of the law apparently anticipated that USAID would use its legal authorities and institutional capability to manage the process, under the policy leadership of the State Department.

This was unusual but understandable in the context of the times. USAID had the means to manage the program, but little knowledge of the geographic region. Further, by specifically requiring the involvement of all relevant federal agencies (for example,

Treasury, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Federal Reserve Bank, the Justice Department, the Department of Agriculture, and others), it necessitated a very senior coordinator with the clout to bring all of these disparate players together. The coordinator would be the Secretary of State, who at the time was James Baker. But the person with the greatest command of the region (based on his prior Foreign Service experience) was Deputy Secretary of State Larry (Lawrence) Eagleburger, who would go on to become Secretary of State for a short period in the last months of the George H. W. Bush Administration. Eagleburger would be top boss of this program from Day One.

USAID faced an interesting challenge since it did not have much experience in the region. Further, its historic approach of establishing field missions in assisted countries would not work. The policy assumption made early on was that USAID interventions in the countries in the region would be for a relatively short transition period. Secondly, USAID did not have the mandate to coordinate all of the players engaged in implementing the SEED Act. Even the State Department had difficulties herding all of the federal agencies under one Coordinator. USAID did not have the clout by itself to do so. As an interesting example of the challenge posed by the need to coordinate, shortly after the Baltic States began to participate in the SEED Act programs, I accompanied the Treasury Deputy Secretary on a tour of the region in 1992 and, while he was personable and otherwise an affable travel companion, he would take every opportunity to remind me that Treasury would not take instructions from State, much less from USAID.

As a further challenge to USAID, early on Eagleburger made the decision that he would not allow the U.S. official presence in these countries to grow exponentially. He wanted a "small footprint" and most definitely wanted to rein in USAID, with its reputation for a huge field presence. To support his coordinating role, he established within the Office of the Deputy Secretary an Office of the Coordinator of Assistance to Eastern Europe.

The USAID operation in support of SEED Act implementation was well underway while I was attending the Senior Seminar. Nevertheless, that program was not high on my radar as I considered the next career move. USAID during this period had a particularly weak Administrator, Ronald Roskens, former President of the University of Nebraska. Roskens did not appear to play much of a role in this, the premier mandate of his time at USAID. By all accounts, Eagleburger wanted nothing to do with him. The leadership role at USAID fell on the Assistant Administrator for Europe, Carol Adelman, a sharp, politically well-connected political appointee. Adelman rose to the challenge and with her impressive access to official Washington (including Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Colin Powell), she made sure that USAID would be a central player. What she lacked was the staff to respond to the challenge. She was particularly leery of USAID bureaucrats accustomed to long lead times and to perceived hidebound processes. She managed to recruit a handful of good people, including from outside the Agency. She and her deputy, a career USAID Officer, David Merrill, needed a senior manager who would take control of the daily management of the program while Carol and David worked the program's political and private sector sides.

At the tail end of the Senior Seminar, as I was beginning to focus seriously on my onward assignment, I was asked to consider the role of managing the SEED program, overseeing both its Washington-based USAID operations and the small field offices that were being established almost as soon as communist regimes abandoned their offices in favor of transitional governments. (This occurred in most cases rather peacefully, but not always so, as in the case of Romania, where the departure of Nicolae Ceausescu was accompanied by major violence and his subsequent execution.) The position would also place me in the role of day-to-day USAID representative within the State Department's Office of the Coordinator for Eastern Europe.

So, with limited knowledge of the region, and no language or geographic experience, I accepted that position, starting with a dozen or so people, most of whom were on detail from other bureaus and who shared my limited knowledge of the region and of the role we would play.

Our task was multifold: One was to ensure that USAID managed the program in a manner that was responsive to Congressional intent and policy decisions coming from the White House and the Secretary of State. Secondly, we had to provide for the administrative structure that would permit us to manage the resources (about $600 million per year) in the manner contemplated under the Foreign Assistance Act, as modified by the provisions of the SEED Act. Third, we had to ensure that the USAID logistic capability was in place to respond to never-ending demands from above for quick action on one or another crisis or opportunity. (By quick, I mean, the "do-it-overnight" requirements of the political decision-makers.) Fourth, my team and I had to do this in a manner that respected the role of State Coordinator and the senior coordinators from a dozen federal agencies.

As an example, two days ahead of the Secretary of State's visit to the newly-liberated Baltic States, the Secretary's office instructed us to produce "deliverables" for the Secretary's visit. This meant such things as announcing a scholarship program and offering to send experts from Treasury and the Federal Reserve Bank on local currency and other banking issues. Of course, this required an intimate working relationship with State. If there has ever been a good joint USAID-State program, this probably ranks among the best. Neither State nor USAID would look good unless we worked closely, and I take pride in the partnership we developed, despite the different timeframes each agency operated under: The State Department has a mandate and an institutional outlook which favors quick responses to emerging foreign-policy challenges; whereas USAID traditionally has had a longer-term development objective and timeframe (except in response to natural disasters, where USAID's response, through OFDA, is quick and effective). The two institutional cultures don't always mesh, but we made it work — for the most part. A special recognition on my part goes to the director and staff of the State Coordinator's Office. The director was Robert Berry, a career Senior Foreign Service Officer and former Ambassador to Bulgaria and Indonesia. He was a no-nonsense type whose personality was not made to be anyone's drinking buddy, but he was highly respected as a team leader and as someone who understood both the political merits of our program and the region in which we were working. I worked closely with him and his

more junior team and he understood the challenges under which my team worked. This demanding job that I had accepted was also made more bearable by the undisputed support that I received on an on-going basis from my USAID superiors, Carol Adelman and David Merrill.

Q. Sounds complex …

ALMAGUER: One of the things we had to do early on was to figure out how I would have the authorities normally available to Mission Directors in the field for project approvals, contracting, and other responsibilities normally delegated to Mission Directors. Since we agreed that the USAID presence in these countries would be limited and mainly to provide field implementation oversight and to support short-term technical staff, we agreed to create a Mission in Washington, the Regional Mission for Europe (RME), with me as the Mission Director. Nothing is ever easy and this was more complex that usual because nothing comparable existed. Further, we soon realized that like every Mission, we needed to have written rules and procedures. We contracted an outside team to help us do this while we continued to put a team together and experimented with how we would provide field support in the various technical areas under our responsibility (e.g., environment and health programs, private sector support, etc.). Our technical staff would be based in Washington under the RME, but expected to travel 80 percent of the time. With all of this travel, we would often joke that we should maintain a satellite office at the Frankfurt Airport, from where most of our connections to Eastern Europe occurred.

Programming for these countries was fascinating. One of our key objectives was to facilitate the transition from a centrally planned economy to one that would be free-market-oriented. Our response would have to be more sophisticated than the response one could anticipate in lesser-developed countries. In addition to these countries' urgent need to establish commercial banking systems, create stock exchanges and the like, we discovered there was an equally urgent need for the basic tools of management. Double-entry bookkeeping was practically unknown. In the Communist era, a factory manager or the head of the collective farm had no reason to keep tabs on revenues. He might have kept tabs on expenditures, but since he was not responsible for selling anything, there were no profit-and-loss statements to publish. This significant knowledge gap led to a project that brought in accounting professors from various U.S. business schools and accountants from the major U.S. accounting firms.

We also made grant awards to multiple public and private organizations in the U.S., including NGOs, to promote independent journalism; to work with the parliaments in developing appropriate legislative procedures and review processes; and to develop other tools necessary for a democracy and a free-market economy to work properly.

One of the things that the Soviets used to brag about was how great their health system was. What we discovered was that the health care delivery systems in most of these countries were in shambles. Primarily focused on curative care, almost no attention was

paid to preventive care. We concluded that we needed to help these countries create modern public health systems that would reduce the incidence of illnesses.

The premier program under the SEED Act was the so-called Enterprise Funds. We established Enterprise Funds in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. In the ensuing years, other Enterprise Funds would be established for other countries and regions (e.g., the Baltic States were grouped into one Fund). The objective of the Enterprise Funds was to bring together "high rollers" from Wall Street and the U.S. investment community, working together with their Eastern European counterparts, to manage huge grants from the U.S. ($100 million or more) for risk-taking investments that would create both jobs and wealth for future investment opportunities. This was a favorite White House program, which handpicked American participants. We didn't have much say in what they did. Hence, our primarily focus was on ensuring that the objectives for which the Enterprise Funds had been created were being met and that U.S. rules and regulations were being observed. We treated these with a gentle touch since they all had the President and the Secretary of State in their rolodexes!

This was both an exhausting and euphoric period for U.S. foreign policy in the region and for those of us who had the privilege to engage in the birth of these Eastern European democracies. To manage all of this, we grew in two years' time, from the handful of people originally assigned to me to some 250 people, most in Washington but traveling frequently to field operations, and a handful working at each of the USAID offices in the countries that eventually became part of the SEED program.

I think there was some misconception regarding how long this transition from centrally planned economies would take. Both Congress and many senior administration officials understandably assumed that, since we were dealing with educated and committed populations, the process would last only a few years. That was an optimist perception. Nevertheless, USAID phased out of most the countries within a decade. We have stayed on only in the countries that resembled more traditional developing countries (Albania is a good example of that) and/or that emerged later in the process (e.g., Macedonia and Kosovo).

Q: I would imagine, particularly in Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania, that you would find a strong commitment from the Swedes and Finns to take care of these…

ALMAGUER: They did, and we worked very closely with them. I personally spent a considerable amount of time in Brussels, coordinating with the European Commission. Part of the problem then, that to some degree continues, is that the European Commission is, as somebody has said, "a bowl of jelly that you're trying to tack to the wall." The various Commission offices rarely talk to each other, and Commissioners, who come from different countries with different mindsets, don't necessarily share a perspective that is all-encompassing and that reflects consensus within the Commission, or within the European Union political leadership. We have a great advantage in the U.S. Our multiple agencies and political actors may have many, often conflicting views, but when a policy decision is made, we all follow that policy decision down the food chain. It was more

difficult - and continues to be more difficult -for the Europeans to do that. Secondly, they were still trying to invest a great deal of money in bringing up their then-poor member countries — Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain …

Q: And former East Germany.

ALMAGUER: Germany assumed the responsibility for East Germany, and though the Germans were keenly interested in what others and we were doing in Eastern Europe and were an important player, often they were distracted by their own internal challenges. Nevertheless, they were instrumental in the creation in 1991 of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development to help with the capital needs of the former communist countries of Europe/Eurasia. They were partners in all of this. One of the frustrations we had with the Europeans was that much of their focus was on developing commercial ties, which is understandable, but which did not deal with the absence of appropriate institutions and systems needed to support Western-style trade. So, it was not always an easy relationship.

The other problem that we experienced, which has always been a problem with foreign aid, is that even for something as popular as restoring Eastern Europe to democracy, the Congress felt a need to micromanage and to ensure that their constituents back home benefited in a very direct way. I recall one example from a very good member of Congress, a man who was thoughtful and well informed: Congressman David Obey of Wisconsin. Few in Congress understood the role and details of foreign aid as he did, but he also happens to have been a congressman from a dairy district in Wisconsin. In spearheading the approval of the SEED Act, he injected a number of provisions to make sure that the Wisconsin dairy industry was involved. Hence, we provided dairy-farming technical assistance to Poland. In the scheme of things, if I had a $100 to spend in Poland, assisting their dairy industry would not have been one of my uses of the $100. But that's the way the system has always worked and we tried to make the best of it.

We had a great deal of oversight from the Hill. Every member of Congress had a reason to pay attention. Everybody has a Polish, a Lithuanian, or a dairy constituent and most had pet projects that they wanted the SEED Act to finance. In the end, however, the program went very, very well. As far as I know, there was only one minor scandal and that had to do with the Czechoslovakian-American Enterprise Fund created to promote the Czech private-sector investment in partnership with American investors.

Q: Do you mean the Czech Republic?

ALMAGUER: Well, it was still Czechoslovakia at the time. The two separated soon thereafter.

Q: Okay.

ALMAGUER: Despite our concern for the enterprise funds (huge grants with limited oversight), most did very well over the longer term. In the case of Czech Fund, they started to invest in Mexico...

Q: How did you expose it? What controls did you have to rein them in?

ALMAGUER: We had a USAID audit team working with us, and most of our aid recipients were open to these audits. When they were not open to us, we obviously raised more questions. In this case, it took a lot of work! When we began to investigate, they protested to the White House. Initially the White House was, frankly, suggesting that a bunch of bureaucrats were interfering with private-sector activities best handled by people who knew the investment world. This case dovetailed with the change of Administrations. By the time the Clinton team came into office, we had their full support because the new White House team had no skin in that particular project. Eventually, that Fund was re-organized and completed its activities successfully.

But other than some relatively minor hiccups, the SEED program, in my view, stands as a great success story at all levels. I was very happy to be part of it despite the daily headaches and the never-ending demands on our time and resources. As I look back, the coordination worked so well that by the time I left I was not conscious for whom I worked, other than in the interest of the SEED Act objectives and the Administration's priorities.

Q: Before we leave your work in Eastern Europe, what about Russia? By this time the Soviet Union had dissolved and robber barons had grabbed all the goodies, the factories and everything else …

ALMAGUER: After the Soviet Union collapsed, the State Department created a separate coordinating office for the NIS (the New Independent States). USAID followed that model. I kept the Baltic States, but Russia and the other formerly Soviet republics went to that new office.

Q: What about corruption and the "robber barons" that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union?

ALMAGUER: This was an on-going concern. There were two kinds of robber barons. There were the homegrown ones, usually former Communist managers who, as a result of the institutional vacuum created by the transition, succeeded in gaining control of businesses or even whole sectors of the economy. The second type was made up of astute Americans and other Westerners who, as entrepreneurs, were quick to identify weaknesses in these emerging democracies and to take advantage of those weaknesses. Some governments — Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, in particular — stand out for effectively managing the process. They decided to privatize very quickly and developed equitable means of sharing the profits. They issued and sold vouchers. I am not an expert on the details, but our consultants thought the process was fair. Nevertheless, there were some questions in my mind that I could never fully reconcile. I

attributed this to my own lack of experience in the equities market. Some good things happened. For example, with our support, "the Crimson group" [Crimson Capital Organization] and others, made up mostly of bright young MBAs from Harvard and other elite universities, saw great opportunities buying and selling these vouchers and, in some cases, temporarily assuming management responsibility for some assets. Despite the few rules in place at the time for controlling "insider" deals, in most cases these transactions seemed transparent. I am sure they did well — some better than others. Sadly, in other instances, there was a rapid accumulation of wealth, much of it in the hands of relatively few people.

Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and the three Baltic States managed early on to establish rules and adequate public oversight to regulate the market, avoiding for the most part conflicts of interest and sweetheart deals. The lesser-developed countries in the region — Romania, Bulgaria, Albania and (subsequently) the NIS countries— were late in getting started, less eager for outside help, and frankly, less transparent in how assets were transferred from the state to the new capitalists (all too often cronies of those newly in power). Since that time, we all have read stories of how some of these modern robber barons became overnight billionaires. Yes, it was quite a challenge in some of the countries. I wish these other countries had followed the lead of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and the Baltic States model, which proved to be relatively fair and clean. It is not surprising that these are the countries that have come the closest to lifting their economies to Western European standards.

Q. So, why did you leave?

Transitioning to the Clinton Administration

ALMAGUER: On January 19, 1993, a day before President Clinton assumed office, Carol Adelman and the remaining senior Bush political appointees at USAID left office. Carol's deputy, David Merrill, was preparing to be nominated as Ambassador to Bangladesh. That left me as the logical Acting Assistant Administrator for Europe until the new Administration was able to staff up the various senior-level positions. In practice, this meant that I was probably doing twice as much work, since I could not delegate much of what I did as Mission Director for Eastern Europe. This added responsibility, however, curtailed much of my travel to the region.

I recall that this particular presidential transition was quite smooth. It was the first time I had been in Washington for a presidential transition and it was admirable how well the outgoing and incoming teams worked to make the transition as seamless as possible. One of the advantages of a career service like the Foreign Service is that there are plenty of experienced career folks to facilitate the process.

As I recall, it took the Clinton Administration a long time to staff up USAID. Ultimately, the person named to serve as USAID Administrator was Brian Atwood, who had just been confirmed in the role of Undersecretary for Management at the State Department. I don't recall why this happened, but it may have been that the person the Clinton

Administration had tapped for the USAID job ran into confirmation difficulties. In any case, that meant a long gap, particularly at the Assistant Administrator level since the new Administrator would have to be given the chance to recommend to the White House appointments for the second-tier political jobs at USAID. Atwood's appointment was well received by many within USAID who had worked with him in his former capacity as Executive Director of NDI (National Democratic Institute for International Affairs). Brian assumed his USAID post in May 1993.

While the new Administration was settling in, most of the career staff in "acting" positions, including me, continued to navigate the ship quite smoothly. There were a few political transition people assigned to the office of the Acting Administrator and they became our periodic "handlers." I recall being interviewed by some of them, mainly to find out what our respective offices were doing and to get a "feel" for the internal workings of USAID. One of them was Richard McCall, who eventually would become Atwood's Chief of Staff. He was coming from the Hill as a senior staff member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and had excellent contacts everywhere. He was a truly delightful man, whose low-key demeanor and respect for our work gave me a sense of relief. He provided valuable guidance, always with a pleasant smile. I consulted with McCall frequently to make sure that I was in sync with the Clinton Administration's views on our issues. Since McCall's arrival at USAID coincided with the Czech Enterprise Fund issues that I alluded to earlier, I briefed him in some detail and invited him to join me at a meeting I was to have with key members of that Enterprise Fund — well-connected Wall Street executives. McCall attended this meeting but limited himself to listening. Afterwards, he came by my office to praise how I was handling that situation and said that I was assured of retaining a senior career position in the new Administration.

The other person from the new Administration who played a central role in subsequent events was Larry Byrne, who came over from the White House Transition Team. He was the husband of the newly-elected Congresswoman from Virginia's 11th Congressional District, Leslie Byrne. Larry was understandably proud of his wife's political success and quite self-assured — some would say arrogant. His focus was on management issues (and later went on to be named as Assistant Administrator for Management under Atwood). My first meeting with Larry was not pleasant. As he did with other bureaus, he invited my senior team and me to discuss our management issues. Rather than listening to our prepared presentation, he gave us a tough talk on how he could easily detect "BS" and how skeptical he was likely to be of our presentation. I recall feeling annoyed and almost surprised myself by saying, in front of the whole group, "Well, if you know that we are going to lie to you, why even allow us to speak?" He smiled and allowed us to make our presentation. I did not know at that time that he was pleased that I was willing to take him on. This episode had much to do with what happened in the coming months.

After Atwood assumed office and was able to get Senate confirmation for his Assistant Administrators, Tom (Thomas A.) Dine assumed the role of Assistant Administrator for Europe and Eurasia. Tom was well known in Washington circles as a powerful lobbyist, particularly on Israeli causes. I enjoyed meeting him and early on he asked me to be his

Deputy Assistant Administrator for his new Bureau. I told him that I would be pleased to be formally designated for the position. I had just been promoted to Career Minister, the timing of which was a surprise to me since I did not expect to be a serious contender for that most senior rank in our Foreign Service for at least two more years. The immediate future looked promising.

Soon thereafter Larry Byrne, who by then had been confirmed as Assistant Administrator for Management, cornered me and offered the position of Director of Human Resources — the USAID equivalent of the Director General of the Foreign Service. I had not expected that and was perplexed. Larry was quite emphatic that my performance managing the Eastern Europe program and my willingness to stand up to him "sold him" on the idea that I was the right person for that job. I asked for an appointment with the Administrator and he confirmed that I could have either job (Deputy Assistant Administrator for Europe or the head of personnel), but that he would prefer it if I were willing to take on the management job. I told the Administrator that I liked what I was doing in Eastern Europe. Both he and Larry (separately) assured me that these were going to be exciting times for USAID: Pro-foreign aid Democrats now ran Congress and the White House and Brian had total support of the new Secretary of State, Warren Christopher. For good measure, they also told me that Vice President Al Gore understood both development and management and would be looking to USAID to "reinvent" itself as a model federal agency. They reiterated that they needed in the human resources job somebody who understood the system, understood the agency, and who could work closely with State in reinvigorating the career service. As a good soldier, I agreed to do it. Tom Dine was not happy, but I thought it was my duty to accept the Administrator's preference.

Managing USAID's Human Resources (Dec. 1993 – July 1996)

Q: When you took over, were you called Director General?

ALMAGUER: My complex title was Deputy Assistant Administrator for the Management Bureau and Director of Human Resources.

Q: You took that over when, and you had it till when?

ALMAGUER: I took over Human Resources (HR) in December 1993; that was several months after the new Clinton Administration came into office, but first I needed to wrap up loose ends in the Eastern Europe program and give Tom Dine a chance to become fully briefed and staffed on the SEED Act programs. I subsequently ran the HR office until July 1996.

Q: What faced you when you took over this job?

Period of high expectations

ALMAGUER: There are two very distinct periods during my 31-month tenure at HR. In the first period, I came in with the excitement of knowing that I was moving into a "growth industry" and that my job was to prepare the Agency, through its human resource base, for the challenges of the future. The Agency was going to expand into the former Soviet Union; it was going to modernize its management apparatus; and it was going to work with Congress a new Foreign Assistance Act (after 32 years, the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act reflected another era and did not contemplate the work we were doing in the 1990s). Further, all of this would take place in the context of a young and eager Administration that saw value in the work we did. Helping to prepare and develop the human resource base of USAID for its 21st Century challenges was exciting. And I was backed by a very supportive Administration. To demonstrate that support, Administrator Atwood and Assistant Administrator for Management Larry Byrne came to my first "all-hands" HR staff meeting. They reinforced the message to my new team and assured them that I had the full support of USAID's Front Office. This was a very nice gesture on their part.

What faced me immediately was the fact that, because of budget cutbacks in the preceding years, the Agency had done almost no hiring in the previous decade, and we had an aging workforce. The average age at USAID in the early 1990s was 44, versus the average age of 34 in a typical federal agency at that time. I don't know what the State Department's average age would have been, but it probably was in the late 30s. When the average age is in the mid-to-late '40s, the implication is that most of your workforce would be eligible for retirement in the next few years.

Further, there had been almost no investment in training. As a consequence, we had deficiencies in management skills and in foreign languages, particularly in the languages of our new European and Eurasian countries, as well as in Arabic - despite our major programs in the Middle East. Further more, we had done little to update the technical skills of our core areas — agriculture, health, education, etc. There was a great deal of technical expertise in the Agency: some of the finest aggies, health professionals, educators, etc., had joined USAID in earlier years. Unfortunately, their skills were not being kept up-to-date, except for whatever they did on their own to remain current. Core USAID skills in program design, implementation, and evaluation were also suffering with retirements and lack of systematic training.

In addition, a silent evolution within USAID was underway and we were not pausing to analyze its implications. With the number of career officers going down and responsibility for resources going up (the Eastern Europe program was an example of that), the Agency was being forced to seek more contractors to manage and deliver development services. We were becoming a contracting agency in which much of our core functions were being contracted out, either to individuals or to firms. It was frustrating, particularly for our technical people who had been hired in earlier times to design and oversee health, education and other technical programs, often working close to where the services were needed. Instead, increasingly they had become desk-bound contract managers. We had to gain the upper hand, as these issues were threatening the

role USAID was most proud of: being the world's premier international development program.

I began to develop a hiring program that would mirror the State Department Junior Foreign Service program, including the training experience. One of the immediate challenges, aside from money, was that in the field we were so poorly staffed that a number of missions were refusing to absorb these first-time officers because they did not have mentors available to provide the necessary on-the-job training and coaching. In other instances, field missions had no choice and would wind up placing these recently hired and inexperienced officers in jobs that required more relevant experience. This oftentimes led to unfortunate situations where bad performance could be directly attributed to the lack of mentoring and relevant on-the-job experience. Fortunately, many of our newer officers came from the ranks of contractors who had done work for USAID in the past. Thus, many of these new employees had enough background to succeed despite the lack of adequate preparation from the USAID side. Hiring and training no doubt were the biggest challenges we faced at that point.

Q: I would think that Peace Corps would be a particular place to get junior people.

ALMAGUER: Absolutely. But there was the drawback to which I alluded earlier: Peace Corps produced wonderful field-oriented people who were used to being in the "frontlines of development." We had to be upfront with them and say: "Look, you are not coming here to teach a farmer how to improve his herd. You're coming here to design a program and to manage a contract whose staff will be working with the farmers. You will be, in most cases, back in a capital city doing what bureaucrats normally do." This was a realistic but unwelcomed message for many otherwise well-qualified candidates. Nevertheless, getting good candidates was not the real problem, since so many development professionals and internationally-minded people want to join the Foreign Service, whether at USAID, or State, or USIS, or any of the others.

The other thing that kept me busy, in addition to trying to recruit and train people, was that we had, in my view, a broken-down grievance system. It's true that in the federal government firing anyone except for the worst of deeds is a major challenge. But it really gets to you when you are on the inside and can see examples of what some people (a small minority, fortunately) get away with and the impact that has on the morale of the vast majority of the staff, who put in long hours and give the job 120 percent.

State and USAID share a Foreign Service Grievance Board and almost always, except in the most egregious of circumstances, the Board will side with the allegedly aggrieved employee. The same holds true for the Civil Service side of the house. Poorly trained managers are often the problem since they don't take the necessary time to document the issue, to train and coach, and to provide candid feedback at opportune moments. We are terrible when it comes to actually documenting what people do. How can we fire somebody for not doing the job when they have stellar written evaluations? The backlog of grievances that we had to deal with was enormous and rather unpleasant. Nevertheless, at the end of the first year on the job I was feeling good and beginning to enjoy myself as

I saw my staff increasingly working as a team. Further, I began to receive feedback from managers elsewhere in the USAID bureaucracy that HR was increasingly perceived as responsive to their needs. I actually made time to travel to a few posts in Africa to get a better feel for some of the issues that our employees were facing in the field.

A new reality: reductions in force

Then, in November 1994, a major surprise rocked our world: Newt Gingrich and the new Republican majority were about to assume control of the House of Representatives for the first time in 40 years. The Republicans also regained control of the Senate. At this point, I was somewhat disconnected from the politics of the moment, except when attending the Administrator's weekly senior staff meetings. In that setting it became clear that a figurative earthquake had hit Washington and that all of the euphoria resulting from the 1992 elections would now be transformed into a daily battle, at best, to maintain what we had achieved so far — and, at worse, to not lose too much ground. The expectation going in was that even in the best of circumstances, some of Atwood's initiatives and incipient management reforms would face serious challenges on the Hill.

The relationship with the Hill turned antagonistic from Day One of the new Congress in January 1995. Jesse Helms (R., NC) assumed the chairmanship of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He is famous for a lot of things, but in one of his more famous quotes, in reference to foreign aid, he said, "I ain't gonna put more money down a rat's hole." Initially, he demanded the abolition of USAID. The GAO [U.S. Government Accountability Office] was asked to review almost everything that USAID did. The operating expenses were cut back dramatically. Probably one of the saddest things that happened is that, instead of drawing the Administration together in response to this existential challenge, it quickly became a dog-eat-dog situation within the Clinton Administration, with Secretary Warren Christopher, initially, and later Madeleine Albright, fighting for State's piece of the shrinking foreign affairs pie, and Brian Atwood fighting for the USAID piece of the pie. This was a period of intense internal battles between USAID and State. I was constantly amazed because when Warren Christopher was named Secretary of State, he named Brian Atwood to be his Undersecretary for Management. Hence, I assumed that their relationship was tight. In real life, it did not seem to be all that great, and it got worse as USAID and State fought for ever smaller slices of the pie.

Subsequently, when Madeleine Albright became Secretary of State after President Clinton won re-election in 1996, I anticipated that relations within the Administration would get better. After all, Madeleine Albright had been Atwood's colleague at NDI [National Democratic Institute for International Affairs]. But the same thing happened; all of a sudden Madeleine Albright was getting along famously with Jesse Helms, trying (mostly successfully) to minimize the impact of budget cuts on the Department. USAID felt like an orphan. There was lots of noise from the Hill that USAID's functions would be absorbed by the State Department. While some of the negative reaction within USAID was the product of parochial institutional self-preservation, there were legitimate concerns that USAID's longer-term development focus would be overwhelmed by State's

focus on more immediate foreign policy objectives. I am personally convinced that institutional arrangements could be built into any merger proposal to preserve the unique characteristics of each agency. In practice, however, the fear of a merger was that development resources would soon be allocated to meet shorter-term foreign-policy objectives at the expense of longer-term development objectives. It was a painful and frustrating time at USAID.

In 1995 it became evident that USAID would not only not be able to expand as promised, but that USAID would have to cut its program and administrative budgets. Atwood's advocacy for USAID both within the Administration (with Vice President Al Gore being perhaps his strongest ally) and with the Hill did succeed in preserving the Agency as an autonomous entity within the U.S. foreign affairs apparatus. Helms had to be pacified in some way, however, and the compromise reached, as I understood it, was that the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) would be totally merged within the State Department (as it subsequently happened). USAID would retain its autonomy, but with significant budget cuts, particularly on its operations side (i.e., the internal administrative budget that funds personnel, office space, equipment, travel, etc.).

Q: It sounds like a very difficult time for all...

ALMAGUER: Atwood and Byrne, after consultations with OMB, Hill staffers and others (of which I was not part since Larry kept highly-compartmentalized operations within his Bureau), decided that a Reduction-in-Force (RIF) was the inevitable course to follow in response to the anticipated budget cuts. RIFs are not minor events in any federal bureaucracy. In fact, large-scale RIFs are rarely carried out. The usual approach to budget cutbacks include hiring freezes, travel restrictions, curtailing of training, etc.

Many rank-and-file employees, as well as much of the USAID senior staff (career and political), bitterly complained that Atwood and Byrne had gone for the most drastic measure (that is, a RIF) before considering other types of cost savings. The level of discomfort and anger among USAID staff was fueled in large measure by Larry's personality and style. I truly enjoyed working with him, despite our polar opposite personalities. In fact, almost all who worked directly with him would say the same thing. He was a one-of-a-kind personality who supported his team and could be quite personable. However, with those outside his span of control he was a totally a different person. He seemed to enjoy being seen as the "bad guy" — USAID's Darth Vader — and could be quite rough with people with whom he disagreed. His verbal altercations with some of the more senior people were legendary. He also had expanded the authority of his Management Bureau to encompass development policy matters and even administrative issues which in the past had been decentralized to individual bureaus. He made sure that management officers in each bureau understood that they ultimately did not work for their respective bureau senior managers but for the Management Bureau. This made his own colleagues, the other Presidentially-appointed and Senate confirmed assistant administrators, angry over their loss of control over their bureaus' internal affairs.

Atwood must have had a difficult time keeping a lid on his senior staff, who did not understand why Larry had accumulated so much power and had so much sway over issues normally outside of the scope of the Management Bureau. Many speculated as to why Atwood would allow so much power to reside in Byrne's hands. This quandary was never satisfactorily resolved and it has affected Atwood's legacy at USAID. Atwood was universally respected and continues to rank among the best-liked and most effective USAID Administrators. He certainly had the charisma, substance and commitment to development that easily ranks him among the best USAID administrators. However, how he allowed so much power to be vested in Byrne will continue to be seen as a weakness in that legacy.

Another element that added fuel to the raging fire at USAID: Byrne's eagerness to introduce new management tools appropriate to the times. His New Management Systems (NMS), using the latest computer technology, promised to bring all sorts of management data, program implementation and evaluation tools to the desktop of every manager in the Agency, to the Hill and to other USAID constituencies. Some $80 million was invested on developing this tool at about the same time that the RIF became necessary. With limited progress in reaching the objectives of the NMS (probably because the technology was not yet there to exploit), many wondered if the RIF was made necessary only by the need to put more money into the NMS. Hence, to say that the announced RIF was unpopular is an understatement. Further, Byrne's style simply added to the perception that it was not needed. Many even speculated that the RIF was merely intended to "cleanse" USAID of people who were not seen as supporters of the Administration.

Further, the Department of State's Office of the Director General (DG, which is State's Office of Human Resources) was equally unhappy, since a RIF in the USAID Foreign Service would set precedents for State. The DG team was keenly interested in every detail of how USAID would apply the provisions of the Foreign Service Act and hoped that the RIF would never be implemented. The employee unions on both the Foreign Service (AFSA) and the Civil Service side (AFGE) were fully mobilized.

Up until the last minute, all of these actors hoped that the planned RIF was a game of "chicken," designed to force Congress to be more lenient on the USAID budget. I was one of those who hoped that all of the planning for a RIF would in fact convince Congress that it has gone too far. Needless to say, 1995 and 1996 must rank as among the most unpleasant times to be at USAID and to be the Director of Human Resources!

Q. I am sure … Who was the DG [Director General] at the time?

ALMAGUER: The DG at the time was Genta Hawkins, a very good colleague, who remained personally supportive even while opposing the plan to conduct a RIF at USAID.

It was a complicated process with few precedents. The decision that came from Byrne and reaffirmed by Atwood was that we would RIF approximately 200 people: 100 from

the Foreign Service and 100 from the Civil Service. Each of the two services has its own rules and regulations. While in the Foreign Service we have "rank-in-person" and individuals could be tagged for "reduction," in the Civil Service, where "rank-in-position" is the rule, a cut of a given position would almost always result in the incumbent being able to "bump" someone of a lower grade, due to seniority. Hence, the cascade effect in the Civil Service almost guaranteed that most of the individuals leaving would be less-expensive recent hires. In both services, any decision inevitably had perverse impact (e.g., losing younger people whom you needed most in the case of the Civil Service, and wiping out a generation of experienced officers in the Foreign Service side).

Q. Yes…

ALMAGUER: There were few precedents, but we had no choice but to come up with a system that was eventually — and very reluctantly — blessed by AFSA [American Foreign Service Association] and by AFGE [American Federation of Government Employees]. It basically focused first and foremost on FS-1s. With regards to the Foreign Service there was general agreement that USAID was top heavy — with a great deal more FS-1s (the "colonel" equivalent) and Counselors (the "Brigadier General" equivalent) than a reduced workforce could absorb. Further, we had people in those ranks whose technical expertise reflected past priorities (e.g., education was at that time a "surplus" skill, as was forestry — never mind that priorities quickly change depending on the mood of Congress and the Administration in any given election cycle).

Q: Yes.

ALMAGUER: To this day, managing up close this RIF remains the most painful professional experience of my life. I felt that I was serving as the executioner of people whom I respected, of people who had given 20-plus years of their careers to USAID, and of people who had sacrificed family and the convenience of home for life in some of the most difficult outposts in the world — and who mostly did it with a strong commitment to their fellow human beings, wherever their services were needed. Few, if any, were being separated from the Service for less-than-satisfactory performance and many were recent recipients of commendations and awards.

Our RIF procedures were done in such a manner that no one — including the Administrator, Byrne or me — would know who would be RIF'd. One group was tasked with identifying positions to be eliminated. Another group, isolated from the first group, was in charge of ranking every officer in every category of employment by grade and skill set (in the case of the Foreign Service) or by length of service in each job category (in case of the Civil Service). Only at the last minute, and with external eyewitnesses, were the two sets of lists reconciled. Only late in the process did we have names of individuals against positions to be eliminated. Before then, I conducted weekly "brown bag" lunches, open to all USAID staff at any level. People were encouraged to come to these "town hall" meetings and raise questions and/or vent (which was inevitable).

This RIF was announced in April of 1996. The RIF took place in June to be effective by October 1, in most cases. On the day individual RIF notices went out, we had volunteer counselors assigned throughout USAID operations to help cushion the blow. I made it my job to contact as many of the RIF'd employees as possible soon thereafter, including calling those who were overseas. I recall tearful conversations (including by me) and expressions of anger on the part of some — but never personalized nor in an unprofessional manner. In fact, it gave me great comfort that some commiserated with *me.* We also did a pretty good job of developing a career counseling and job placement service, so that we would help everyone who wanted help in their job-search efforts.

Q. That's quite a story…

ALMAGUER: Sadly, it tore the Agency's soul and destroyed the Agency's institutional memory. After many years, USAID is still struggling to recover. If there's a lesson to be drawn here, it is that something like this may save money up front but at a huge expense in terms of Agency morale, sense of purpose, and the loss of confidence among those who had made USAID the premier development agency in the world. It almost killed the patient.

Q: Yes.

ALMAGUER: There were multiple grievances filed — most settled long after I was gone, but none succeeded in tearing down the objective process that we followed. One lawsuit that continued to percolate for years charged that we had intentionally targeted white males over 40. We did target FS-1s, a surplus category. As it happens, most FS-1s were over 40 since being an FS-1 implied long-term service in the Agency. Further, since the hiring of women and minorities was not a priority until the 1970s or more recently, it was inevitable (although something we did not notice at the time) that most officers RIF'd were white males over 40. Inevitably someone figured that they had a class-action suit ready to be filed. But it was difficult for them to prove it. I was a white male over 40; Brian Atwood and Larry Byrne were white males over 40, and almost everyone else in the decision-making chain was white male over 40. Nevertheless, the case was finally settled sometime back when the Agency agreed to pay each employee who had been separated something minimal, like $10,000. I am sure the lawyers who engaged in this effort did quite well for themselves.

Recruiting for diversity

Q: During the time you were running the personnel office, what about the hiring of women and minorities?

ALMAGUER: It was a major priority. The profile of the foreign affairs agencies in general, and USAID in particular, reflected another period in our history. Bear in mind that until 1972, the Foreign Service had few women and most had to resign if they married. The very few minorities were an oddity. Earlier, you mentioned the Peace Corps. USAID is a place that attracts former Peace Corps volunteers. The profile of the

Peace Corps, however, is overwhelmingly white. Sadly, there were very few blacks in the Peace Corps until recent times, relatively few Hispanics, and a handful of Asians. The Peace Corps is half-and-half male/female these days, so that helps. Generally speaking, however, we were dealing in the Peace Corps with an ethnic makeup that was not diverse. I think they are doing much better now.

In recruiting people, we attempted to do what the State Department is doing now, which is to target universities that are particularly diverse, such as the historically black colleges and universities, and universities in the Southwest, where Hispanics and Native Americans are prevalent. As a result of these efforts, we began to see more diversity. Some of our small entry classes were about 57 percent women, perhaps 50 percent non-white, and all without compromising on the quality of what we were looking for.

Q: So in '96, after the RIF, what happened to you?

ALMAGUER: Long before the RIF was announced, I had convinced Brian and Larry that I wanted to go back into the field; that I had been around Washington for too long for a career Foreign Service Officer, and after two grueling assignments — Eastern Europe and Human Resources — I needed a break in familiar territory. Exciting things were happening in Bolivia and that's where I wanted to go. Everyone understood that the Bolivia Mission Directorship would be held open for me until the RIF process was concluded in the summer of 1996.

ALMAGUER: In August 1996, the most frustrating period in my career came to an end, having completed an exhausting Reduction in Force (RIF) process involving two of our key personnel systems (Civil Service and Foreign Service) and which included multiple facets, such as developing an outplacement program so that every one who wanted a job or needed any other type of counseling would have a counselor to work with and helping that individual to map out an outplacement strategy going forward. Many, if not most, of the affected employees took advantage of these services. While sensitivities were raw, and not just among those who were being separated, I believe that most USAID staff members were appreciative of the efforts we made to ease the transition pain.

USAID Bolivia (1996 – 1999)

ALMAGUER: In August 1996, I was delighted to fly off with my wife to La Paz, Bolivia and to return to the field in my old Andean neighborhood. Both Antoinette and I had been to Bolivia before and considered it one of the most intriguing countries in Latin America. Its strong indigenous population, the country's relative isolation, its complex and diverse geography and its strong cultural ties to pre-Columbian civilizations made it unique in the region. This new posting, however, was a bit traumatic for my wife and me because this was the first time we were posted overseas without our two kids, who by then were in graduate school. Our daughter, Nina, who had just graduated from college – Marymount Manhattan in New York City - and was in the process of entering graduate school at New

York State University Stony Brook, said, "In most families the children at our age leave the nest. Here our parents took the nest away!"

Q: [Laughter.]

ALMAGUER: She meant it! And she was about to turn 21. Our son, Dan, had graduated from Williams College a couple of years earlier and was at Law School at Duke University. Nevertheless, we were uncomfortable leaving our "kids" behind. The moral of the story is that our children, no matter their age, are a lifelong commitment we make and we carry them in one way or another no matter where we are. And once we got there, the phone calls mounted…

Q: Oh yes!

ALMAGUER: … and this was just before the e-mail tool became widely available; $500-$600-a-month phone bills became the norm and we made it a point to plan holiday periods with both of them.

Q: Yes.

A period of transformational reforms

ALMAGUER: Back to La Paz. Bolivia at the time had one of the largest foreign aid programs in the world. USAID had made a long-term commitment to Bolivia, a very poor country that had gone through traumatic economic and political periods for most of its existence, with the largest indigenous population in the region and a geography that made development and national integration a highly complex matter. To add to the complexity, by the 70s and 80s, Bolivia had become a major producer of coca destined for the illicit cocaine market in the U.S. and elsewhere, particularly in Europe. The simple fact was that less than a third of the coca produced in Bolivia was destined for domestic traditional use (tea and chewing of leaves, an old indigenous tradition, particularly among miners). The rest of the coca harvest was a major policy concern for the U.S.

After years of political turmoil and economic chaos, Bolivia was rapidly turning around. Its president when I arrived (Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada) and his government were committed to fundamental economic, social and political reforms. We were very excited to be there; in fact, I had really handpicked Bolivia and lobbied for this assignment because this historically coup-racked country was now into a third democratically-elected presidency (beginning in 1984) and making some incredible structural reforms. These included the privatization of failing government enterprises; the restructuring of the economy to focus less attention on the traditional mining sector and more on the potential for energy and other resources; and a president who was committed to decentralization and local empowerment. In fact, under the Bolivian constitution, 20 percent of all central government revenues were automatically allocated to each of the municipalities - the equivalent of a U.S. county - on a per capita basis. Municipalities were not only being empowered to make local decisions about their priorities, but also the getting the

resources to carry out those priorities. Bolivia was becoming a laboratory for local empowerment in a region where centralized decision-making was - and remains - the nom. This was pretty exciting stuff for our development professionals.

Our Mission focused on a) supporting decentralization and municipal development; b) strengthening the legal justice system, which, as in almost every country in Latin America, had not kept pace with changes in the political processes; c) meeting social needs in health and other services such as credit for microenterprise and primary education in the marginal areas (the countryside and urban peripheries) where poverty rates exceeded 65%; and d) working with Bolivians to develop viable alternatives to the production of coca. We also focused attention on Bolivia's rich ecological advantages, which included vast under explored and often untouched tropical forests.

War on drugs and the role of alternative development

At the time, Bolivia had the largest U.S. Embassy in Latin America, including Mexico. The reason for that was that there were dozens (perhaps as many as 75) DEA agents assigned to the post, as well as a large contingent of State Department officers assigned from INL (Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs). The first time I flew into the Chapare (the largest coca-producing area in the country and the center of USAID's Alternative Development program), I was surprised to be greeted by Americans wearing battle gear BDUs (Battle Dress Uniforms). They easily could pass for military personnel, with their names on one side of their BDU shirts. But where it would normally say "ARMY" or "AIR FORCE," it said, "DEPARTMENT OF STATE."

Q: [Laughter.]

ALMAGUER: Most of these individuals were vanilla-flavored Foreign Service Officers on rotation through INL who had become warriors in the battle against drugs. They, along with their DEA counterparts, managed one of the biggest U.S. helicopter and airplane fleets anywhere under the control of U.S. civilian staff and their U.S. contractors.

The USAID side of the "War on Drugs" was to provide viable economic alternatives to farmers who were being encouraged – and in some cases forced - to leave the coca business. This effort had been going on for a decade or longer with limited success. The Chapare region, an ideal area for tropical and semi-tropical agriculture, was undergoing a major transformation as a result of massive U.S. aid. This transformation included vastly expanded commercial agriculture, a paved highway connecting to the major cities in the country, and thriving local businesses. On the other hand, coca production was not diminishing. Rather than using their new licit crops to substitute for illicit coca production, farmers were growing both, thus augmenting their income and developing means to survive if coca eradication resulted in the destruction of their coca harvest.

To some degree I would attribute this lack of progress in replacing coca with licit crops to the fact that there was a disconnect between what we were doing on the commercial agriculture side and the policing, law enforcement and irradiation effort on the other side

of the ledger. The two sides of this multipronged effort were never fully in sync. Farmers whose fields were being eradicated were not necessarily the ones receiving our agricultural support and vice versa. I also attribute some of the problems to the fact that we had limited contact with the powerful coca producers' labor union, led by Evo Morales – who went on to become president of Bolivia but with whom, at the time, we could not engage in discussions because of his ties to coca production. In retrospect, that was a major mistake on our side. We should have engaged with the coca growers union and made efforts to integrate them into our program.

Q: Yes.

ALMAGUER: We were providing licit agricultural alternatives without linking that alternative to a need to reduce coca production. The Bolivian drug-enforcement people (mostly military) were coming in, with the support of the DEA and INL, and burning down coca fields without relating these operations to the work underway of the alternative development team. We had become parallel federal agencies working on different tracks.

If I can claim any success (and according to the statistics for the 1996-1999 period, we were very successful in achieving a more integrated effort, with reduced coca production and significantly expanded commercial agriculture in the Chapare), it was to a large degree the result of forcing a discussion within the U.S. Embassy Country Team and then with the Bolivian authorities on the need for a more integrated approach. We had to bring all the pieces together and ensure that families targeted for forced eradication had alternatives that the USAID program could offer. We needed both the carrot and the stick. We also had to do a better job of communicating with the inhabitants of the region so that they would understand the rationale for what the Bolivian authorities and the U.S. were doing. The stick had to be explained better. It was not just a bunch of soldiers showing up one day to burn the coca fields and a bunch of USAID folks showing up at another time to offer assistance in developing alternative crops and alternative markets. The two efforts had to work in tandem.

As a result of increased coordination among the DEA, INL, USAID and our respective Bolivian counterparts, we had more success during this timeframe and more peaceful outcomes than most of us imagined possible. While this was a Country Team effort in close coordination with the Bolivian authorities, I earned a share of the credit. I have speculated that this effort was one of the reasons why my name surfaced for an ambassadorial nomination on the part of the State Department and the Clinton White House.

Q: What was the carrot?

ALMAGUER: The carrot was a lot of hands-on assistance in developing alternative crops and alternative markets for licit products from the region. Let's be clear: there is nothing that one can give a farmer in this region that will be as lucrative as growing coca! Coca is an indigenous shrub; you don't have to do anything to it; just plant it in the right location

(usually about 2,000 feet above sea level in the transition zone between the cooler mountain regions and the lower tropical forests) and lay back in your hammock. When the shrub is mature, the leaves are picked and allowed to dry. The illicit market (controlled at the time by Colombian cartels) came to the farm gate and bought the dry leaves. Converting the dry leaves into a paste, using rudimentary tools and mixing agents, increased the farm gate price and reduced the transportation costs for the buyers. It was a win-win proposition, with the farmer making less than one tenth of what the buyer would earn in the production and distribution chain. Despite the fact that the farmer made only a small portion of the profits, it was a considerable amount for them.

Q: Yes.

ALMAGUER: … and while the coca farmer gets very little of that lucrative market, it is a big chunk of money for a small farmer in Bolivia. What makes it even more enticing is that coca shrubs yield three leaf crops per year and a shrub produces for seven years or more. So, it is easy money for the farmer and one that he (or she in some cases) will not give up voluntarily. This is why we not only needed to help these farmers develop alternative crops, but also had to ensure that they were planting high-value licit crops for markets in Bolivia, Argentina, Brazil and other international markets

Q: Tell me more about the region. I assume that it is like the high desert.

ALMAGUER: No. Coca grows best at about 2,000 feet of altitude in the tropics, an area that is warm and moist, so it is jungle-like, but at a sufficiently high altitude that it is cooler and dryer than tropical rainforests. If you look at all of the coca-producing regions of Mexico, Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia, they all center on the slopes of mountains at about 2,000 feet of altitude, with the right amount of rain and moisture.

The area also has to have access to markets. This is why alternative development projects are expensive and complex. To be successful, they must provide for the essential infrastructure, including roads and other communication links; develop modern agricultural practices to ensure high yields and consistent commercial-grade quality; and develop potential markets for these crops. I would estimate that USAID invested close to $300 million to get to the point, in the late 1990s, where alternative crops had become a major source of income for the Chapare farmers. That is an amazing amount of money. But it bought roads connecting the region to La Paz, to Cochabamba and to Santa Cruz, the major commercial hubs of the country. It helped support the construction of a paved road to Argentina, connecting the Chapare to the rest of the South American road network. It also bought electricity and opened the region to external investment, including agroindustrial processing plants and new opportunities for outside investors. Spaniards, who were tremendous partners in this effort, invested a great deal of money in the region, building processing plants, in particular. The Spanish Melia Hotel chain invested in a resort in the region, which opened just before I left in 1999. This was a particularly important investment since it sent signals that the region was no longer considered dangerous. In fact, in early 1999, I took a group of ambassadors from Europe and Japan posted in La Paz on a tour of the region. This helped to advertise the fact that

progress was being made in developing the region away from its dependence on coca and that additional investment was needed to ensure the success of our collective efforts. All of this, plus constant technical assistance to the farmers on how to plant the right kind of pineapples that would be bought by Del Monte; the right kind of oranges for regional markets; the right soil preparation and harvesting techniques to ensure a steady supply of quality produce, etc., led to real progress in creating alternative opportunities to farmers who in the past were 100% dependent on coca. But this was a major and never-ending endeavor.

Support for applied research and product development was also part of this endeavor. We were not always successful. For example, the region was hit with a major banana blight, underscoring the need to constantly develop new options for the cooperating farmers who needed a safety net as coca income disappeared.

This was a complex program with lots of moving parts. Working with the Bolivian authorities was never easy, although we had excellent counterparts. But, frankly, the most frustrating part was dealing with the folks back in DC who were under enormous pressure from the Hill to show tangible results, from INL to move the appropriated funds they controlled as fast as possible, and from the White House Drug Czar's office, who wanted instant results and good news to report to the media. The answer to the problem of coca production in areas like the Chapare was perceived by some Members of Congress as a simple one to resolve. In one case, a congressional staffer said to me: "Those people are doing something illegal, so to hell with 'em. Why should we spend that kind of money? We want them to stop growing coca now." The only possible answer, which was never well received, was "Well, you know what? The Bolivian authorities, who are our allies in this effort, are going to wind up with a revolution on their hands if we follow that course. They (and we) will lose the progress that has been made."

By the middle of 1999, the statistics were quite impressive: the region went from 60,000 hectares of almost all-illegal coca, to something near 7,000 hectares of mostly-legal coca. And the Chapare, once a remote region of the country, was being transformed into a major breadbasket for Bolivia. This progress was subsequently reversed, but that is for another discussion related to political developments in the country in the early 2000s.

Q: I assume that there is a market for cocaine that continues to be satisfied.

ALMAGUER: Despite our progress and impressive statistics, the economic impact of reducing coca production was significant: the cocaine industry, which was not reflected in the GDP of the country, amounted at one point to maybe 50 percent of the real GDP; by the year 2000 it was maybe 10 percent of the real GDP. If the rest of the country is not growing fast enough, then any changes in the coca-growing industry has an enormous impact on the economy, in secondary and tertiary job creation, and so on. This became fodder for local politicians, who basically said, "the rich people from the capital" or "the imperialists from the North want to take away from you your livelihood." It was a complex issue, indeed!

Q: Yes.

ALMAGUER: The success of the program in the late 1990s was poorly explained (if at all) to the coca growers' union leadership, which led to future unintended consequences. Among those consequences was the rise of an insurgent political movement led by the head of the coca growers union, Evo Morales, with whom we could not speak despite the fact that it was clear that he had a strong following and was a major opinion setter. When he subsequently became president it was no surprise to me that he reversed many of USAID's initiatives and that chose to distance himself from the U.S.

Q: Yes.

ALMAGUER: Many critics of U.S. foreign policy often say that one of our weaknesses is that we lose interest in a subject once we feel that the mission has been accomplished. We move on to other issues, often too soon to solidify the gains made. This may have been the case in this instance.

Relations with neighboring countries

Q: You were talking about the reforms that were taking place in Bolivia when you were there. Was this any reflection on what was happening in Chile?

ALMAGUER: … yes and no. Chile is a very important country in the region and certainly for Bolivia. Chile was undergoing rapid transformation towards a free-market economy and its experiences were of great interest to Bolivian economic planners. At the same time, Bolivia is always weary of Chile's politics, particularly when it comes to the issue of access to the sea. Bolivians of all political stripes agree on their country's long-held objective of regaining access to the sea. They see Chile as the country standing in its way. There is a long and complicated history about this issue, ever since Bolivia lost access to the Pacific as a result of the War of the Pacific in the early 1880s. From Chile's point of view, there is nothing to discuss. An international treaty clearly supports Chilean sovereignty over disputed territory. From the Bolivian perspective, it was an unfair treaty that needs to be renegotiated leading to Bolivia's sovereign access to the Pacific. Further, many Bolivians attribute their country's historic political and social instability, as well as widespread poverty to its lack of access to the sea. Whether that is true or not is irrelevant to the Bolivian narrative, which is widely accepted as a fact. The U.S. has, for the most part, attempted to stay out of this dispute, which involves governments and people on both sides with whom we want to maintain friendly relations.

Q: What about Argentina? Argentina's been a mess for a long time. How did this impact Bolivia?

ALMAGUER: During the time that I served in Bolivia Carlos Saul Menem was still the president of Argentina. Argentina under Menem had come up with an ultimately self-defeating policy of adopting the U.S. dollar as the local currency, which controlled inflation but which basically made it impossible for Argentina to compete in its key

export sectors, mostly agricultural commodities and some assembly plants. Nearby Argentina plays a role in Bolivia not unlike the role the U.S. has played in easing pressures on the Mexican economy. The U.S. consulate in La Paz was not particularly busy – the demand for U.S. visas among the poorer classes was relatively low. Argentina was the draw. In Argentina, the guys who maintain lawns and fix the roofs are likely to be Bolivian. Argentina was the traditional escape route for impoverished Bolivians. When the Argentinean economy collapsed, as it did in the early 2000s, it sealed that outlet for Bolivians, adding to the challenges the Bolivian governments have faced in more recent times (although a booming market for Bolivian natural gas more than compensated for that loss.)

Working with Bolivians and with the Country Team

Q: How did you find working with the Bolivian government?

ALMAGUER: It was good and far better than one would imagine. Bolivia is poor, with a small population and lots of deficiencies, including limited infrastructure, high illiteracy rates and weak institutions. At the same time, Bolivians are a very proud people, with strong cultural traditions, a sense of history, and frankly, not that close to the United States. Hence, American cultural influence is not as pervasive as it is elsewhere in the region. I was in Bolivia when they opened the first American fast-food franchise (Burger King) and that was quite a scene. Even wealthy kids wanted to work there for the "prestige" of working for a famous franchise. Generally speaking, however, Bolivians respected Americans but demanded respect in turn. Because opportunities were limited for the educated Bolivian middle class, government bureaucracies had a significant number of well-educated employees. Hence, the relationship and interaction with government functionaries was generally cordial but serious, with Bolivians being clear on their desire to control outcomes. One could have a real exchange of views and almost always reach a compromise on policy issues – but we had to work at it. When I was Ambassador in Honduras, and we will get into that later, I was routinely labeled as the "Proconsul." In a poll taken in Honduras of the most influential people in the country, I came in second; the most influential was the cardinal …

Q: [Laughter.]

ALMAGUER: That would never happen in Bolivia, where the U.S. maintained a high profile mission but not so high as to distort national thinking. The influence of the U.S. ambassador as a predominant voice was significant but not a determinant one. The Bolivians respected the U.S. and we respected them back.

We had a close and productive relationship with the two governments in office during my time in Bolivia. Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (widely known as "Goni") was elected in 1993 and remained in office through his four-year term, which ended in 1997. He was a fascinating character. He was born in Bolivia but soon thereafter his parents were exiled in the U.S., where he grew up in Williamstown, Massachusetts, acquiring an American accent and outlook. His Spanish was always deficient since all of his schooling took

place in the U.S. He did not visit his birthplace until he was 21. There he met a beautiful young lady who, stories have it, was Miss Bolivia for that year. He married her and became a successful Bolivian businessman (principally in the mining sector) and politician. While his background would suggest that he was beholden to U.S. views on issues, he was feisty and not in anybody's pocket. However, our support for his reforms – many of which were controversial – was tangible, making it for an ideal partnership.

When his term expired, the next government was headed by Hugo Banzer, who was elected in free and fair elections in 1997 for a five-year term. He previously had served twice as a military dictator. While not as bad as some of the other dictators of the era, his election in 1997 did raise questions about the future of democracy in Bolivia. As it turns out, Banzer was very proud of the fact that he was the first Latin American dictator to win the presidency in a fair and democratic election. At the time of the election, I was Chargé d'Affaires since both the Ambassador and DCM were back home on medical-related leave. Hence, I had a chance to meet with him soon after the election. He gave us every assurance that while he came from a party in opposition to the Goni Government, he had no intention of retrenching the forward leaning reforms of that Administration. This was great news to us.

While Banzer did not have the depth of knowledge about economic issues as did Goni, he had as his Vice President-elect a young, U.S. trained and strongly pro-American dynamo: Jorge Quiroga (universally known as "Tuto"). Tuto soon became our key interlocutor. For one, he was the one who had been given the economic portfolio and treated as a *de facto* prime minister. Second, unbeknown to us at the time, Banzer was suffering from a cancer that would eventually force him to resign (in 2001) and leave Tuto as President. The relationship that we enjoyed with Tuto was in many ways similar to the relationship we enjoyed with Goni. In my case, it was quite close and we would talk about issues at least once a week. Tuto was hard charging and not prone to accepting our views without discussion, but we could not have had a more mutually supportive relationship.

Q. What about your relationship with the Embassy?

I was fortunate during my three years in Bolivia to have as Chiefs of Mission two of the finest and stellar career diplomats as ambassadors: Curt Kamman (Curtis W. Kamman) and Donna Hrinak. They each had distinctive personalities and interests that made their styles quite different. But both were equally effective in representing the U.S. and in leading a large Country Team. What was similar in each was their abiding commitment to the job and to the staff they led, as well as being well-read and well-versed in almost every issue that confronted them. They traveled and visited every corner of this vast country (twice the size of France but only 8 million people), engaged the authorities in personal and friendly manner and took time to hear the views of their staff. I was lucky. I was close to each and they gave me all the support I needed from them. And they certainly served as role models for me as I went on to assume a Chief of Mission position. They both respected the work USAID did and supported us in both major ways (e.g., policy differences with the Government) and in minor but significant ways (e.g., showing interest in the welfare of our staff).

I cannot recall any unpleasant moment with Kamman, who was an introvert but always available and he, in turn, was well supported by his wife, Mary, who was one of the many Foreign Service spouses who before 1972 were forced to resign upon marriage. Mary was a role model for my wife when we assumed a similar role.

Hrinak was more outgoing but equally demanding in her style. I had one close encounter with her temper early on in her tenure – and she was right. We were hosting a CODEL and we learned at some point during a lunch event that the CODEL's afternoon agenda was changed, leaving a gap. I saw this as a great opportunity to offer to the visiting CODEL an alternative option: visiting a USAID health project nearby. The CODEL quickly accepted and the visit was a great success. I could sense, however, that Hrinak was quite upset. The next day she called me into her office and made very clear her unhappiness that (as she saw it) I had schemed to divert the group to a USAID project without consulting with her first. While I saw it as an innocent opportunity to showcase our program, she rightly saw it as bypassing her authority to make final decisions on something as important as a CODEL. While I did not enjoy the moment, I did learn a lesson that I shared with my staff both in Bolivia and subsequently in Honduras. Once the air was clear, we resumed having a terrific relationship and she enjoys my highest respect.

Q. What about your USAID staff?

ALMAGUER: We had a large mission made up of fabulous officers, both Americans and locals. Bolivia had always been a favorite posting for USAID FSOs. The post was not glamorous and the isolation of La Paz, perched in a rocky valley 12,000 feet high and surrounded by a lunar landscape, could get to anyone. But there is no question that Americans enjoyed working with Bolivians and seeing their work bearing fruit. USAID Bolivia was known for having a history of serving as an "incubator" for future leaders - and indeed that happened. Both my predecessor and I went on to become ambassadors, my deputy went on to lead major missions in critical posts and several of our junior officers are now in increasingly more senior positions at USAID. The building owned by USAID was outstanding and secure. In fact, Ambassador Kamman decided to hold the U.S. community reception for First Lady Hillary Clinton in 1996 at the USAID backyard since it offered both a beautiful view of the rocky mountains surrounding La Paz and the security such a visit demanded.

Q. Anything else you would like to add about your Bolivia experience?

The rest of the USAID program

ALMAGUER: Yes. While we have spent a great deal of time talking about the Alternative Development program, we need to remind ourselves of the many other things the U.S. foreign aid program was doing in Bolivia during this time.

We had a very successful health program that helped to finance a world-class, community –based preventive health program called Pro-Salud, a private non-profit consortium with clinics all over the country and with a terrific outreach program that in measurable ways helped to change the health landscape of the country. Historically, Bolivia has had some of the worse indices in the Americas for maternal and child mortality, chronic illnesses and endemic health epidemics. Pro-Salud and other public and private health programs, with USAID support, helped to turn that around. Our help facilitated access to quality health care for the most needy in the country and in ways that preserved the patients' dignity. This latter factor, often insufficiently considered, led to increased use of professional health care services by families who in the past would have their health care needs met by traditional practices, if at all. For example, the use of clinics for deliveries (vs. home deliveries) skyrocketed once the Pro-Salud program adapted traditional practices for deliveries, such as having the family nearby and allowing women to deliver while squatting vs. bed deliveries.

Similar stories could be said about successful microenterprise programs that reached some of the most impoverished groups: women in rural and marginal urban areas. The decentralization program, known in Bolivia as the Popular Participation Program, led to significant decision-making at local levels, which our programs encouraged and supported. Some of my favorite memories of Bolivia revolve around attending "town hall" meetings throughout the country in which local citizens would meet to debate budget priorities for their communities. This was democracy in action at its best and USAID was a critical partner in this important innovation.

USAID was also instrumental in supporting the then-emerging environmental movement, with assistance for nascent environmental groups and in the creation of national parks. Satellite views of South America showed very clearly where the Brazil-Bolivia border was located, with the Brazil side recently burned and planted with soy bean crops or devoted to cattle, while the Bolivian side remained pristine – a source of some pride among many Bolivians.

During my time in Bolivia the Country Team hosted a number of Congressional visits (CODELs and STAFFDELs), mostly seeking to be updated on the counternarcotics program, but we made it a point to showcase the U.S. development assistance program. As an example, I will never forget the visit of Congressman Sonny Callahan, Republican from Alabama, who was at the time the Chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, accompanied by Democratic Congresswomen Nancy Pelosi and Nydia Velazquez. Callahan often was depicted as antagonistic to U.S. foreign aid. Yet, in their visit to a Pro-Salud Clinic near Santa Cruz, I can still visualize these members of Congress sitting on the floor playing with infants and toddlers and relishing a moment that clearly highlighted the good the U.S. foreign aid program can do.

In November 1996, I served as the Control Officer for the visit of First Lady Hillary Clinton, who was participating in a "First Ladies of the Americas" Summit. We took advantage of the visit to showcase for her the work we were doing in micro-credit for women and she devoted considerable amount of her visit to chatting with beneficiaries

and asking pointed questions that strengthened her resolve to support USAID efforts to target women as a priority group around the world. Days later, we hosted Vice President Al Gore at the 1996 Environmental Summit in Santa Cruz. The fact that the venue was in Bolivia added further significance to our environmental program. Countless other U.S. groups also visited, many focused on the novel Popular Participation (decentralization) program, which observers considered a model for other countries to emulate.

In summary, without being Pollyannaish about it, USAID Bolivia in the late 1990s was an ideal place in which to carry out the USAID development mission in a receptive environment where the needs were great but matched by satisfaction of seeing tangible results from our efforts.

Q: Well, you left there when?

ALMAGUER: We were in Bolivia until I was nominated to serve as Ambassador to Honduras in the spring of 1999. I left one year short of what was intended to be a four-year assignment. My wife and I left La Paz on June 1, 1999 to get ready for my Senate hearings later that month.

Ambassador to Honduras (1999 – 2002)

Q: Could we discuss how you got the appointment? It's always interesting how this type of appointment comes through.

Receiving the appointment and preparing to assume the responsibility

ALMAGUER: One of the issues that the Foreign Service personnel system has faced over the years is that FSOs outside the State Department — whether they come from the old U.S. Information Agency (USIA, now merged with State), USAID, the Foreign Commercial Service or the U.S. Foreign Agricultural Service — should have a fair shot at being considered for ambassadorial for appointments. Historically, ambassadorial appointments from these constituent parts of the U.S. foreign affairs community have been few relative to their size. As a couple of State assistant secretaries have admitted to me, they built up long-term relationships with a cadre of officers within the Department. When these colleagues achieve senior ranks, it is natural to try to reward them. Historically, and for perfectly understandable reasons, the Department has found it difficult to open up the system to equally qualified candidates from other parts of the Foreign Service community. Therefore, it usually takes a hard-charging, well-placed and committed head of one of these other agencies to get their candidates considered by the "D Committee" (a Committee chaired by the Deputy Secretary which vets career candidates for each ambassadorial position and makes recommendations to the Secretary for subsequent White House consideration). USAID historically has managed to get an ambassadorial nomination through the "D" system for one or two of its officers every couple of years, usually for an African posting. Before my name went up before the "D"

Committee in October 1998, the last time there had been an ambassadorial appointment for a Latin American post from the ranks of the USAID FSOs was in 1967!

Q: [Laughter.]

ALMAGUER: A long time — 31 years in fact! Again, as someone pointed out to me, there are some 44 embassies in Africa and not that many people want to serve in the Central African Republic. On the other hand, there are only about 25 Latin American and Caribbean postings; half of which are of potential interest to the White House as they seek to place political allies. Therefore, an ambassadorial appointment in Latin America from the USAID Foreign Service ranks is a tough proposition.

Brian Atwood, early in his tenure as USAID Administrator, seems to have identified me as somebody that he thought not only had the qualifications to be ambassador, but whose candidacy would be well received by the Department. Prior to assuming his USAID position, Brian had served in the early days of the Clinton Administration as Undersecretary for Management at State and knew his way around State. Further, he knew that I had worked very closely during my time as head of USAID Personnel with the State Department's Director General's Office. Further, over the years, going back to my posting in Panama in the 1979-83 timeframe, I had worked closely with the Western Hemisphere Bureau at State and was well known and presumably well regarded there. Further, my candidacy was strengthened by my performance in Bolivia, my work with INL on counternarcotics issues and the fact that the two ambassadors with whom I worked most recently in Bolivia, Curt Kamman and Donna Hrinak, had stellar reputations within the Department and they both thought highly of me. It seemed like a winning combination. Fortunately for me, I had Atwood championing my candidacy at a time and in a setting that was propitious for me.

Q. How did the process leading up to the nomination start?

ALMAGUER: Early in 1998 I had a conversation with Brian Atwood and he apparently mentioned my name in a conversation with Madeleine Albright, who must have passed it along to the then-Director General of the Foreign Service (Edward William) "Skip" Gnehm. That summer I had a long TDY in Washington, chairing that year's USAID's Senior Foreign Service Promotions Board. The USAID Chief of Staff arranged for me to meet with Gnehm and also with White House Personnel staff. Gnehm was generous with his time, allowing for a good "get-acquainted" discussion. He gave me a good layout of the land, noting that my credentials were impeccable, but cautioned how difficult it would be. At the time Peter (Pete") Romero, an old acquaintance, was the Assistant Secretary for Latin America. He, quite frankly, was negative, not in a personal way, but being realistic. In so many words he said, "Look, I have four embassies coming up next year and I have 15 people who work closely with me who deserve my support. You're number 16, not because I don't like you, but because that's just the reality." Brian was particularly insistent and followed up with phone calls to senior people in the Secretary's staff.

Q. So, what happened?

In late October '98, I was back in Bolivia, and it was about ten o'clock at night my time when I received a phone call at home from Skip Gnehm, the Director General (DG). He informed me that Strobe Talbott, the then-Deputy Secretary, had just finished chairing the "D" Committee. It was my understanding that this Committee did not include representatives from the geographic bureaus; rather, only representatives from the Secretary's office, the Director General and the Undersecretaries. He noted that the Committee had concluded that I was as qualified as anybody under consideration and that, should I accept, my name would go forward as a recommendation from the Secretary to the White House. He added that since I had been Peace Corps Country Director in Honduras 20 years earlier, the Committee had concluded that I was ideally suited for Honduras. He asked if I would be willing to accept the nomination if it came my way after the White House considered it. I said, "Of course, I would be delighted and honored to serve." By coincidence, my wife had been visiting our daughter in the U.S. and was due in La Paz early the next morning. I shared the news with her at the luggage carousel at the La Paz Airport. That night I also called Ambassador Hrinak to let her know and early the next day I received a call from Administrator Atwood to congratulate me. It turns out that he too had been nominated to serve as ambassador in Brazil. Unfortunately for Atwood, that nomination did not survive the wrath of the then Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Jesse Helms, who seems to have suffered not only from a dislike of the U.S. foreign aid program, but also from a personal dislike for Atwood. I also received a gracious phone call from Assistant Secretary Romero to extend his congratulations and offer any needed assistance.

One of the things I discovered very quickly was how difficult it is to keep the silence that the process requires. After all, only the President may announce a nomination and, until that happens, nominees are expected to remain silent on the subject, giving the White House total discretion to accept or reject the Secretary's recommendations without any public comment.

Nevertheless, once the name goes forward to the White House, a complicated process ensues, with half of the State management bureaucracy mobilized. In the era before emails and with telephone communication with La Paz not always assured, it was a bit stressful, compounded by the need to maintain silence beyond a small circle (the ambassador and my secretary) while carrying on my ongoing responsibilities as USAID Mission Director as if it were business as usual. In the days and weeks that followed I received phone calls from the legal people, the ethics people, and then the White House people. The latter did not raise any political issues. But they were interested in issues that could pose embarrassing questions for them. These types of questions seem to vary depending on the political and social winds of the times. Their "hot issues" at the time were sexual preferences (with homosexuality still considered politically sensitive), marital scandals, paying taxes, hiring of undocumented household staff without paying Social Security taxes, and similar kinds of things. My record on all of these housekeeping issues was pretty clean and I had a good relationship with Congressional staffers who eventually would receive the nomination for consideration of the Senate Foreign

Relations Committee. Over two months after I received the Gnehm phone call with the news, I formally received a letter from Gnehm saying that the Secretary was going to submit my name to the White House for the President's consideration. My name finally emerged from that process in April, when the President made the formal written announcement and my nomination went to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Q. Wasn't the U.S. engaged in a major disaster response in Honduras at about that time?

ALMAGUER: By sad coincidence, on the night in late October 1998 when I received the phone call from Gnehm that I would likely be the next U.S. Ambassador to Honduras, that country was being buffeted by one of the most devastating hurricanes in 20th Century history. Hurricane Mitch not only destroyed much of the infrastructure in the country and killed hundreds, but also flooded Tegucigalpa, where four days of torrential rains had caused massive landslides blocking the normal water flow. The destruction suffered by the Honduran people, along with significant destruction in nearby Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador, was a major news item for months while my nomination was churning trough the Executive and Legislative gauntlets. When my nomination was made public, many assumed that I had been selected to go to Honduras because of my extensive experience in disaster response and development assistance. While that experience proved to be extremely valuable, the fact was that I was selected for this position before the hurricane struck. In the aftermath of this disaster, my nomination seemed like a fortuitous coincidence. It certainly facilitated my confirmation and the follow-up international response to the disaster shaped the first half of my ambassadorship.

Q. So, your confirmation must have been easy…

ALMAGUER: Senator Helms was the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and he remained particularly interested in events in Central America. I was confident that Helms would be supportive of my nomination because several of his staff members who were responsible for vetting candidates knew me favorably. I also anticipated that the Confirmation hearings would be relatively easy and focused on Hurricane Mitch reconstruction efforts. But to get to the hearings I had to go through another complex bureaucratic process. The Senate process was perhaps even more grueling than the process followed by State and the White House. The paperwork required by the Senate would easily approximate the size of a typical college textbook! Some of the requirements quite frankly seemed to border on invasion of privacy for family members who had no stake in this process, other than family pride. For example, the paperwork required me to submit detailed information not only on my political contributions, my wife's political contributions and my children's political contributions, but also on my parents' political contributions, my sisters' political contributions and my brothers-in-laws' contributions.

Q: Oh boy!

ALMAGUER: …which in a way was rather funny, as well as awkward. I have two sisters in North Carolina, and one of them is quite liberal, and the other one is quite

conservative. So they both gladly shared with me the fact that each of them had, in the appropriate election years, contributed $100 each; one had contributed to Harvey Gantt, the Democratic candidate for Senate, and the other one, fortunately, I guess, [laughter] had contributed $100 to Jesse Helms! So that balanced out very nicely.

The guy at the receiving end of all this paperwork was a young man by the name of Roger Noriega, who was Senator Helm's key staffer for Latin American issues. Roger, who went on to become U.S. Ambassador to the OAS and, subsequently, Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs under President George W. Bush, was a gracious gentleman whom I considered a professional friend in the circles in which both of us worked. In my routine meeting with him following the White House submission of my nomination he quickly volunteered that I was an excellent choice, particularly in light of the heavy U.S. commitment to Honduras following the Mitch disaster. The hearing was scheduled for mid-June, a couple of weeks after I arrived in DC, and I testified along with colleagues nominated to serve in Peru, Guatemala and Nicaragua. The hearing was almost a non-event. One prepares for this solemn moment and it is almost disappointing that it is over so quickly and with no substantive debate. The Chairman and only attendee was Senator Paul Coverdell, Republican from Georgia who had served with distinction as Director of the Peace Corps under President George H. W. Bush. He welcomed us warmly and asked a few appropriate questions and then it was over…

Q: Yes.

ALMAGUER: As I was making the transition, my biggest concern, other than learning as much as I could about the issues facing our Embassy in Honduras, was developing strong relations with the State Department team. Even though I was received warmly by everyone at State, I could not help but ponder whether I was seen as an interloper who had taken an ambassadorial slot from a deserving State FSO. A traditional approach that State has used when the Ambassador is either a political appointee or a career person from another agency is to appoint a strong "insider" as Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM). I was very fortunate because, as it turns out, the DCM in Tegucigalpa, Paul Trivelli, was in his second year in Tegucigalpa and highly regarded in the WHA bureaucracy. He and I got along well from the very beginning and, at my request, he was extended for another year so that he and I would serve as a team for the duration of my ambassadorship. My concerns about the State bureaucracy proved to be unfounded. My State colleagues welcomed me and gave me the full support any successful career ambassador needs. Something that I discovered quickly after arriving from Bolivia and preparing to assume my post in Honduras is that the trappings of the office is highly respected. As I made the rounds in the Department and elsewhere I sensed the difference; not that I was not respected before, but I did notice an elevation of that relationship once the White House nominated me. This was also true of staff from other Federal agencies who were called upon to brief me, particularly the military, who are the most rank-conscious of all Federal employees.

Q. What about "Charm School"?

ALMAGUER: Oh, yes. My wife and I attended the two-week program and it was quite useful. Contrary to popular opinion, we did not learn the difference between a shrimp fork and a lobster fork [Laughter]. But we did get many useful tips handed down from generations of ambassadors who had experienced what we were about to experience, both substantive and mundane. I was impressed with all of our "classmates," including a handful of political appointees, who, for the most part, chose to be attentive students.

There was one funny sidelight: President Clinton apparently did not make it a habit of meeting and greeting his new ambassadors as they were getting ready to assume the office. Most of us considered it rather strange, given historical precedence and his own affable personality. It was said that when Clinton needed "down time" he would surround himself with his closest 1,000 friends. Therefore, we were taken aback that he would not pose for "photo ops". We joked about what we would need to do to take that photo which inevitably would sit on top of the piano at the Residence. Some of us, in good humor, "threatened" to go over to Pennsylvania Avenue, across from the White House, and have our photos taken with those cardboard images of the president! Nobody (that I know of) followed through but we were disappointed.

The other person who was surprisingly distant was Secretary Madeleine Albright. She limited herself to a shake of the hands and quick photo. She never came a couple of flights down to the ambassadorial program, as we anticipated and as other Secretaries, both before and after, have done. Secretary Powell, for example, was the total opposite – as I will describe later on in this narrative. Ambassadors are their representatives abroad on all matters, big and small. While we were at the tail end of that Administration and had our written instructions, a little more contact at that level would have been appropriate. As I will subsequently recount, George W. Bush did make the time to meet and greet his ambassadors.

Q: That notwithstanding, I assume you were "psyched up" to get to Post…

ALMAGUER: Of course, I was eager to get going and to lead that Embassy. I often joked that I would rather be Ambassador to Honduras than Ambassador to London because the Ambassador to Honduras has more independence, and, as the title of the job says, serve out in a plenipotentiary manner since few at the senior levels in Washington follow Honduran events, while in the case of Britain, even small matters are dealt with at the highest levels within the Department and the White House.

In Honduras, perhaps more than in any other country in Central America, the pronouncements of the U.S. Ambassador, with whom he or she meets, and how he or she acts is followed with great interest by all, from the President down to common citizens. And Honduras has had a long line of very strong and successful American ambassadors with real clout. A good example is John Negroponte, who some called "Negro Potente." *("Potent")* (And, by the way, he and his wife, Diana, are held in highest regards in Honduras for a variety of reasons, foremost among them is that the Negropontes adopted five Honduran children and developed strong ties of friendship with many Hondurans.

My wife and I were honored when John and Diane invited us to their home for a very informal Sunday brunch as we were getting ready to depart for Tegucigalpa.)

Q: How was your "swearing in"?

ALMAGUER: It was terrific and emotional for me. It took place in late July, a day or two before Antoinette and I were due to depart for Honduras. Having my family, a multitude of friends and colleagues and other dignitaries in that majestic Ben Franklin Room in the 8th Floor of the Department made it a memorable occasion. It was a moment to reminisce about the road I had traveled from an immigrant from Holguin to representing the President and people of the United States abroad!

A blip on the way to Honduras

Q. What about your arrival in Honduras

ALMAGUER: Antoinette and I flew to Miami a day or two behind schedule since I had to take care of a dental issue. In Miami we were greeted by SOUTHCOM (U.S. Southern Command), which hosted us for a couple of days of briefings prior to getting on the plane to Tegucigalpa. SOUTHCOM had multiple interests in Honduras. First, it has maintained a presence in the Comayagua Valley of Central Honduras, at a Honduran Air Force base called Soto Cano, but more widely known as "Palmerola," an important center of operations for the U.S. military and intelligence community during the Central American wars of the 1980s. SOUTHCOM continued to maintain there some 700 soldiers and airmen, focused principally on training, combined exercises and forward deployment in case of natural disasters in the region. Secondly, SOUTHCOM was a major player in the days and months following the Mitch hurricane disaster, including the airlifting of people and supplies. They even served to rescue the Honduran President, who was stranded as a result of a mudslide as he toured one of the areas most heavily damaged.

Thirdly, SOUTHCOM plays an important part in the "war on drugs" as a partner with DEA and other agencies. Thus, maintaining strong relations with the U.S. Ambassador to Honduras is important to them, as it was for me. I was once again impressed with the deference displayed towards the U.S. ambassador and I was equally impressed with the set of tools that SOUTHCOM could make available to us in support of our efforts in Honduras, including reconstruction, counternarcotics efforts and in support of humanitarian needs (e.g., medical teams, school construction, etc.) that also served to enhance the image of the U.S. in Honduras.

Q: Yes.

ALMAGUER: That brief stay in Miami in route to Honduras was made even more interesting by an event taking place in Honduras at the same time: the then-President of Honduras, Carlos Roberto Flores Facussé (1998-2002) had opted to dismiss the senior ranking military official (the Honduran equivalent of the U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff). This was the first time that any democratically elected president in

Honduras had exercised this constitutional authority over the military. This precedent-setting decision, if it prevailed, would firmly establish civilian control over the military. No one really knew how far the military would go to protect its historic independence from civilian control.

On the day before I was due to leave for Honduras, I received a call from the Department informing me that things were so tense in Tegucigalpa that the presidential helicopter was literally parked adjacent to the president's office in case the military decided to launch a preemptive coup. It did not, fortunately, probably due to lack of popular support, including from within the ranks of the military, but the President and his government were not yet out of the woods. The fired officer issued some denunciations of the president for firing him, but that is as far as the military dared to go. So, I received clearance to proceed to Tegucigalpa the next day. This not only saved the day but also saved my ambassadorship. Had the coup threat materialized and led to the overthrow of the democratically elected government, U.S. sanctions would be applied immediately and we would have been forced to downgrade our relations with Honduras. Sending a newly-minted ambassador to the country at that time would have been a bad idea. Fortunately, cooler heads in the Honduras military prevailed.

My arrival in Tegucigalpa would have been big news in any case. Historically, the U.S. ambassador has played a big role in the country. Most have been well received. Both our sympathizers and our detractors (relatively few in Honduras at the time) wanted to get a "feel" for the person: "Does he speak Spanish? Is he approachable? Does know much about us?" Some (a minority) in the local media were also eager to report that "here comes the next 'big shot' from America to tell us what to do." I was fully prepared for live TV cameras and a bevy of reporters at the airport.

I had hoped to focus my arrival remarks on the continuing commitment of the U.S. to help Honduras recover from the destruction brought about by Hurricane Mitch. My background with the Peace Corps and USAID was perfectly suited for that effort and my fluent Spanish made it easy to convey. Nevertheless, I was walking into a days-old constitutional/military crisis that had not totally dissipated. After a very nice welcome by the Honduran Protocol Office and the Country Team, I was directed to the microphones and the waiting reporters. I had to use that opportunity as my first test of baptism of by fire.

In addition to expressing how delighted my wife and I were to be back in Honduras (the usual, nice protocol comments), I reiterated our commitment to reconstruction efforts. At the same time, I made clear that our support for constitutional order and the preservation of democracy was equally strong. I send signals that the U.S. would not be able to maintain our commitment unless the democratic process and civilian control over the military was preserved. In my remarks, I noted the opportunity I had before leaving the U.S. to review the important support Honduras was receiving from Southern Command, under the leadership of its CINC (Commander-in-Chief), Marine General (Charles E.) Wilhelm, who was well known to the Honduran top brass. I wanted to make sure that the Honduran military understood that SOUTHCOM and the Embassy were in total sync.

These comments (I took no questions) were widely disseminated in the media, including in live reports from the airport. There had been an explosion of TV stations in Honduras in recent times – some 15 of them – all vying to gain audience share with their newscasts.

As I discovered very quickly, anybody who had a political view and some pocket change to spare had a little TV studio. In addition to TV, scores of radio stations and four national newspapers made news reporting in Honduras a contact sport [Laughter]. Democracy in Honduras remained fragile but an interesting process was taking place: the Honduran public was exposed to a variety of opinions.

The next morning's headlines included: "*El Nuevo Representante del Imperio Llega* ("The New Representative of the Empire Arrives"). Another headline said "New Ambassador Backs Civilian Control." This was only the beginning of what turned out to be almost daily headlines or articles on my opinions and activities.

Q. How did the Government react?

ALMAGUER: My comments, of course, were welcomed by the President and by his civilian Minister of Defense, who also had experienced run-ins with the military high command. I was not sure how the Honduran military would take it, but by then it was clear to them that any decision to move against the civilian government would not be well-received by the country's key ally. I made a note to myself to engage with the military leadership early on, after the requisite presentation of credentials.

Q: What happened to the officer who started this crisis?

ALMAGUER: I am not sure, but I suppose that he became a military attaché at some far-away Honduran embassy – that's what most civilian governments in Latin America do to get rid of these renegades with a "golden parachute."

Relations with the Government

Q. How did your relations with the Government evolve?

ALMAGUER: In briefings in Washington I received mixed reviews on President Flores. He studied in the U.S. (Louisiana State University), had a highly regarded American wife (Mary Flake, whom most Hondurans loved and respected for her low-key but tangible support for the needs of Honduran children) and held policy views generally in concert with U.S. policy. However, he was said to have a "prickly personality" and perhaps standoffish towards U.S. officials. Some outside observers speculated that he had suffered some slights in the U.S. (presumably because of his dark skin and living in the U.S. South in the 60s). Perhaps the fact that he was married to an American required him to prove to Honduran voters his independence from the U.S. Whatever the facts may have been, I anticipated some early tensions in our relationship. In fact, while ambassadors are received by the President for credential presentations within a week or two of arrival, mine was not scheduled until three weeks after arrival.

Q. Was this intentional on the President's part?

ALMAGUER: At the time, I speculated on the meaning of this delay but it did not seem intentional since other newly designated ambassadors were also being delayed. (However, in most of the other cases, the delay involved ambassadors posted elsewhere in Central America or Mexico and serving Honduras concurrently.) Whatever the rationale may have been, and I never was able to determine the reason, I had a full plate in my hands. After making the mandatory calls on the Minister of Foreign Affairs (Roberto Flores Bermudez) and the Presidential Office Chief of Protocol (Ivan Romero - no relation to our WHA Assistant Secretary), both of whom received me warmly, I made it a point of visiting each of the resident ambassadors accredited to Honduras, including from most of the Latin American countries (but not Cuba at the time – Honduras was one of the last Latin American to recognize the Castro regime – more on that story later). This initial round of visits started an excellent personal relationship with most of the resident ambassadors and delegations. I also made courtesy calls on the Papal Nuncio, who was the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps by virtue of the honor most Latin American countries accord the Pope and his representative. Europe and Japan were well represented in Honduras, with the Spanish Embassy being among the largest and most active in the country. Because of the Mitch Hurricane disaster, a number of countries previously not physically not represented in Honduras, opened significant representations in country – most notably Sweden. Taiwan also was represented in Honduras, but of course I could not engage with them. Central America has remained one of the few bastions of recognition for Taiwan and the Taiwanese Government has regaled Honduras with many projects, including schools, water systems and agricultural programs. The Taiwanese also have showered the government with gifts not likely to come from any other donor country. For example, the lavish, pure mahogany oval office of the President (larger than our Oval Office) was made possible by a gift form Taiwan. The President's helicopter also was a gift from Taiwan.

Q. So when did the President receive you?

ALMAGUER: I believe it was about 20 days after my arrival. It was a great ceremony, with some pomp, including a military band and appropriate etiquette for such solemn occasions. The President and I exchanged pleasantries and he took the occasion as an opportunity to thank the U.S. Government and the American people for the gestures of support in the aftermath of the Hurricane Mitch disaster. I shared with him that effective execution of the massive U.S. program of assistance would be my highest priority. It was in this exchange that he shared, by way of light humor, that when he learned that I had been with the Peace Corps in Honduras, he worried since, in his words, "Peace Corps people know the country better than we politicians do and it is dangerous to have an ambassador from the U.S. who knows the country and its people so well!" I took it as a compliment and, indeed, our relations after that could not have been better. He was always available when I called him or when I requested a meeting. Perhaps nothing exemplified that relationship better than the fact that a few months later, just before Christmas, he called to invite my wife and me to his annual Christmas Eve get-together

with family and personal friends at his home. I reminded him that my children and my daughter's husband would be visiting with us. He said, "Bring them." When we arrived at his home on Christmas Eve, I immediately noticed that the guests were truly family and personal friends and we were the only guests that did not fit that profile. My wife and I reciprocated the following year with a holiday lunch at the Residence with his family (including the President's mother) in which we did not discuss any official business; rather, we concentrated on topics of mutual interest. For example, my wife and the President enjoyed art and both spent quite a bit of time discussing painters. Our friendship solidified, while accepting that we did not always need to see eye-to-eye on policy issues. To this day, we periodically keep up with each other. To my knowledge, the only other U.S. ambassador to Honduras who has enjoyed that level of friendship with Flores is John Negroponte and his wife Diane. When Negroponte served in Honduras, Flores was a very young Minister of the Presidency and Flores was a key interlocutor between the Embassy and the then-Honduran President, Roberto Suazo Cordova.

Q. That sounds terrific. How was your relation with the rest of the government officials?

ALMAGUER: Generally very good. I did not hesitate to meet with any official on matters of interest to us. Some ministers were better than others, but they all knew that in addition to representing U.S. interests, I had a direct pipeline to the President. That latter point proved to be very useful in times when issues turned difficult.

Q. What kinds of issues?

Responding to the Mitch Hurricane disaster

ALMAGUER: We have not started to discuss the U.S. response to the Mitch disaster. For the first half of my posting in Honduras, recovery, reconstruction and the introduction of reforms to protect the massive investment by donor countries dominated much of the discussion.

Q. Tell me more about that.

ALMAGUER: As one can well imagine, within the Embassy I had my hands full. I was blessed with a terrific DCM, Paul Trivelli, who took care very effectively of most of the Embassy operational issues. He was open and available to all staff and he kept me fully informed. From the very beginning, we learned each of our respective strengths and interests and worked effectively together. Staff soon learned that this was a working team and that what they shared with Paul would also be shared with me. Generally speaking, I was focused on the external issues and he focused on internal operations – although the lines were not always so clear-cut. I, too, had an interest in management, in staff morale and security issues and in the coordination within the Country Team and among donors of the large foreign aid program being undertaken in the country. Paul also served as my key advisor on matters related to State Dept. politics, although that never was a major issue for us.

My task of ensuring coordination within the various elements of the U.S. presence in Honduras was quite an undertaking and, frankly, one of my proudest achievements. At its peak we had some 22 Federal agencies or military elements based in Tegucigalpa.

Q: Good God!

ALMAGUER: Good God, exactly! This included not only INL, USAID, Peace Corps (one of the largest in the world) and other elements within the civilian foreign affairs community, but also the U.S. mapping agency (U.S. Geologic Service), the intelligence community and of course military reporting to me (e.g., Defense Attaché, Military Group with all branches of the Military represented), as well as the Soto Cano military group, which reported to the Southern Command in Miami but which maintained a liaison office within the Chancery. They were always considered a part of the Country Team and we liaised with Southern Command regularly.

Q: Yes.

ALMAGUER: To provide additional flavor on the multitude of agencies represented in country, after the hurricane and the subsequent U.S. assistance program, Congress mandated that the U.S.-funded relief and reconstruction program be channeled not only through the traditional USAID spigot, but also through other relevant Federal agencies. This was a continuation of the policy that evolved out of the Eastern Europe (SEED Program), where Federal agencies such as Treasury, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and even the Federal Reserve Bank were given a role to play in the delivery of U.S. development assistance. As a result of this mandate to other federal agencies, we had some awkward moments. One day President Flores called to let me know that he had just taken a call from the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Andrew Cuomo. HUD was interested and getting in on the action in the development of housing projects and the two had agreed to participate in a telediscussion, available to the media, on how this was going to unfold. This was news to me.

Q. That must not have made you happy, particularly learning about it in that manner…

ALMAGUER: I was very unhappy, particularly since I knew that HUD had no relevant international experience and that USAID had a 40-year history as a pioneer in housing programs in the developing world. But, Washington politics prevailed. I experienced this in a big way when the HUD representative arrived and asked, "Why do I have to go to a Country Team meeting?" [Laugher] I said: "Because this is the way it works. I don't want to be ordering you around in the minutia of your work, but I am the President's representative in country. Your Secretary works with the President and I work for the President, so you have dual bosses." The State Department sees itself as a platform on which other federal agencies rely. But first one has to get these other federal agencies to understand how it works overseas and to join the rest of the agencies on that platform! [Laughter.]

Q: What about the Country Team and your relations with USAID, given your professional history and all that was going on?

ALMAGUER: Bringing all the pieces of the Country Team together under my leadership, ensuring that everyone understood their role in the context of broader U.S. interests in Honduras, and that everyone felt that they had a say, but would be willing to march in lockstep once a decision was made, were my highest internal priorities from Day One. In fact, I said these very words to the Country Team on my first day on the job. Just as I did when I arrived at the Department for my initial meetings prior to confirmation, I was a bit sensitive as to how I was going to be received by my Country Team State colleagues. It soon became evident that I had nothing to worry about in that regard. They were superb professionals! I could not have asked for a better Country Team. I think being in a post that's not particularly sexy has its advantages. While people may have found Tegucigalpa a bit boring and the amenities lacking, the work was interesting and most found their counterparts responsive. There was a great deal of frustration about the inefficiencies of the country and corruption was always a challenge to be dealt with, but morale was quite good. Further, many on the Country Team had been through the hurricane, which created a shared experience that bonded them to a common cause.

Q. That often happens in smaller, more isolated posts, when morale often is better than in larger and more glamorous posts.

ALMAGUER: That was certainly the case in Honduras. My first task was to ensure that we brought together and in a coherent manner all of the pieces that made up the Country Team and, secondly, that the large, multifaceted reconstruction effort was coherent, both internally and, more broadly speaking, among all of the other donors. In that regard, my USAID Mission Director was my right hand. I did not want to play the role of the Mission Director and wanted the lines clearly drawn, but I could not be "hands off" either given the importance of the U.S. commitment and the pressures from Washington. In this regards, I was the beneficiary of the work of a tremendous USAID Director, Elena Brineman, who was famous for her prodigious work habits, as well as for her managerial skills and strategic perspective. I had known her before and could not have been happier to know that she would be leading the day-to-day efforts. Under her leadership, the USAID Mission was carrying out its mandate almost flawlessly.

Q. That was very helpful to you….

ALMAGUER: Absolutely. On the other hand, both the USAID Mission and I were under two types of pressure. First was the paranoia in Washington that the money be safeguarded from corruption, which was perceived to be so endemic in Honduras that Congress insisted on the almost constant presence in-country of the GAO (the General Accountability Office – Congress's watchdog). Secondly, there was pressure from the Hill on the Executive that money move fast. After all, Americans witnessed on television the destruction brought on by the hurricane and wanted to see our assistance result in tangible improvements in peoples' lives – and they wanted to see it NOW! Those of us

who understand how reconstruction efforts take place, know that instant responses are not feasible (except in the provision of immediate humanitarian relief, where the U.S. response through OFDA tends to be incredibly fast). The reasons why reconstruction efforts tend to be slower are often frustrating but defensible. If a contract is awarded without competition someone will complain to the Hill and competition takes time. And if we want not only to help rebuild but also to rebuild better, that takes time. Further, all of the donor assistance, as welcomed as it may have been for Hondurans and its Government, was stretching Honduras' capacities to the limits.

Q: Yes.

ALMAGUER: During my first few weeks at Post almost every call that I received from the front office of WHA was to remind me that we needed to be moving the money faster and to show tangible results. In at least one testy conversation, Assistant Secretary Romero noted my background and suggested that the Bureau expected more and faster results from me.

Q. That must not have made you happy?

ALMAGUER: No, but I understood the dynamics at play in D.C. It was clear to me, and ultimately to the GAO and others, that the reconstruction program was going quite well despite competing pressures to both safeguard the resources and respond to the needs as rapidly as feasible.

Q. What about the other donors?

Donor coordination

ALMAGUER: The response to the Mitch disaster in Central America had been a multi-donor effort from the very beginning. In April 1999, several months before I became Ambassador, President Clinton hosted an event in Washington with the presidents of the affected countries and the larger donors. The coordination effort was almost unprecedented. At the same time, the resources being allocated were equally unprecedented for a region that, even in the best of circumstances, lacks the institutional capacity to manage large-scale programs. Pledges of resources were coming in not only from the traditional donors, but also from smaller donor countries such as Denmark and Italy. Japan had demonstrated its support early on by deploying to Honduras members of its Internal Self-Defense Forces to build temporary shelters and repair badly needed infrastructure. I heard that this was the first time Japan had ever deployed its Self-Defense Forces in the Americas.

Q. That is impressive.

ALMAGUER: Yes, and to give shape to this unprecedented coordination effort, the donors agreed on a coordination mechanism composed of the U.S., Canada, Spain, Germany and Sweden, who would each hold the chairmanship of the coordination effort

on a six-month rotating basis. In Honduras, we had not only those five countries well represented, but also several others, including the multilateral agencies: World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the United Nations system.

In the case of Honduras, the pledges from all of these spigots amounted to some 1.8 billion dollars. Responding to the mandate for the donors to cooperate with each other and to coordinate strategies and programs is easier said than done. In my experience, that is always problematic for, among other reasons, the donors each have their own agenda and their own constituencies back home. Further, in countries like Honduras, the U.S. presence is so massive that the other donors do not want to be co-opted by the U.S. or to lose their own identities, which would have been easy to do in Honduras. If you look at Tegucigalpa's skyline, there's the huge American Embassy, while almost everyone else rents office space or has a house to serve the purpose. I knew that the leadership of the U.S. Ambassador was essential to implement this coordination effort, but that it would have to be done judiciously so as to not turn off the partners. I would immodestly suggest that one of my most significant accomplishments during this period – and throughout my tenure there – was to institutionalize this coordination program, with all of the partners feeling respected and engaged. By the time I left in 2002, the original group of five countries had pretty much given way to the local coordination group of 16 donors, including the bilaterals (except for Taiwan and Cuba, which were donors with whom we could not coordinate) and the various multilateral agencies based in Honduras, principally the international development banks and the U.N. system. This group of 16 became known locally as the "G-16" and we had a rotating chairmanship involving most of the members.

Q. How did the Government react to all of this coordination? Normally, they want to be in the drivers' seat.

ALMAGUER: This was another aspect of the effort that required some fancy footsteps on our side. Frankly, in most countries where I had served, the Government was quite jealous of its prerogatives and would have been insistent that any coordination among donors would be done by them. The Honduran authorities would have preferred that, as well. At the same time, they were well aware that their institutional capacity to effectively coordinate and oversee so much assistance was limited. Further, the President and his team were well aware that part of the reason why the international donors had placed a coordinating structure at a very high level was their perception and fear that corruption could derail their best laid plans to help rebuild Honduras. To his credit, President Flores understood that and apparently had concluded that his own reputation would be protected and enhanced by having the donors heavily engaged in all facets of the recovery and reconstruction effort.

My strong relationship with the President and his senior team – and the level of trust he had in me - helped a great deal. He knew that I would share with him anything that came to my attention that would potentially embarrass his government. On the other hand, pronouncements from the donor community praising the progress of the reconstruction effort were bound to help the prestige of the Government. While the President was not

eligible for re-election, he was very sensitive about his standing with the public and tracked his own popularity on a regular basis. He was very proud of the fact that even in the waning months of his administration his standing in the polls as a respected leader remained high. The Government, rather than fighting this coordination effort, sought to be a part of it and to be seen as providing strategic guidance.

Q. How did they do that?

ALMAGUER: The President appointed his Minister of the Presidency, someone akin to a Prime Minister or Cabinet Coordinator, to chair the Government's own efforts and to meet frequently (and often publicly) with the G-16. The donor community found these to be useful opportunities to speak out on issues on their minds. For some of the smaller donors, with limited access to the senior leadership of the Flores Government, these meetings provided valuable opportunities. In summary, these were win-win opportunities for all participants.

Corruption

Q. Corruption seems to have played a major role in the thinking of the donors. Would you like to talk a bit about that?

ALMAGUER: Sadly, corruption is endemic in the region and it afflicts all levels of society, from the traffic cop who expects his *"mordida"* ("bite") for traffic infractions that he sees, to the tycoon who enriches himself with "sweetheart deals," often involving the bribing of public officials to gain a monopoly share of a sector of the economy or to win a lucrative contract. Quite often this involves keeping the competition out. Corruption ranks very high in the list of factors why so many countries are unable to overcome underdevelopment or to develop a viable middle class. Corruption became my pet subject the longer I served in Honduras and the more I saw its impact. I also developed a strong view on who were the main perpetrators. We tend to blame it on corrupt public officials. The bureaucracies in countries like Honduras are poorly staffed, poorly trained and don't have many role models of ethical behavior in public office. These factors facilitate corruption, but at the "mom and pop store" retail level, selling small favors for small "gratuities.". Elected officials share much of the blame and there is a solid case that can be made that many run for public office to enrich themselves. But the lion's share of the blame, in my view, resides in a private sector that has learned to thrive not by competing but by winning the right contract, by bribing legislators to keep competition out and by manipulating the system to their advantage. I was always baffled that so many bright and sharp business people felt the need to rely on these old habits when they could easily thrive in a more competitive economy. They, of course, would argue that if they didn't play this game, others would, putting them at a disadvantage – which is also true.

This is an issue that has moral, social and economic implications. Let me give you two examples. The destruction caused by Mitch was terrible. 90% of the country's bridges were destroyed or seriously damaged. The fury of the raging waters accounted for much

of the damage. But it did not help that many of the bridges were poorly constructed, not necessarily because the designs were bad but because construction crews were told not to put as much cement or reinforcing bars or whatever and somebody pocketed the money. Housing developments were allowed to go up in steep areas without drainage protection and, when the rains came, landslides would destroy much along its way.

The legal system is also made dysfunctional by corruption, which affects legitimate investment. This was one of our major on-going concerns because unsuspecting Americans investing their money could find themselves holding the short end of the stick. The laws may seem good on paper but the application may not give the investor the protection that makes investment feasible. I will give you one example that happened just a month after I arrived in Honduras. I had left the country for a few days to be at my daughter's wedding in Santa Fe, New Mexico. When I arrived back at Post and was still at the airport, I was informed that the country's general manager for Texaco was at the Embassy seeking asylum. He was an Argentine citizen, but representing a major American company. Texaco, in addition to importing and distributing gasoline and oil, owned some of the gas stations in the country, a few of which they leased to Hondurans to run them as franchisees. In this particular case, Texaco decided that the Honduran who was running one of their gas stations at a potentially very profitable location in Tegucigalpa was running it to the ground. Texaco, after exhausting its informal processes, opted to invoke the clause in the contract allowing Texaco to vacate the contract. What Texaco was not counting on was that the guy who had the lease was a relative of a well-placed judge. Soon thereafter, the judge issued an order for the arrest on criminal charges of the Texaco general manager. A number of phone calls from me to key people allowed the general manager to go free, but the case set a bad example of what can happen when the rule of law is overtaken by these personal interests. One could argue that my efforts amounted to interference with "due process." Obviously, a foreign ambassador in the U.S. trying to extricate one of its citizens from legal prosecution would not be well received because we have an established system that's supposed to work. In settings such as Honduras, that system is too fragile to ensure fair treatment for people not familiar with the system. I have multiple examples of cases where the Embassy was an essential partner for legitimate U.S. commercial interests. I was not only quite vocal about it, but also made it a point of addressing this issue when talking with local business groups, many of whose members were part of the problem. Some in the business community did not consider me "friendly" to business, but as I often told them, I am very friendly in support of the free market system, but adamantly opposed to "crony capitalism" and to "unholy alliances" that kept Honduras poorer than it ought to be.

Q. Did you outspokenness get you into trouble?

ALMAGUER: It could have, but several things worked in my favor. For one, I knew the country well and I traveled a great deal to every corner of the country and people knew from my public pronouncements and efforts that I was well disposed towards the country and its people. Ambassadors who speak out can easily get into trouble if they are perceived to be either unfamiliar with the country or uninterested in its problems and challenges. There was no question that I was well versed in the affairs of the country and

perceived as supportive. Secondly, I had developed a great relationship with the media. I invited them to the Residence and to join my many visits outside Tegucigalpa. I knew many by name and shared jokes with them. As a result, I had great media coverage, almost always favorable. I was a popular subject for cartoonists and my collection of cartoons over the three years that I served in Honduras is huge. Cartoonists knew that I kept their cartoons in my office walls and were tickled when I asked them to autograph their cartoons.

Most significantly, however, was the role of the Government and President Flores, for which I was very grateful. They could have easily reminded me that I was close to the line in terms of speaking out on issues that transcended my diplomatic role. However, they chose to capitalize on it. President Flores made it a point of being seen with me and he and I traveled extensively throughout the country to inaugurate projects and otherwise "inspect" reconstruction projects underway. These always attracted media coverage and it was obvious that I was not in trouble with the President. Secondly, the Government began to promote the reconstruction program as much more that mere rebuilding and repairing damages. The Government began to advertise its efforts as "transformational." In their speeches, the President and his senior team spoke in terms of using the disaster as an opportunity to "transform" the government and society. With the donors' support (principally USAID), the Government passed legislation and issued executive orders on issues such as competitive bidding, contractual obligations and public disclosure of government actions. While we knew that implantation of these actions to promote a more competitive and open business environment would suffer in implementation, the Government's actions gave us the opportunity to promote initiatives in support of the stated Government policy of transparency and fairness in the implementation of the country's economic policies.

One of the funniest episodes in my outspokenness about corruption occurred the last year of my stay in Honduras, after Ricardo Maduro Joest had become president. By then, Otto Reich was Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs under President George W. Bush. Otto delivered in the U.S. a hard-hitting speech on corruption, noting that the U.S. did not want corrupt people to benefit from access to the U.S. He said something along the lines of "we don't want corrupt visitors to the U.S. shopping on Fifth Avenue, receiving medical attention in Houston or vacationing at Disney World." I thought that this was a pretty good message to convey to Honduran audiences. Hence, I delivered a talk to an international group that was meeting in Honduras and deliberating on the issue of corruption. I pretty much followed the Otto Reich line and suggested that corrupt people would find it increasingly difficult to get U.S. visas. This led to a hyperventilating set of headlines, including one that said that the U.S. Embassy had a list of corrupt Hondurans. This was not true at the time. I don't know about current practice, but in fact putting such a list together would require resources that we did not have and could raise significant questions about the fairness of our visa-issuing processes. In a setting where very few people were ever formally charged or convicted for corruption, we would have to rely mainly on rumors and innuendos. Hence, we were rather vague on how we would implement any system that would deny a visa solely on corruption grounds – unless the applicant had been through the country's legal system. Despite the fact that I denied it,

many of our Honduran friends were convinced that we did have such a list. As the public debate on this matter raged on, a senior official from the previous Carlos Flores Administration called me and asked, "Tell me the truth, Ambassador, am I on your list? [Laughter.]

Q. It seems as if you were very successful….

ALMAGUER: I certainly feel that we made a positive impact and that my broad objectives as ambassador to promote U.S. interests while helping to build a more solid future for one of our key allies in the region were mostly met.

Q. How did you engage the rest of the Embassy community in these efforts?

Country Team coordination and travel

ALMAGUER: First of all, I always was there and very much engaged, particularly when key issues were under discussion. My Country Team knew exactly what I was doing and why and what my views were on important matters. I also made a conscientious effort to ensure that all views were heard and considered. While some on the Embassy team may have seen me as perhaps too close to the Government, it was clear that I was critical when I had to be, but in ways that would foster our longer-term objectives. Secondly, I instituted a policy in my travels around the country of including the Country Team whenever possible. Early on, I mapped out the country and determined that I would visit every one of the 18 provinces (they are called "departments") and as many municipalities (of the close to 300 in the country) as possible during my three years. I did succeed in visiting all 18 departments and perhaps as many as 200 municipalities.

While the timing and details of the planned visits would change up to the last minute, my objectives were to get to know the local leadership, to visit U.S. projects and interests (e.g., American fruit companies, the ports, etc.), meet with Americans residing in the area, meet with the local business community and have at least one public speaking event in which I could discuss U.S. interests pertinent to the region and focus attention on local issues such as corruption, the rule of law and the need to provide solid educational opportunities for all. Where feasible, the local media was contacted and invited to accompany us. Most significantly, I would ask a group of Country Team members to accompany me. Some invitees were obvious (e.g., the Peace Corps Director if the visit involved visiting Peace Corps volunteers, or the Military Group Commander if the visit involved visiting a Honduran military base). However, others were invited just so that they would be exposed to the country. And I wanted to cross-fertilize experiences. Hence, I wanted the Military Group Commander to know what USAID was doing and for the USAID team to know what the role was of the Defense Attaché. It was a neat concept that involved a great deal of logistic preparation and, oftentimes, diversion from the pressing issues of the moment, but it was generally well received. Members of the Embassy team not only got to know me and I had an opportunity to get to know them in more informal settings, but also it was an opportunity for members of the Team to get to

know each other, as well. Horizontal communication is insufficiently stressed and I am an avid believer in its importance.

As a result of these efforts, it was relatively easier to achieve Country Team consensus on important issues. Perhaps as important, these coordinated site visits improved Country Team analyses of issues for which each section of the Embassy was responsible. I must have done some 30 of these trips – some bigger than others – and they became somewhat legendary [laughter]. Some involved impressive caravans. We would descend on towns that had never seen a U.S. Ambassador. I am not sure this could have been done in less welcoming environments. The PAO (Public Affairs Officer), of course, loved these events because he was able to invite and mingle with the local press.

Q: Do you have videos of some of these?

ALMAGUER: I wish! We had a full-blown Post Inspection while I was in Honduras and I took advantage of one of these trips to invite the inspectors to come along. They wrote something complementary about that, noting that it was unusual to see an ambassador being thronged by the masses. I had to deal with many crises while I served as Ambassador. There were difficult moments, but there were also great moments. These visits are among my favorite moments in terms of outreach from the U.S.; of having the Honduran people see our country in a good light. I feel very good about that. The more I think about it, the more I am pleased with how I managed my time and my role in Honduras. It was a great experience.

Q. What about the crises? What were some of the significant challenges you faced beyond the reconstruction efforts?

Dealing with the American expatriate community

ALMAGUER: American embassies have to do everything possible to safeguard U.S. assets and interests, including its citizens. I was surprised at how many U.S. citizens and assets resided in Honduras. We had maybe 10,000 to 15,000 permanent residents, and, at any one time, twice as many tourists, missionaries, study groups and many others. While many of the residents were retirees seeking low-cost Caribbean lifestyles or Americans married to Hondurans or otherwise engaged in lawful pursuits (including as ranchers, preachers and teachers, among many other occupations), some, I am sad to say, were the sleaziest of kinds — the embezzler looking for his next target or the child molester finding easy preys. In a country with weak law enforcement and filled with crime, some of these Americans became part of the problem. During the time that I served in Honduras, some 35 Americans were murdered in the country. Each case was a tragedy at multiple levels and our consular people, the regional security team and I would do everything in our power to get the Honduran authorities to investigate each case, to ensure that justice was served and that similar events would not occur in the future. But it was not easy. Of the 35 Americans murdered in three years, some 25 fit a pattern.

At the risk of generalizing, let me describe an all-too-frequent pattern for those who subsequently became victims: a 60-year-old male, recently divorced or running away from his wife and family back in the U.S. This drifter would wind up in Honduras, seeking to live near the beach, either in Roatán or the North Coast, attracted by the low cost of living and other amenities. There he finds a low-cost tropical paradise and also finds a young cutie who seems delighted to be part of this man's newfound leisurely life. And, of course, he lavishes everything on her. He discovers very quickly that he cannot buy property within 15 miles of the coast because, under Honduran law (as in many of these countries), there are limits to what foreigners can buy. So, his young sweetie suggests, "Put everything under my name," and he does. A few weeks later, he's found murdered. The family, whom we probably notified of the murder, comes to the Embassy or contacts its representative in Congress and expresses outrage at us: "You let my husband be murdered," or, "You didn't advise us that he was here." They also would come to reclaim his property and soon discover that the property was in the hands of the deceased's girlfriend. In many of these cases, the young lady was actually working for a pimp or gang who took advantage of American men. I remember how frustrating it was to see featured articles and even opinion pieces in U.S. newspapers proclaiming the virtues of the deceased under headlines that read, "American Embassy Fails." In most of these cases the families were in denial. "Gee, my husband would never do that!" But he did!

Q: Right.

ALMAGUER: In a handful of other cases, Americans were innocently in the wrong place at the wrong time. For example, an older American man decided to travel in his camper down to Central America and beyond. He parked overnight in a desolate location and was murdered as a part of a robbery. We constantly engaged with our American citizen constituents on the issue of safety. As private citizen Americans they were free to move about, but they were told of the risks they faced, but all too often they failed to heed our recommendations, with sinister results.

Besides homicides, we worried a great deal about Americans landing in Honduran jails. While they received all of the attention that the Consulate was expected to provide and we advocated at all levels of the Honduran judicial system for "due process," some cases were harder to defend than others. We had more than a handful of American pedophiles in Honduran jails. Sex tourism was illegal but law enforcement was weak. Most who were captured were clearly guilty. And then we had at least one notorious case of an American citizen swindling fellow Americans. The person in question was wanted in Florida for tax evasion and illegal land sale schemes. He had managed to set up shop in Roatán, the most important of the Bay Islands, presumably investing in beach property, but selling non-existing property or false land titles to American retirees seeking to move there. Frankly, a lot of Americans are naïve and this American citizen residing illegally in Honduras was all too willing to let naïve American retirees part with their savings.

Q: So what happened to this American criminal?

ALMAGUER: He finally was deported months after I left. In the meantime, he managed to stay in Honduras for a long time by bribing local officials and even making campaign donations to local politicians!

U.S. commercial interests

Q. What about crime against American companies and commercial interests?

ALMAGUER: This was also a big part of our daily set of issues, particularly for our Economic Section and for others in the Country Team. The U.S. has long-term commercial interests in Central America, and in Honduras in particular. It started with the mining industry, which long ago ceased to be profitable – although we still had at least one mining operation in country. This was followed in the 20th Century by the banana industry. The history of Honduras is intertwined with the history of United Fruit (now Chiquita Brands), Standard Fruit (now Dole) and others. While these fruit companies were no longer politically dominant in the country, they continued to be significant players. While much of what is written about these companies is negative, and much of the criticism of that history is deserved, they also were positive players in the history of the North Coast of Honduras, introducing modern production practices, improving transport and communication, and providing its workers with some of the best housing, health services and schooling available to Hondurans for the better part of the 20th Century.

More recently, American investment supported the growth of the *maquila* industry, which imports cloth from the U.S. to be manufactured into textile goods (underwear and shirts principally) for the U.S. retail market. These "offshore" textile-clothing manufacturing plants are often criticized in the U.S. for "stealing American jobs." However, most Americans would resist buying $50 T-shirts, which is what would be required to support higher wages for textile workers. The North Coast of Honduras became a center for these *maquilas* because of easy market access to the U.S. and the fact that American are welcomed and that company executives can get on an airplane and be back in the U.S. in less than two hours. But like other investments, American companies suffered from the vagaries of the local legal system, high crime (in some cases including the hijacking of trucks carrying finished products to the port) and unfair practices on the part of Korean and other East Asian competitors. Superimposed on that was the barrage of negative publicity these *maquilas* received in the U.S. media, where frequent articles highlighted unfair labor practices in "sweatshop" conditions. One of our jobs was to monitor these operations to either confirm or clarify the content of these U.S. newspaper articles. Protecting American citizens and American assets was a constant issue and we actively engaged that American community, both to appraise them of local conditions and to defend them, where appropriate, in the eyes of both the Honduran and U.S. media. I am pleased to say that we did a great job in this regard. While we found a number of *maquila* operations run by Asians that clearly failed to meet minimum standards of employee safety and fair practices, *maquilas* with strong ties to the U.S. market inevitably kept much higher standards – and while it is easy to criticize 50 cent per hour rates, the average Honduran made two dollars or less per day in far worse conditions.

Q. Were the competitors to U.S. companies critical of you work?

ALMAGUER: Yes, to some degree. I took advantage of every opportunity to discuss these issues with Chambers of Commerce and other business groups, government officials and even on local radio and television. The message was consistent: "the country needs investments. Most American investors are doing their best to operate within Honduran laws and they generate jobs and tax revenues. Don't make life more difficult for the honest investors."

Q. How did you find your relations with the American business community?

ALMAGUER: A place like Honduras attracts all kinds, from the legitimate business that sees a good opportunity to invest to the "flight-by-night" operator who is seeking an easy buck. We had to figure out who was who. Fortunately, most of the people with whom we dealt were serious and with good ideas. However, too many of them were not counting on the difficulties in a place with weak institutions and an easy-to-manipulate legal system. Educating them on the local realities was part of our job, ideally without discouraging those who had legitimate and viable business plans.

Q. Did that approach work?

ALMAGUER: We were not always successful. I will give you a specific case of an energy company that ranks among the largest energy firms in America, which ultimately pulled out of Honduras after spending millions of dollars out of the one billion dollars that they were planning to invest. Honduras needed more and cheaper sources of energy. Hondurans were paying more than their Central American neighbors for expensive, unreliable and dirty electricity because the public utility was poorly managed and with corruption at the top. In addition to some hydroelectric generation, the public company bought electricity from small, diesel-power generating plants that were owned by powerful individuals with "sweetheart" contracts with the Government. They, not surprisingly, opposed any competition from the outside. The American company had good ideas that could have made Honduras a net exporter of electricity to the region. But that was not to be. The American company found roadblocks and delays at every turn. We were outspoken in our support for the American investment, so much so that as I was leaving, the newspaper owned by a powerful businessman who made a great deal of money by selling dirty and expensive electricity published what perhaps was the only seriously negative cartoon about me in my time there. Further, that cartoon was laced with racial references. It showed me trying to plug an electric wire in the socket and shocking myself in the process. The next panel showed a black man, presumably transformed in color by the electric shock. The caption read, "This is what happens when the U.S. ambassador plays with electricity." As it so happens, my successor was an African-American career officer (Larry Palmer) and it was intended to send a message to him, as well.

Q. When American companies pulled out, were they angry at the Embassy?

ALMAGUER: Not really. We had been very upfront with them and had given them our objective assessment of the challenges they could expect. They were experienced and had computed all factors into their calculations when they did their investment risk analysis. It didn't pay off for them, but they went in with clear eyes and knew full well the risks they were taking. Unfortunately, not all businesses have the same outlook. Many prefer to be distant from the U.S. Embassy and may disdain U.S. government involvement in private sector matters. Yet, these same folks, when they fail, often will blame, among others, the U.S. Embassy for not resolving their problems with local law or business practices. I have little patience for those who, when things don't go the way they had planned it, blame the U.S. government and the Embassy in particular for not protecting them. There's only so much you can do for any private firm. We can help open doors and troubleshoot to some degree, but at the end of the day, they operate in a foreign country, with all of its advantages and disadvantages. They should know that from the early stages of their investment planning.

Q. What other challenges did you face?

Migration

ALMAGUER: The other big issue for us was migration and the flow of illegal aliens to the United States, as well as the U.S. "repatriation" program that returned illegals to their country of origin. Honduras historically had not been a major source of illegal aliens in the United States. Even during the Central American civil wars in the 70s and 80s, Honduras remained an island of relative tranquility. But Hurricane Mitch was a turning point. President Clinton, as part of the assistance program to Honduras after the hurricane, signed an Executive Order in early 1999 that granted anybody from the hurricane-affected countries who were in the U.S. illegally and who had entered the U.S. prior to December 31, 1998, amnesty for 18 months, provided they registered with U.S. immigration authorities. This was very welcomed in Honduras, particularly by President Flores.

Q: Yes.

ALMAGUER: This Presidential initiative opened the door to an intense discussion both at home and in Honduras about legal and illegal migration. As a result, we were better able to quantify the nature of the illegal migration from Honduras to the U.S., while exposing for the Honduran public the dangers of the transit from Honduras to the U.S. by land. Clinton's Executive Order, not surprisingly, may also have encouraged further illegal migration in the hope of "sneaking in" under the 18-month window.

The human story of migration from Central America is one that has not been sufficiently told in the United States. To get from Central America overland to the United States is a horror story! It is such a horror story that we paid a film crew to record it so that we could show it on Honduran television and discourage people from doing it. What it highlighted was the rape and degradation of women and children, as well robbery and murder of

countless men and women attempting that overland route. The journey was dangerous throughout, beginning from the crossing into Guatemala and on into Mexico, followed by a treacherous train crossing through Mexico. Those who made it to the U.S. border often found their ordeal just beginning, including getting dumped in the desert somewhere along the border or winding up as a victim of unscrupulous "coyotes," as people who manage that crossing are known. The story of the lady in Texas who was given 40 years in prison for the murder of 45 illegal aliens from Central America when she abandoned them in a locked truck in the desert heat received prominent play in the Honduran media. The fact that no one in the coyote-controlled business could be trusted was highlighted by the fact that the truck driver was Honduran!

Q: Yes.

ALMAGUER: But no amount of scary stories was enough to put a dent on the flow of illegal immigrants. The expectation that a life at the other end would be so much better and that opportunities they never could have in Honduras would be readily available in the U.S. was a draw that could not be stemmed. They witnessed neighbors who were getting remittances from the North (as they called the U.S.) and they had every reason to assume that they too could go and send remittances to their loved ones. One of the things that I always found so sad when visiting the Honduran countryside, particularly in the south of the country, was the noticeable absence of able-body males and, increasing, of working age women. In many cases, one could only see older folks and children being raised by the grandmother. Frankly, if one saw a working age male in these communities we would wonder why he was still there. Lack of initiative may have been one of the reasons. This meant, perversely, that Honduras was exporting its hardest working people in the countryside. These are the same people who now labor in our yards and in our construction and food services industries, often working two jobs or more to send money home.

Q. How many undocumented Hondurans signed up for the Clinton 18-month amnesty?

ALMAGUER: I believe that some 125,000 undocumented Hondurans registered in the first phase of that special program.

Q: Does that mean that there was another phase of that special program?

ALMAGUER: [Laughter.] Several phases and it continues. When the 18 months were up in late 2000, President Flores, along with his other colleagues in Central America, asked President Clinton to extend the program since the reconstruction phase was far from finished. While some Embassy officers were not keen on supporting the extension, I supported it in my communication with Washington.

I should point out that we had an open-ended Country Team discussion on the merits of an extension of the amnesty program before we send a message to Washington on the subject. In that discussion, it was apparent that the Consular Section and other key members of the Country Team focused on law enforcement had strong views against any

extension. In the cable I prepared for Washington I laid out the views of those who opposed the extension. I was very pleased with the cable, since it took seriously the rationale voiced by the opponents of the extension within the Country Team. More significantly, it was appreciated by those officers who opposed it since it clearly showed that I considered and respected their views. I subsequently received kudos from Washington for that cable.

When we received word that the White House would approve the extension, I contacted President Flores to alert him. On that particular day, the President and I were scheduled to go to a community nearby to inaugurate a project. We both were dressed for a field trip and not the usual starchy suits we favored (Flores normally dressed quite formally unless he was going on one of his many visits to rural areas). He was so happy that he called for live TV and radio coverage of an impromptu press conference in the patio of the Presidential palace. He had me stand next to him as he announced the news, giving the U.S. major credit. (He also gave me undeserved credit.) At that point the extension made sense given that so much reconstruction work needed to be completed. Forcing over 100,000 Hondurans to go home would have led to economic and even social chaos.

But the story of that amnesty program continued much beyond that early phase of the country's post-hurricane reconstruction. By the time the one-year extension was ending, Ricardo Maduro had been elected to be the next president. He was elected in November 2001 and took office in January 2002. Within hours after his election, I arranged for Maduro to receive a congratulatory call from President Bush. A couple of days after, the White House asked me to arrange for Maduro to receive the President's call at 7:30 AM Washington time (6:30 AM Honduras time). (Apparently, President Bush preferred to make these types of international calls at 7:30 AM). I was at the listening end of Maduro's phone at his home and President Bush was very courteous and in a good mood, perhaps happy to talk to a new Central American president who spoke perfect English, who had been educated in the U.S., and who came from the private sector (Maduro owned a couple of U.S. franchises, including Radio Shack). In that conversation, Maduro said to Bush, "The most significant issue coming up is the migration issue," including the phase-out of the temporary amnesty program. President Bush said (and I am paraphrasing): "Look, I'm a free trader. I believe in the free movement of goods and people. You got it." Another extension was to be granted with almost no discussion.

Q: Yes.

Meeting with President Bush

ALMAGUER: A few weeks later, in mid-December 2001, at the president's invitation, President-elect Maduro came to Washington. I accompanied him, and we had a meeting with President Bush. What was to have been a five-minute photo-op session turned out to be a 40–minute pleasant and substantive conversation. As an aside, I came away from that and another experience with the President feeling that Bush was at his best when talking in small group settings on subjects that were of personal interest.

Q: That's a good observation. Tell me more.

ALMAGUER: … In that December 2001 White House conversation with President-elect Maduro, President Bush spent much of the time talking about his interactions with the governor of Chihuahua, a Mexican state bordering on Texas, when he was governor of that state. According to Bush, the issues the two governors discussed centered on water rights and usage in a region with insufficient water supplies, as well as on the need for rural roads and other infrastructure that could incentivize investments. President Bush noted that the problems the two governors (from Chihuahua and Texas) faced were similar and wondered if they were similar to the problems Central American presidents faced.

What made this impromptu conversation so noteworthy was that the plan had been for the meeting to take place in the Office of the National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice, and that President Bush would "drop in" briefly for a photo op. The substantive discussion was to take place with Dr. Rice. The U.S. side in Rice's office consisted of WHA Assistant Secretary Otto Reich, the National Security Council Director for Latin America, Ambassador John Maisto, and myself. Maduro was accompanied by his right-hand person, Luis Cosenza (soon to be Minister of the Presidency – analogous to a Prime Minister), and a private sector supporter, the CEO of one of the largest banks in Honduras (FICHOSA), Camilo Atala. (I was never clear of Atala's role in that delegation other than to convey the message that Maduro intended for his Administration to be private sector friendly.) We in the Embassy had prepared Dr. Rice's talking points and had discussed these with Maduro. Hence, we all anticipated how the discussion would evolve, with both sides in full agreement on every issue. However, it soon became apparent that Dr. Rice was either not interested in the subject we were planning to discuss (e.g., migration, reconstruction, democratic governance and trade) or had not read the briefing paper. With minimal opening pleasantries, she asked President-elect Maduro about nuclear proliferation issues and how those were viewed in Central America.

Q: [Laughter.]

ALMAGUER: Suddenly I was tense because that subject matter did not figure in the top 100 issues worrying the region! Maduro and I shared discreet glances wondering where this was going when the President opened the door and walked in, by his admission, 30 second late. He clearly knew about Maduro because he joked that he was running late since he had to stop and look at a dictionary to find a few exotic words that "would impress a couple of people from Stanford." [Laughter.] Maduro was a Stanford graduate and Dr. Rice had been Provost of that university. It was a great icebreaker and led to Bush sitting down and spending the next half hour engaged in a very friendly and productive conversation with Maduro.

Q: That is a great story. You said that you saw the President at another time….

ALMAGUER: Yes, the following January I was in Washington on other business when I received a call from the White House Protocol Office asking if I had taken a photo with

the President. I was surprised, recalling that President Clinton, who after all was the President who had nominated me, apparently declined to have these types of photo-ops. When I said that I did not have that opportunity, they immediately scheduled me to go to the White House the following Friday. When I arrived, I was one of some ten ambassadors waiting to take their photos with the President. We were told that all we each would get was about 30 seconds: walk into the Oval Office, smile, shake hands with the President as we faced the photographer and move out the opposite door leading to the Rose Garden. I was in the middle of the pack and it soon became evident that the line was moving much slower than anticipated. When it was my turn, the President asked me how was Maduro doing and asked about who should be in the U.S. delegation to the Maduro inauguration. I was not prepared but immediately suggested his brother, the Governor of Florida, The President immediately turned to one of his aides and asked that they check on Jeb Bush's availability. This was not a substantive discussion, but in keeping with the previous encounter, I witnessed a relaxed President much more in tune with the issues than I had anticipated. As it turns out, Jeb Bush could not do it and the job of leading the U.S. delegation to Maduro's January 28, 2002 inaugural was assigned to then-Secretary of the Interior, Gale Norton.

Q. Earlier we were discussing illegal migration. What about the legal migration?

ALMAGUER: The consular section, as most consular offices in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean, always was a beehive of activity. It was overwhelmed with visa applicants. Even before the October 1998 hurricane, they had to deal with the fact that most of the Honduran applicants did not qualify. On a typical day, by 7:30 in the morning, the lines snaked around the front of our Embassy compound, perhaps a block long… and our Consular staff, mostly junior officers, were grinding away. Often times, they would come back with stories of applicants who would say, "Okay, you will not give me a visa, but I will get there anyway!" Many of the Hondurans who did receive visas would overstay – in fact, that was the case for most of those who benefited by the Presidential decision to grant temporary amnesty after the Mitch hurricane disaster. We had pretty good morale at Embassy Tegucigalpa, but the most frustrated group were the ones staffing the visa lines.

Q: That is not unusual...

ALMAGUER: They were understaffed to begin with and after 9-11 it became worse. Suddenly, everybody, regardless of their track record, had to be interviewed and the fear that the next group of terrorists would get their visas from their Consulate made Consular Officers paranoid – and with good reason. More visas were denied than in the past and this, I assume, added to the flow of illegal migration.

Q: This was not a population group that had anything to do with terrorism or anything like that …

ALMAGUER: Not even close. We had no evidence at the time that Middle East terrorists were targeting Central American embassies to get to the U.S. legally. Our biggest

concern always was the possibility that Latin American drug traffickers would use our Consulate to get to the U.S. and I suspect that some did since they had no negative records and may have had legitimate business connections while at the same time engaged in the illegal drugs traffic.

Q. Where in the U.S. did Hondurans, both legal and illegal, congregate?

ALMAGUER: Unlike El Salvadorians who seem to have focused on the Washington, D.C. area, Hondurans have been more scattered, including Washington, D.C., where they are an important part of the landscaping and construction sectors, but also they have gravitated to rural areas, for example, the poultry operations in Delaware and Georgia. In those areas one hears - for public consumption - that the illegals are taking jobs away from those who were here legally or from Americans. But in practice, sectors of our economy that employ workers to do dirty jobs can't live without these immigrants from Central America, documented or undocumented.

Q: Would you comment on how American politicians handled this significant migration?

ALMAGUER: I hosted a number of CODELs (Congressional delegations) during my time in Honduras. Almost always there were three issues that drew them to Honduras. First, they were there to see how the reconstruction effort was going and how effectively the U.S. assistance was being managed. This was always the positive side of the visit. On this subject we almost always heard praise from these CODELs. The second subject was the war on drugs and the desire to capitalize on the U.S. military presence in Honduras, including a base, to go after narcotraffickers and the flow of drugs. Honduras was almost always seen as a victim and not a perpetrator. That view may have changed later on, but at the time, that perspective was generally correct. The third subject was the issue of migration. All of a sudden, some Members of Congress began to hear from their constituents that Hondurans were in their districts. The politicians had to say all the right things for public consumption, but they knew that as frustrating as they might be about immigration policy, their business community supporters depended on this flow of cheap and hard-working labor. Immigration is a subject everyone wanted to talk about and complain about illegals, but very few took the lead to change the status quo.

Q: Yes.

ALMAGUER: As much as we may not like it, certain sectors of the U.S. economy are dependent on this flow of immigrants from Mexico and Central America. At the same time, as much as the Honduran authorities advertised the fact that illegal migration to the U.S. was dangerous and bemoaned the lost of potentially productive citizens, in practice they did very little to stop it. This migration had become a safety valve for countries like Honduras. In addition with helping to deal with high unemployment in Honduras, immigrants were (and continue to be) a source of significant amount of remittances. By the time I left in the middle of 2002, it was estimated that 800 million dollars a year were reaching Honduras in remittances. The figures for El Salvador and Mexico were far more impressive, but for a small economy this was significant. Further, an advantage of

remittances is that they go directly to the families who need the money. The typical foreign aid program goes through various layers of bureaucracies before it becomes a school or a health center. Remittances go directly to the target population and have the potential to change the lives of the recipients.

Q. Was this happening? Were they beginning to invest in education and moving up the social and economic ladder?

ALMAGUER: The bad news is that consumer education is non-existent. Hence, rather than investing in the future, much of that money was wasted in consumer goods. I will share one example: I recall going to a very poor village in southern Honduras, which happens to be the poorest region of the country. I went there to help inaugurate a Peace Corps community water project. The villagers gathered in the dilapidated schoolhouse for the usual speeches. As anticipated, there were very few adult males — almost everyone was a child or an elderly woman. I am sitting in the front of the room listening to the town leaders asking, "'Señor Embajador,' (Mister Ambassador) please help us with a new school. As you can see, the windows are broken and the roof leaks when it rains." While this is going on, I kept hearing what sounded like computer-generated noises of various sorts. It took me a while to notice that many of the kids (mostly five, six and seven-year-olds) were wearing Nike or Adidas shoes of the type that light up and play a jingle when the user bangs on the floor…

Q: Yes.

ALMAGUER: Everyone of these kids no doubt had a parent back in the U.S. who either send the not-so-pragmatic shoes, or money which the mother or grandmother used to buy these expensive shoes locally. In the meantime, the school was falling apart because there is no cohesive structure, no civic education, or any realization that these monies that are coming in could be used to tax themselves to build a better school or do other community improvements. At the same time, the lack of nutrition education led to more consumption of junk food while nutrition practices were not improving with money coming in.

I found this very frustrating. I understand, although I have not experienced it directly, that in a number of communities in Mexico, remittances were having a real economic and social impact, with lives improving measurably. This was not happening in Honduras, which may account for the deteriorating social fabric that we have witnessed in more recent times. The failure to invest in education and the lack of faith in their own abilities had compounding effects.

Q. What about the elites?

Elite classes

ALMAGUER: Most of the privileged classes proclaimed love of country, but few had faith in the future. Most did not associate with the poorer classes except as hired labor and did not see the connection between their ability to retain their privileged status and

the fact that the vast majority had so little. Let me share one of many stories that illustrated the problem. This one occurred early in my tenure as ambassador. Recall that not only had I served as Peace Corps Country Director in Honduras in the late 70s, but also that I had served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in nearby Belize in the late 60s. As Peace Corps Volunteers often do, and with a few dollars in my pocket, I set off to explore nearby Central America. This led me, in 1968, to Tegucigalpa. I arrived there in one of the minibuses that traveled the back roads of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. I stayed at a cheap hotel *("pension")* across the street from the central market and had my breakfasts there – a place known as the San Isidro Market.

Q: Yes.

ALMAGUER: Fast forward to 1999. I am now the U.S. Ambassador. I was invited to have lunch with a very wealthy Honduran, perhaps close to being a billionaire, U.S. educated, probably corrupt and as insensitive as one can be, but also an important political and business figure. On my way to his residence, I was in my black bulletproof Cadillac with tinted glass, passing by the market that I first knew 31 years earlier. I pondered a bit about the great distance I had traveled from being a restaurant patron there to the role I now played. But I also was dismayed by what I saw. When I arrived at my destination, I mentioned to my host that when I looked out my car window it seemed that the market looked dirtier than I recalled, that there were a lot more people milling around than I recalled (which was explained by the fact that the country's population had more than doubled in that time), and that conditions in and around the market had deteriorated. More significantly, on a school day I saw too many children who should have been in school at that time of day who seemed aimless and not healthy looking. My host's response was simple. He said, "Ambassador, I have a solution for your problem. Don't look out your window!"

Q. That was very insensitive on his part….

ALMAGUER: I am glad he said it, frankly, because I often told this story in private settings with the business community, as a reminder that social responsibility is one of the traits of an enlightened private sector. We cannot build walls around us and expect the outside problems to go away; quite the contrary. These problems will only accumulate and one day will destroy all they have worked for if not addressed. A few months before leaving I told the story publicly at a symposium on social responsibility that included the Honduran Cardinal (Oscar Andres Rodriguez Maradiaga) and me as panelists, not naming names, but as a reminder that societies are built not just to satisfy individual interests. Successful societies create conditions that allow individuals to succeed. This includes pursuing broader societal objectives that enhance the lives of all, including access to health services, to education and to legal protections. The connection between individual aspirations and meeting broader societal objectives is often not considered by the privileged few in countries like Honduras. In many ways, the emerging middle class is striving so hard to leave poverty behind that they, too, all too often sound detached from the conditions of the vast majority of the population.

Q: I've doing interviews for almost 20 years and I find that most American ambassadors, as well as other people in the Foreign Service — Americans, basically, can't help looking out the window and asking what could be done.

ALMAGUER: Right.

Q: The normal foreign ambassador does not look out the window. This includes many of our European colleagues.

ALMAGUER: My experience tells me that, with some exceptions, you are right. The Nordics in particular do strive to look out the window and point to what needs to be addressed. The British do so, as well. Of course, in our Western Hemisphere, it is the American officials who can command an audience and most of us do try to push the envelope and tell it like it is, even when dealing with our friends in the private sector and in government.

Q: It's in our genes as Americans to look out the window and figure what can we do about it.

ALMAGUER: Absolutely! And this is one of our greatest assets. We are a society of doers. We not only try to fix things, but we also work hard and don't mind getting our hands dirty even when our station in life is relatively high. In Latin America, I could not envision any of the upper classes doing the menial job of washing dishes or cleaning the yard that we in the U.S. are accustomed to doing irrespective of our station in life. That's not the case in Latin America, where labor is cheaper and, more important, where too many consider this type of labor to be beneath them. My neighbor across the street in Northern Virginia is a retired admiral, and he spends a great deal of his time cleaning his yard, mowing the lawn and taking out the garbage. So do I. We both have joked about the "good old days" when we both commanded battleships. Yet, we don't have that sense that we are somehow immune from having to do what every other person has to do; we pitch in. We have been fortunate to be in positions of responsibility. In many societies, and this is certainly true in Latin America, you either hire somebody to do these menial things, or they don't get done at all.

Q: Right.

ALMAGUER: One of the things that I continue to struggle with is an issue that has been raised by some development professionals — whether underdevelopment is a product of culture or not. I would like to believe that it is not engrained in a culture; but, on the other hand, I am struck by how difficult it is to bring about change, particularly when it comes across as imposition from afar. What my experience has taught me is that it is easier to criticize, as I often did, and in a public way, when it comes with an understanding of the people and their culture. Perhaps more significantly, the criticism must be seen as reflecting affection and respect. This is true for all of us. Criticism is hard to take, but it becomes more palatable when that criticism is seen as a desire to be constructive and even affectionate. It becomes more difficult to tolerate foreign criticism if it is perceived

as putting down a society just because it is poor. I was very outspoken. I talked about development issues afflicting Honduras extensively. But first I had to develop the reputation for being a true friend of the country and its people and with a helpful approach, not just for the sake of criticizing.

Honduran presidential transition

Q. Changing subjects, you mentioned that elections took place and that a new president took over in early 2002. Let's talk about that.

ALMAGUER: One of the big highlights of my time in Honduras was the election in November 2001. Even though this was the fifth democratic election in Honduras since 1981, when the last military regime left office, it was not as easy as that. First, there were a number of legal technicalities, which can happen anywhere, as we learned a year earlier in the U.S.! [Laughter.] Elections don't come easy.

Q: Yes.

ALMAGUER: Second, there was in Honduras in 2001, and you see it all over Latin America today, a sense of "So what?" I think many voters were saying to themselves and even publicly, "Look, we've already been through four cycles of democratic elections, and my kids are still not going to a good school, and after the fifth or sixth grade they can't even go to school because there are no middle or secondary schools nearby. The public hospitals are in shambles and all I see is the politicians getting richer and the poor continue to be left out." These voters also lived with higher crime rates, higher cost of living and unfulfilled promises of better roads and more reliable access to water and electricity, In other words, the public mood was becoming skeptical that democracy would lead to positive changes in their lives.

Honduras has multiple political parties, but for most of the 20th Century two parties have dominated the political landscape. The Liberals and the Nationalists. Their origins went back to the 19th Century. While in the early days these two parties reflected ideological differences, by the mid-20th Century in Honduras, the two parties had few ideological distinctions. Both would today be seen as center or even center-right parties. Their appeal tended to be based on family political affiliation (e.g., "if my family was Liberal then I am a Liberal.") or whom you knew on either side. Both parties relied heavily on patronage (e.g., government jobs and contracts) to get out the vote. In Honduras, presidents are limited to one four-year term with no possibility of re-election. The incumbent, Roberto Flores, was a Liberal and his predecessor had also been a Liberal. The Nationalists were convinced that 2001 was their year to win back the presidency.

The Nationalist candidate, Ricardo Maduro Joest, was a successful, well-to-do businessman who was U.S. trained and very well disposed to the U.S. His views were closely aligned to those of U.S. President Bush and they shared friends from the business community. The fact that the Nationalists had aligned themselves with the Conservative Union, an international grouping of like-minded parties, including the Republicans and

the British Conservative Party, helped to create a positive view of the Nationalists within the Bush Administration. Maduro was well known to us and was a frequent visitor at the Embassy and Residence events. As a former Central Bank president, he earned a great deal of respect among bankers and economists in the region. A big tragedy in his life – the assassination of his adult son in 1997 in a kidnapping for ransom gone badly – added to his appeal among those most concerned about rising crime. Becoming the nominee of his party seemed natural - but only after a long legal battle. Maduro was born in Panama and derived his claim to Honduran citizenship from his mother. The opposition took this to court, arguing that Maduro was not eligible to run for the presidency. In fact, during his party's primaries he had a "stand-in" (his close friend Luis Cosenza, who won the primary with over 80% of the votes) while the matter was being adjudicated. The decision in his favor required mediation from Brazilian jurists tapped to help unlock a deadlocked Honduran Supreme Court. When he was cleared to run, Cosenza stepped down as the surrogate and Maduro's road to the presidency was cleared.

The Liberals were clearly divided and in the end, through a primary process, chose a lackluster candidate, Rafael Pineda Ponce. Pineda was an aging party patriarch who was serving at the time as President of the Congress. His provincial background and limited exposure to the complex economic issues of the times made him a very weak candidate. Even the incumbent, while giving *pro forma* endorsement to his party's candidate, did not do much to support him. Privately, President Flores maintained lines of communication with Maduro and more than likely voted for him. The bottom-line was that it was a mismatch. At one point I invited both of the major candidates to come to the Residence, separately, to meet with a visiting CODEL who shared an interest in the political landscape of the region. Both candidates were peppered with similar questions, which Maduro handled beautifully and Pineda flubbed in a big way, unable to articulate coherent views on economic issues.

During that election cycle, I personally spent a great deal of time with the political parties and their leadership. In addition to the two major parties, there were three other parties running for both the presidency and legislative seats. One of the tools I used was to invite each of the parties' leaders to attend, at separate times, working lunches at the Residence to get to know them and to reiterate to each that the U.S. did not endorse or favor anyone. What we wanted above all was free and fair elections and the acceptance by all parties of the results. This was not easy to convey since everyone understood that Maduro's worldview was closer to that of the U.S., but everyone appreciated being given the attention they received from us. In fact, the Democratic Left Party leadership (the closest Honduras came to having a Marxist-oriented group) were particularly pleased that we were willing to listen to them. These lunch events were ideal for the reports we submitted to the Department.

Q. How did Election Day go?

ALMAGUER: It was a very peaceful election. International observers from the OAS, the Carter Center, the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute, among others, were very pleased with the process. Several members of the

Embassy community, including staff and spouses, and I joined the observation teams, monitoring events throughout the day. By 8 p.m. that night, the defeated candidate, Pineda Ponce, went on television to accept his defeat. I tried to visit with him that night to congratulate him on his magnanimous concession but he would not see me. I think that to this day he believes that his candidacy could not get off the ground because the U.S. allegedly favored his opponent.

By 10 p.m. that night, with the victory rally behind him, the Political Counselor (FSO Paco Palmieri) and I went to visit with President-elect Maduro, who graciously took almost an hour of his time to reiterate his interest in working closely with the U.S. on all issues of common interest. As early as that night, we agreed on a process that would bring members of my Country Team to his Transition Headquarters over a period of days to review in detail issues of U.S. interest, such as the USAID portfolio of projects, counternarcotics cooperation, military-to-military engagements and so on. This first meeting with Maduro as President-elect was followed two or three days later by a congratulatory call from President Bush, as I recounted earlier, and the latter's invitation for Maduro to visit Washington in December. It was an excellent beginning of a fruitful relationship.

U.S. democracy in action: the 2000 elections

Q. This recounting of Election Night in Honduras reminds me that only a year earlier the U.S. had an election that took a while to resolve. How did that election play out in Honduras?

ALMAGUER: Yes, it was a memorable event in Honduras and, I suspect, around the world. As U.S. embassies traditionally do, we organized an Election Night 2000 party at the Ballroom of the Hotel Maya in Tegucigalpa for a "Celebration of Democracy." We invited hundreds of our contacts, including most of the political leadership of the country, student leaders, labor organizers and many other groups. We had TV monitors everywhere giving the U.S. networks' results as they were being tabulated. The local TV stations would frequently break into their regularly-scheduled programs to cover the events at the Honduras Maya Hotel. At 7:30 p.m. that night, in welcoming our guests, I announced that the party would go on until a winner was declared in the U.S. elections. [Laughter.] As you can well imagine, the event did not turn out as expected. At 2 a.m., we invited our guests to go home….

Over the next 36 days I was a frequent visitor to the morning TV and radio talk shows, trying to explain and update what was going on. Most Hondurans had no knowledge of the Electoral College and had a difficult time understanding how a candidate with a lead of 500,000 popular votes could be involved in a legal battle over the results. I am so glad I was a good student of history and of elections since the longer this impasse lasted the more of that history that I had to recount in my talks, including why the U.S. Founding Fathers opted for this system and the meaning of Federalism. The Honduran media had a great time with this story. After the U.S. Supreme Court ruling, one cartoon had me holding a newspaper with a headline (in Spanish) that read, "U.S. Election Decided in 36

Days," and a Honduran holding another newspaper that said, "Honduran Election Decided in Two Hours." Many of my political friends were enjoying the opportunity to suggest that Honduras would be glad to offer the U.S. technical assistance in conducting elections!

Continuing U.S. military presence in Honduras

Q. Changing the subject, and to complete a discussion we had earlier on the U.S. military base in Honduras, share some history and rationale for that U.S. presence.

ALMAGUER: Its origins go back to the Cold War, the Cuban Communist Revolution and the Central American civil wars in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua during the 70s and 80s. In more recent times, justification for the continuing U.S. presence is related to our on-going counternarcotics efforts, as well as SOUTHCOM's need for a forward operating center for disaster-related responses and for training. The facility, known by many as "Palmerola" (the name of the immediate neighborhood where the base is located in the Comayagua Valley of Central Honduras), was made operational in 1981. It was the site of some of the more notorious escapades of the legendary Ollie North. Now the facility is co-located with the Honduran Air Force Academy and the official name is the Soto Cano Air Base. The Honduran flag flies over the facility. The U.S. presence is under the Southern Command in Miami and is known as the Joint Military Taskforce Bravo (JTF-B). It houses some 600 military personnel and perhaps as many as 200 civilian support staff. It manages the best runway in the region, capable of accommodating our largest planes, including the C-5As, as well as a fleet of helicopters that can support humanitarian, counternarcotics and training activities.

In recent years, even under democratically elected civilian governments, this low-key U.S. military presence is generally welcomed in Honduras. It brings important economic benefits to the region since JTF-Bravo buys much of what it consumes from the local economy. It also creates some job opportunities on-base. Further, it gives the Honduran military, particularly its air force, some training opportunities not otherwise available to a severely underfunded military. Quite often Honduran military are invited to be part of U.S. training exercises directed from Soto Cano. Finally, the Hondurans look forward to the day when they can use the Soto Cano runway as a replacement for the very dangerous civilian international airport in Tegucigalpa (known as "Toncontin" and often listed among the ten most dangerous commercial airports in the world due to its mountainous surroundings and short runway).

My predecessors and I found creative ways of tapping the Soto Cano facility. It serves to strengthen and maintain good relations with the Honduran military and to focus their attention on their role as safekeepers of the national borders. Further, the facility is a jumping off point for U.S. military exercises – many of which involve the deployment of U.S. Corps of Engineers and National Guard battalions. These deployments lead to construction projects, such as schools and latrines, in the areas of deployment. Some exercises involve military medics, who practice their skills by delivering medical services

to underserved isolated regions of Honduras. The public relations benefits of these operations are significant.

The U.S. military was blessed in the ’90s and early 2000s by particularly good leadership at Southern Command. The two CINCs (Commanders-in-Chief, now known as Combatant Commanders) with whom I dealt in my role as ambassador were General Charlie (Charles) Wilhelm, a Marine four-star general, and later, General Pete (Peter) Pace, also a Marine four-star general who subsequently became Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and then Chairman. One of the things that I have learned in my interaction with the military at its very senior levels is that the military does a darn good job of selecting outstanding diplomat warriors to head difficult assignments — difficult in this case not because they are expected to lead soldiers in battle. Rather, they are effective at engaging with local governments and military commands on the proper role of the military in a civilian-led democratic society. The U.S. military has successfully helped the military in the region to work closely with their civilian counterparts in counternarcotics efforts, in preparing for disasters and in response to terrorism and other potential threats, while responding well to civilian control.

Even though activities led by a CINC are not under the authority of the ambassador, the relationship between these two CINCs and my Embassy was fabulous. The relationship between the Embassy and the JTF-Bravo leadership was equally great. They had logistic capabilities that the Embassy did not have and they were very good at avoiding situations that could affect their and the U.S. Government’s image in Honduras. For example, they rarely wore uniforms in public and quickly disciplined soldiers and airmen who misbehaved in public settings, such as inebriation or reckless driving. Further, many of the soldiers and airmen volunteered at nearby community projects. Since families were not deployed, these soldiers and airmen had more time than most soldiers to devote to “good deed” projects. When early in the Bush Administration (before 9/11) Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld raised the issue of our presence in Soto Cano and the possibility of closing it as a cost-savings measure, the Honduran civilian authorities rapidly mobilized their embassy in Washington to deflect that discussion. After 9/11 talks of closing that facility ended.

Q. I would like to know more about the training and humanitarian deployments that you have mentioned….

ALMAGUER: At the time I was serving in the region, some 60 to 70 percent of Southern Command’s logistic capabilities and planning requirements were centered on mobilizing National Guard, Reserve units and other specialized groups (e.g., Medics, Corps of Engineers) for training in Latin America - and Honduras in particular because of its favorable location and its Soto Cano facility. Before I began to witness these training and disaster response deployments, I would have assumed that the U.S. military was very adaptable and could easily be deployed into a jungle environment, for example, and build the needed roads for troop movements and so on. Based on my experience, that was not the case. When I was in Ecuador (from 1986 to 1990) and wearing a different hat, I was perplexed at how unprepared some of our units were to operate in jungle conditions. As I

mentioned in an earlier discussion, U.S. National Guard units were deployed after the 1988 earthquake to help Ecuador reopen a land route from the central highlands to the jungle in the east that had been made impassible by the earthquake. Experienced Ecuadorian engineers familiar with the terrain repeatedly cautioned the U.S. military engineers that the road alignment the U.S. preferred seemed OK on paper but would not work. The U.S. military insisted on an alignment that was less hilly, despite Ecuadorian warnings that in jungle settings, you don't want to build near rivers and other low-lying areas. Sure enough, the National Guard unit deployed for this purpose soon found itself mired in a swamp, where even cranes were disappearing as rivers crested after tropical rainstorms. The Ecuadorians had it right and hopefully our units learned from that experience that despite our superior technology we have a great deal to learn. If we ever have to fight a war in a tropical, humid environment, these places provide wonderful training opportunities for our military.

I welcomed these military deployments for the training opportunities they offered and for the good will they often generated. At the same time, as a taxpayer and as a civilian employee of the U.S. Government, at times I was appalled at the cost of these operations. For example, to build a rural road or community centers that would require a six-week deployment, the U.S. military would first, even up to a year earlier, deploy a team to survey the location, which I can understand, but then proceeded to build a base camp that was anything but primitive: with electricity, sewer facilities, water distillation systems, flushing toilets, professional kitchens, refrigeration, etc. These are amenities that make life more bearable for the deployed troops but far exceeded what they would have to build if the enemy was nearby. Further, these facilities were fancier than what was available to Honduran soldiers when they went back home. I had anticipated the traditional camouflaged tents and rustic facilities and these were anything but rustic. Add to this the constant movement of helicopters and the cost of the deployment must have added up to many times the annual budget of the entire Honduran military.

I recall one time, on a tour of Soto Cano with General Pace, right after he became SOUTHCOM CINC, that he was reflecting on his days as a young Marine at Camp Lejeune [North Carolina], where many of the services now provided by civilian contractors were tasked to the young soldiers, including peeling potatoes. I would agree that times have changed and that we cannot deny our men and women in uniform amenities that can be provided to them. But when I think about what the military spends for its upkeep — not for defense, but for its upkeep — and compare and contrast that with the Foreign Service, and it underscores the reality that our Foreign Service is woefully underfinanced.

Q. How was Soto Cano used in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch?

ALMAGUER: The hurricane struck some nine months before I arrived but I know that Soto Cano played a major supporting role and one that solidified its prestige in Honduras. After the hurricane moved on, helicopters were essential to survey the damages and provide urgent relief. Honduran helicopters were scarce and not reliable. One of the biggest casualties of the hurricane was the well-regarded mayor of Tegucigalpa, who was

killed in a helicopter accident the first day of the disaster. In the meantime, and in preparation for the expected formal request for assistance from the Honduran authorities, SOUTHCOM, in coordination with OFDA (the USAID Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance), began preparations to provide aerial surveys of the damages and to mobilize much needed temporary shelters, water, food and medical supplies for the victims.

On the second day of the storm, Honduran President Flores and a number of his senior officials got into their helicopters to survey the damage. During that survey mission, the President was stranded, apparently as a result of a landslide nearby, and was surrounded by a raging river. His helicopter could not help him. Fortunately, the word got out to Soto Cano and Southern Command helicopters were mobilized. These arrived at the site where the President was located under very difficult weather conditions and in treacherous terrain. It was a difficult rescue but they succeeded in fetching him out of that situation and saving his life. I understand that until then, Carlos Flores would not set foot on Soto Cano. Years earlier, as a young Minister of the Presidency, he claims that he was not allowed to go into the facility despite the fact that it was located in sovereign Honduran territory. After this rescue, he realized that times had changed and he was forever grateful, a sentiment he shared with me at some point in a discussion we were having about disaster preparedness.

Several months after the hurricane and rescue incident (and before my arrival) President Clinton became the first U.S. President to visit Tegucigalpa. (President Johnson visited San Pedro Sula but not Tegucigalpa due to its risky airport). Clinton landed in Soto Cano and there he was welcomed by President Flores. That symbolized the acceptance of Soto Cano as an important and welcomed presence in Honduras.

After 9/11 (and after I had left) Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld visited the Soto Cano base that he had wanted to close before the world changed. He was there to thank Honduras for joining the "coalition of the willing." From then on, all talk about closing Soto Cano ended.

Recognizing the Castro regime

Q: What about Cuba and relations between Cuba and Honduras?

ALMAGUER: Cuba has been like a pebble in our shoe since '59. It is no longer a threat but the pebble makes walking a bit painful. After the Cuban government was suspended by the OAS in 1962 for exporting revolution and becoming an ally of the Soviet Union, just about the only country in the region that never broke relations with Cuba was Mexico. Over the years, particularly as democratic regimes began to replace the old military dictatorships, most countries in the region began to restore normal relations with Cuba. Their argument was that whether they liked the regime or not, Cuba was an important neighbor. Further, most Latin American leaders concluded that it was better to work with Cuba from inside the tent than to continue to leave it as an outcast. This political reality was, in part, the result of the popularity of the regime among leftist intellectuals (always a strong voice in Latin America), Cuba's abandonment of its 1960's

policy of exporting revolution, and Cuba's very effective use of its surplus pool of doctors and nurses. Cuba, whether intentionally or not, produced a surplus of medical practitioners. From the Cuban regime's point of view, it was far better to have these professionals working in the Latin American countryside, where they could do some good and promote good will, than to have them driving taxis in Havana.

I must admit that I was always frustrated with Cuba's public relations success in its use of these medical teams. We as a country deployed thousands of Peace Corps Volunteers and thousands of missionaries and non-governmental groups, such as CARE, Catholic Relief and many others. Our cash transfers and technical assistance programs were far bigger than anything that Cuba could ever replicate. While this U.S. assistance was welcomed, the Cubans were more successful in exploiting these medical teams for building good will. Cuban medical brigades in many of these countries received the welcome and popular acclaim that we saw only infrequently in our case. These brigades no doubt benefited from sharing the language, the culture and the skin color. Further, while U.S. aid had strings attached (for example, our proactive use of aid to promote free market tools and legal reforms), the Cubans were not pushing for any kind of reforms. Finally, engaging with Cuba was another way these Latin American democratic governments expressed their independence of the United States, something welcomed by the leftist intellectual community.

By the time I arrived in Honduras in 1999, there were only two countries in the Western Hemisphere that did not have normal relations with Cuba: Honduras and El Salvador. Nevertheless, Cuba had a representation in Honduras and was active with its medical brigades and with scholarship programs that allowed many Hondurans to study medicine and other professions in Cuban universities. Despite our efforts to find Cubans engaged in nefarious activities in Honduras, we never found anything incriminating, such as fomenting local guerillas. They no doubt provided some financial support to the small leftist groups that would once in a while agitate for Puerto Rican independence or the closing of Guantanamo and Soto Cano. But those efforts had minimal political impact.

Q: What about Cuban assistance in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch?

ALMAGUER: After the hurricane Cuba deployed hundreds of medical doctors and support personnel. As a result, the Flores government came under increased domestic pressure to normalize relations with Cuba. This became a contentious issue for us and we would frequently counsel the Hondurans to not take the next step. But it was clear that normalization would take place sooner or later. Ricardo Maduro, both as a candidate and as President-elect, assured us that the issue of normalization of relations with Cuba was far down in his list of priorities. Hence, we were caught off-guard when normalization happened – at a most awkward and inopportune moment.

Q. That sounds intriguing. Tell me more.

ALMAGUER: The Maduro Presidential Inauguration was to take place on January 28, 2002. The U.S. delegation to the festivities, as usual, was large. It was headed by

Secretary of the Interior, Gale Norton, who spoke no Spanish and had limited knowledge of the region. Nevertheless, she was quite pleasant and served as good representative of President Bush. The other VIP in the delegation was Otto Reich, at this point serving as Acting Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs. "Acting" only because the Senate would not vote on him, but very much in charge. As everyone knows, Otto was a Cuban American with strong views on the Castro regime. Otto was delighted that a like-minded person was about to assume office in Honduras. After the delegation's arrival on the 27th, I hosted a working lunch for them and briefed them on what to expect. I don't recall whether I mentioned Cuba in my briefing, but certainly it was not a topic high on my mind. Soon thereafter, we all were bussed to the Presidential Palace, where outgoing President Flores received us warmly and engaged in non-substantive pleasantries. From there we went to the nearby Intercontinental Hotel, where Maduro and his incoming team were meeting with the foreign delegations. As expected, it was a warm and non-consequential discussion about issues in which both sides held similar views. It was in this context that I was approached by one of the attendants to let me know that the outgoing Foreign Minister was on the line, that the Minister was aware of where I was at that moment but that it was essential that I step out and accept the call, which I did. The Foreign Minister, Roberto Flores Bermudez, in a somewhat apologetic tone, told me that the Flores Administration and the Cuban Government had agreed on full normalization of relations upon Maduro assuming office the next day. This was an unannounced and unexpected bombshell. Bear in mind that none other than Otto Reich, my boss and among the most ardent opponents of the Castro regime, was physically next-door with the President-elect. As I walked back in, the group must have sensed my consternation. No doubt that my pale skin was either paler or more reddish! I recounted the conversation. Otto's demeanor also changed. The obvious questions were, "what did Maduro know and why did we not receive any prior hints?" Maduro seemed calm and said that, "no," the outgoing government had not consulted with him. He quickly added that the positive side was that it got this issue out of the way but that he would not name an ambassador to Cuba, even if there was full recognition. (For the record, Maduro lived up to his word and did not name an ambassador to Cuba, at least during my remaining time in Honduras. The Cubans, of course, did, elevating their representative to full ambassadorial status).

Otto seemed to have accepted Maduro's declaration of innocence, but he was livid at outgoing President Flores, particularly for surprising us in this manner and for not letting us know during our farewell courtesy call. At one point he talked about leaving. I strongly dissuaded him, suggesting that we express our displeasure by not attending the evening's farewell function hosted by President Flores's friends and supporters. Further, I suggested that I use my good contacts with the media to express our displeasure. Otto agreed and that's what we did. In the media coverage the next day – dominated, of course, by the Inaugural festivities, I was quoted as saying that we were disappointed because this elevated a Cuban regime that was no longer in touch with today's realities. I compared the Castro Government to that of the era of dinosaurs: destined to become extinct and irrelevant to the future of the Americas. For the next several weeks this image captured the attention of the cartoonists, depicting dinosaurs with beards and Otto and me fighting them with swords!

The inaugural festivities were well staged and well executed. After the formalities at the National Stadium, and as planned, the foreign delegations were helicoptered to Copan Ruins, a majestic site in western Honduras. SOUTHCOM provided our delegation with a Chinook helicopter, which allowed us to not only transport the large U.S. delegation but also visiting dignitaries from some of our NATO allies, including the British and the Spanish delegations. The evening events, surrounded by specially lit Mayan ruins and with appropriate music to go with the show, were magnificent. The next morning, our Secretary of the Interior, who is responsible for the U.S. Parks Service, received a personalized tour of the ruins. The entire delegation, notwithstanding the Cuba bombshell, left for Washington quite happy. That was a relief!

A day or two days later, I received a call from former President Flores asking me to visit with him at his house. There he assured me that he was not the one who decided on the Cuba issue; he blamed it on his now former Foreign Minister, Roberto Flores Bermudez, in concert with Maduro's incoming foreign minister. The way Flores stated the issue, the decision to normalize relations with Cuba was inevitable. He noted that almost every visiting Latin American and European delegation pressed him on the subject, but that he would not do it out of respect for us. I subsequently recounted to President Maduro my conversation with former President Flores and Maduro repeated that he had nothing to do with it, but now that it was done, it was one less headache to deal with. I have had several discussions with both presidents, now both out of office, and neither has changed this strange story of who decided. Former Foreign Minister Flores Bermudez at my house in Virginia years later was also reluctant to talk in detail, but shared that both outgoing President Flores and incoming President Maduro struggled with this issue and that both wanted to put this issue behind them but to not have their fingerprints on the decision. Neither was willing to annoy the Americans but both agreed that normalization was inevitable.

We kept track of what the Cubans were doing and continued to find that while the Cubans were wishing that they could influence events in Honduras and elsewhere, they had no particular means to do so aside from building good will through their medical brigades. Yet, sadly, perhaps 40 percent of the instructions that I as Ambassador would receive from Washington were related to Cuba – a U.N. vote or a matter related to human rights abuses in Cuba. Inevitably, we would follow our instructions and provide the Foreign Ministry with our talking points and demarches. The Honduran authorities would listen politely and assure us that our concerns would be considered. In more informal settings, these officials would confess that they way they saw it, the U.S. was overly fixated with Cuba, far in excess of Cuba's influence.

Q: Did you have a feeling that the instructions that you were getting were related to domestic politics? That we asked our ambassadors to present demarche on Cuba to tell Congress and the Cuban-American lobby that we were being tough on Cuba?

ALMAGUER: For the most part, yes. Frankly, it got boring at times. It reached the point where it was detracting from some of the other issues that we really wanted to engage in.

Cuba's involvement with the drug trade was a frequent issue, but at least in Honduras we did not have credible evidence that Cuba was engaged in drug trafficking. Similarly, there was no evidence that Cuba was engaged in facilitating illegal migration, except for Cubans leaving the island. I think we would have done a much better job of condemning Cuba by focusing on its human rights record. But even with this subject, we were often accused of double standards. By focusing on Cuba and not being equally strong in condemning human rights violations in friendly counties left us exposed to charges of having double standards. Our creditability among Latin American governments on Cuban issues was very low.

Q: Well, Frank, were you ever approached by any side on the Cuba issue, particularly since you were born in Cuba?

ALMAGUER: The answer is "NO" absolutely not. In my many years in the public limelight proudly representing the U.S., I have never once been approached by a foreign government to do anything contrary to U.S. interests. The only foreign governments that have approached me have been the Europeans on development issues, urging policy changes on issues such as family planning, where our positions often diverged from the more liberal European positions. With regards to Cuban diplomats, I followed the rule: you don't invite Cubans to your home and you don't accept social invitations. That protocol was followed very strictly. Our interaction with the Cuban chargé in Tegucigalpa was limited to a curt handshake at protocolary functions. The Cubans did not appear to be active in the local social circuit since I never saw them in those settings. There were no hints that the Cubans approached anyone at my Embassy during the time that I was in Tegucigalpa, nor did I ever hear an officer of the U.S. government say that, in whatever capacity, he or she had had been approached by the Cubans.

The one geographic area where I could have envisioned an encounter with Cuban officials was in Bolivia and it never happened. The coca-growing region of the Chapare was led by fairly radical peasants who probably found the Castro regime and the communist message appealing. Yet, I worked closely with the "*campesinos*" (farmers) in the Chapare and never once saw a Cuban in the area. I think that by the time I became involved at those levels Cuba lacked the resource base to do much damage. Of course, I missed Central America in the '80s, where Cuban influence and engagement were more pronounced.

Q. What about the Cuban-American community and its influence?

ALMAGUER: Every once in a while I would come across Cuban-American groups, but it was always in the context of pride that, gee whiz, a Cuban-American made it to Ambassador. I am not sure this is correct, but I have heard it said that half of the Hispanic Ambassadors to Latin America from the United States have been Cuban-Americans. At the same time, and at the risk of overstating it, from the Latin American perspective — and remember that many Latin American leaders spent a lot of time in Florida, vacationing, in exile or engaged in business activities - the reputation of the Cuban-Americans in Miami was not all that great. Some Latin Americans friendly to the U.S.

have described this community as single-minded zealots. They often conclude that the reason so many made it big in the U.S. is because they either brought money from Cuba or had the right connections. Many express annoyance at what they perceive is the preferential treatment Cubans in the U.S. receive. Some have said to me that the U.S. is too big and with too many interests to be co-opted by a single community of influential voters.

Q: While you were there, the Elian Gonzalez case must have attracted attention.

ALMAGUER: Major events in the U.S. are always of interest in Latin America and I found myself trying to explain them, as I did (for example) the events surrounding the 2000 election. I am sure the media asked me about the Elian case. In this case, a mother took her 10-year-old child on a rubber raft across the Florida Straights. She died along the way, and he and those accompanying him drifted to Florida, where Elian was welcomed not only by family members, but also embraced by the community as a symbol of the oppression in Cuba. This was a very appealing human-interest story. The problem is that he had his father in Cuba who 1) had no interest in migrating, 2) had not given permission for this kid to leave, and 3) wanted his son back. Under all international norms, including American standards, the child belongs with the surviving parent. However, in Miami Elian became a symbol (egged on by the media) that argued, "Let this child grow up in America. Give him the chance to be free."

In the meantime, of course, Castro was making political hay back in Cuba, saying, "Return this child to his father." This became an epic clash that pitted the Miami Cubans against Castro. President Clinton and Janet Reno, the Attorney General at the time, had a very difficult political issue in their hands, even though the legal case was fairly straightforward. The Elian case probably will go down in the history of Cuban-American politics almost up there with the failure of the United States to support the Bay of Pigs invasion. I attempted to explain to Honduran audiences what was going on. There is no doubt that most Hondurans saw this as a straightforward case of parental rights in which the Cuban community in Miami was in the wrong. Ultimately, the Clinton Administration decided to return him to Cuba with an unfortunate show of force. The Miami Cuban community, egged on by the local media, blew up and scars still remain.

From a consular perspective, the decision was the right one. A decision to keep him in the U.S. against the surviving parent's wishes would set a terrible precedent. Let me illustrate it with a case that was happening at about the same time as the Elian saga was raging: A 15-year-old American girl had left her home in New York City with a 22-year-old Honduran. She was an American runaway opting to escape to Honduras – and to a particularly tough part of the country. Her parents, of course, were demanding — correctly, as I would have — that the U.S. government track down their child. We did. The Honduran parents of her boyfriend objected to her return, claiming that, "We may be poor, but we're willing to support this girl, and she doesn't want to go back home." As U.S. government officials responsible for the welfare of American citizens in Honduras, we interceded with Honduran authorities and asked that the girl be returned to her parents. The girl was subsequently returned to the U.S. Imagine the outrage in the U.S. if

the Honduran authorities had not helped to reunite a minor with her parents? The same members of Congress who advocated for keeping Elian in the U.S. probably would have supported imposing sanctions on Honduras if this girl had not been returned. It facilitates our work when our practices match the behavior we seek from other governments.

Another example is the treatment of prisoners. If we learned that some drunken American had been picked up by the local police and we were not notified, we would be upset and complain to the authorities that under international agreements we were to be notified anytime an American was in jail. Yet, we have had prominent cases in the United States where foreigners, particularly Mexicans, were jailed, indicted and convicted without proper notification to the consular officials of the country from which the individual claimed as home. Our Number One job is to protect American interests and citizens. Other countries have similar rights. This is why the Elian case was so relevant to what embassies do.

The impact of modern communication tools

Q: Moving to a different subject, did you find by the time you were in Honduras that the modern communication system, with cell phones, Internet, etc., was beginning to change how you conducted business?

ALMAGUER: I often joke that the word "plenipotentiary" should disappear from the official ambassadorial title: "Ambassador Plenipotentiary and Extraordinary." I never quite understood the "Extraordinary" part. But the "Plenipotentiary" aspects are doomed. In the "good old days," ambassadors sailed to far away places and periodically received written guidance, with none of the daily back-and-forth that we now experience. I think that those of us serving in posts that receive scan attention from "official Washington" have a great deal more discretion than in posts where the presidents, prime ministers and foreign ministers communicate directly with their U.S. counterparts. Nevertheless, it has become a challenge to act independently of our "Washington handlers." Because of the one or two-hour difference between Washington and Tegucigalpa, it was not unusual for the Desk Officer to send an e-mail early in the day seeking clarification on a Honduran newspaper item that we were just beginning to read. And with easy access to cell phone technology almost anywhere along the main roads of Honduras, staying disconnected from the Embassy or from Washington during a trip to the countryside or on vacation was becoming impossible. This, ironically, served to undermine our capacity to act in a discretionary manner in keeping with the "plenipotentiary" title.

While I served as ambassador, we were still relying on cable traffic for all official and almost all classified communication. Nevertheless, e-mail was beginning to take over formal communication and telephone conversations. E-mail was more convenient and it received prompt attention from our key interlocutors in Washington. Further, I could go higher in the bureaucratic chain of command because it was easy. Increasingly, I was receiving e-mail messages from Assistant Secretaries and Deputy Assistant Secretaries that involved subjects previously handled by lower-level officials. One of the consequences of this practice was the ratcheting up of decision-making, at the expense of

more junior officers. At the time, I had two PCs in my office, one exclusively for classified traffic. It was not as convenient to use because the Security and IT folks insisted that it be placed at some distance from the PC near my desk. I understand that this practice ended as a result of Secretary Powell's dictate that the Department unify and simplify the management of our communications infrastructure.

In March and April 2004, when I was brought back for a few weeks to serve on the U.S. delegation to the U.N. Human Rights Commission annual meeting in Geneva, I got a better taste of our new reality. The flow of electronic communication delivered to my desktop was so voluminous that it was tough to segregate that which was urgent and important from that which was routine. I always prided myself in not needing much support to get my work done. Ironically, with this bombardment of messages right to my desk, I probably would need more staff support to separate and prioritize the e-mail and cable traffic.

The other impact that the communication revolution was having on our operations was the rapid expansion of "horizontal" communication between our staff at all levels and the various Washington offices. To some degree that was good, but it also weakened a fundamental premise that has characterized our supposedly disciplined Service: cables from Washington carry the Secretary's signature at the bottom, signifying coordination among all of the interested offices back there. Cables generated at the Embassy carry the Ambassador's name for the same reason. The theory behind that practice was that anything signed by the Secretary of State or signed by the Ambassador were the product of coordination up the chain of command. E-mail traffic has changed that premise.

I could well imagine a dissenting officer sending out an e-mail message to his contacts saying, "Hey, my Ambassador just sent out this cable. I disagree with it totally!" This is why managers who practice centralization and concentration of information and decision-making are not going to succeed in this new environment. I always have preferred information sharing, consensus building and explanations for my decisions. This makes it less likely that the system will be overwhelmed with rumors, misinformation and confusion.

When I was in Geneva in 2004, serving with the U.S. delegation to the UN Human Rights Commission annual meeting, Cuba introduced a resolution one afternoon asking for an international inspection of Guantanamo and the Guantanamo prisoners. Even though it was a surprise to us in Geneva, I soon discovered that folks in Washington were already aware of it because the desk officers at IO (Bureau of International Organization Affairs) were listening to the proceedings via the Internet. Hence, we were not conveying anything new when we picked up the phone to report on this development.

This resolution was introduced late in the afternoon, Geneva time, which was mid-day Washington time. We huddled in Geneva to recommend a strategy but, by the time we were ready to share our recommendations, folks in Washington did not wait for our feedback but pretty much had made up their minds about what they wanted us to do, which was very frustrating. I remember sharing this experience with Ambassador (Kevin

E.) Moley, our UN ambassador in Geneva, and with Mike (Michael) Skol, another former ambassador who was also part of the delegation, and we all agreed that it was inappropriate to have a high-power team in Geneva to make critical on-the-ground decisions but not being given the opportunity to do so thanks to the new way information was shared.

Impact of Bush in the White House

Q: We'll come to this Geneva experience in a while. Let's return to Honduras. You were there when the George W. Bush Administration came into office. How did the U.S. transition affect you?

ALMAGUER: As a career officer, I was nonpartisan. Like every other ambassador appointed during the Clinton Presidency, I prepared a *pro forma* letter of resignation, which, as anticipated, was not acted on. We solemnly took down the Clinton and Albright photos on January 20, 2001 replaced them with the Bush and Powell official photos as soon as they were available and continued business as usual pending new guidance. As you may recall, Clinton did not have any luck in getting his nominees for the post of Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs confirmed by the Senate. "Acting" and "Recess" appointees had served in that role for most of the Clinton years. I liked President Clinton personally and admired his brilliance and political abilities, but he was never that engaged on Latin American issues. Neither was Secretary Albright. Hence, we were all eager to see what would happen with the new Administration, particularly with regard to the appointment of an Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs.

To my pleasant surprise, early on President Bush and National Security Council chief Condoleezza Rice appointed a good friend and experienced diplomat, John Maisto, as Senior Advisor for Western Hemisphere Affairs. John most recently had served at SOUTHCOM as General Pace's foreign policy advisor. Pace would soon be moved to Washington as Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Both Pace and Maisto had just been my guests at the November 2000 Marine Ball in Tegucigalpa and they were terrific individuals and well-versed in regional issues.

Subsequently, the President nominated Otto Reich to be the Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs. I cannot say that I share Otto Reich's heavy-handed approach on some issues (Cuba, as an example), but I had known Otto over the years and worked well with him when he was Assistant USAID Administrator for Latin America and the Caribbean. I felt good that someone whom I knew well and who knew me would be the Assistant Secretary. Otto, in fact, called me and said how pleased he was to be able to work with me once again. I also learned that Roger Noriega, with whom I developed good rapport as I was going through the confirmation process, was slated to be the U.S. ambassador to the OAS.

At that point, I was pleased and at home with the new leadership team. Even thought they were ideologically to the right of where I would prefer to be, I did not feel that this would be much of an issue – and it wasn't for the remainder of my time in Honduras. I was also

hopeful that Secretary Powell, of Jamaican heritage, would devote some attention to a region that included the Caribbean, an often-neglected part of our country's neighborhood.

Q: Yes.

ALMAGUER: Of course, soon 9/11 happened and it sucked the air out of whatever new attention was being paid to the Latin America region. The President and his team did come up with a number of initiatives that on paper sounded good. He picked up on President Clinton's Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) efforts and supported a Central America free trade agreement (CAFTA), which was signed after I had left. The Bush Administration also managed to gain support for a "Democratic Charter" which committed the 34 members of the OAS [Organization of American States] to free and fair elections and democratic governance. In fact, Secretary Powell was in Lima, Peru, where a Special General Assembly of the OAS was meeting to approve the Charter, when the planes struck New York and Washington. For that moment, at least, all of our nations at the OAS were "fellow Americans" and the resolution was approved unanimously, even by Venezuela.

Q: That sounds like an impressive start for Bush in Latin America. What about the new Administration's view on foreign aid.

ALMAGUER: The foreign aid program from the Clinton Administration to the Bush Administration did not appear to change all that much, at least in the context of Latin America, which is labeled as a Middle Income region. The centerpiece of the Clinton Administration's development policy towards Latin America centered on free trade and investment – a policy that was continued and intensified by the Bush Administration. More has to be done to ensure quality education for all – perhaps the single biggest challenge facing Latin American governments as they seek democratic stability and broad-based prosperity. Clinton, late in his Administration, introduced a new program: Centers for Excellence in Teacher Training (CETT) to be established in three Western Hemisphere regions: one in the Caribbean, one in Central America, one in South America. The CETTs were envisioned as settings where teachers from the region could develop their expertise and the skills of teaching. I hope it is still in place and succeeding, but I am not sure. Our follow-through is often spotty. 9/11 shifted Washington's interest in the region. I think Bush would love to spend more time and effort in support of the region. He obviously learned a great deal about Latin culture in his years in Texas. But that's not where the center of policy thinking is at right now. Only issues impacting on the drug trade or terrorism gains the attention of Official Washington. It is unfortunate. A number of Latin American countries have had democratic regimes for 20 years or more and many Latin Americans are legitimately asking "is that all there is to democracy – voting every few years? How come the traditional political classes remain in power despite endemic corruption? And how come education is not improving and crime is rampant?" While abject poverty as a percentage of the population is way down from 25 years ago, in absolute numbers the decline is much less impressive. Recall that the population of the region, which is now stabilizing, has doubled in the past 25 years.

Further, all polls conducted in the region highlight the fact that crime and corruption are the biggest issues most citizens of the region encounter. People in the region are tired of the "same old thing," and populist appeals from charismatic figures, such as Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, have resonance. Can we reverse these trends by ourselves? Of course not; but in partnership with the Europeans and others, we could be helpful to Latin American societies as they struggle with these issues. I think the approach that this Administration chose, and many would disagree with me, was too 'business-oriented' and not enough focus on the fundamentals of education, infrastructure, legal reforms and local empowerment. For example, CAFTA has become the centerpiece of our relations with the Central American region. We insist that Central America open its borders to free trade among themselves and with the U.S. It sounds great on paper, but the likely outcome is more U.S. products in Central America, which will further strain the capacity of local farmers to compete with cheaper and often higher quality products from the "North." We face a credibility issue in the region when we put all of our eggs in the free trade basket. How do we convince the typical Honduran — who tends to be more pro-American than the typical Latin American — that the U.S. really means it when it says "we have your interests at heart?" They can't quite understand how free trade can be good for Honduras when its meager productive capacity cannot compete in the open market with cheap, high quality U.S. goods. That's the challenge that we're facing.

Embassy security

Q: Frank, was security for our Embassy and staff in Honduras a problem? How did security affect your life and your Embassy's work?

ALMAGUER: The single biggest security issue that our Embassy employees faced was personal physical security. Many of them did not want to go out to the countryside for the weekend for fear of carjacking. Even picking up a pizza at the neighborhood Pizza Hut required some consideration about how to avoid being caught in a robbery attempt. The security problems to which I refer involved the fear of becoming a victim of common crimes. Terrorism was not yet a big concern in Central America. I, of course, lived in a cocoon. The American Embassy in Tegucigalpa was well fortified and some of the "softer" spots were being addressed by further street closings along the perimeter. We were limited in what we could do along the main entrance since it abutted one of Tegucigalpa's main thoroughfares, Avenida La Paz. What we did, in my last few months in Tegucigalpa was to shift the main entrance to one of the side streets that had been closed. The USAID building across the street on Avenida La Paz was marginally less secure, but the biggest challenge staff there faced was crossing the street to access the Chancery. After I left, the city of Tegucigalpa installed a pedestrian skywalk at the corner of our respective buildings, which alleviated that particular problem. The Peace Corps remained in a very insecure location about a mile away. The American Embassy Residence property, a seven-acre compound that was purchased in the early 1950s up the Hill from the Embassy chancery, was fairly well fortified and its security enhanced over the years. The real security problem posed by the location of the Residence was that there really was only one way in or out of the Residence – a winding, heavily trafficked substandard road filled with vendors and other commercial activity on both sides.

When I traveled, I always traveled with a security detail, including a back-up vehicle. My wife, who was very familiar with the city and spoke Spanish, drove herself almost everywhere except when attending official functions. Neither she nor I felt much discomfort in that regard. The RSO preferred for her to stay put in the Residence [Laughter] but could not provide a vehicle for her personal activities. We both enjoy going to the movies and early on we decided that we would continue to go to the movies. There was one good multiplex at the city's biggest mall. We went there frequently. Of course, we had to have guards inside the movie house and the driver protecting the vehicle. Our on-going joke was that it was an expensive proposition for us since we bought the guards' tickets and popcorn (although some preferred "nachos").

It took me a while to realize that for the three plus years that I served in Honduras, I was never alone outside the Residence. Even within the Residence, if I took a walk at night a security light would go on… It certainly was not nearly as bad as current ambassadors experience. The fact is that I never really worried all that much about my wife's or my personal security. I do not recall threatening situations. Hondurans were mostly friendly.

Life at the Residence

Q. What was life like at the Residence?

ALMAGUER: It was a weird place! It had a 1950s appearance and the living area was a separate building from the entertaining area. The residence part consisted of several bedrooms (all dated) along an open corridor and the suite for us at the end of the corridor was a large bedroom below a relatively small sitting area. We had no private way to prepare food, for example. One of my proudest achievements was to convince the Department that replacing the living area was way past due. My successor, Larry Palmer and his wife, were not able to take up residence in the compound until several months after their arrival. On a subsequent visit to Tegucigalpa, Palmer gave me a tour of his new "home" and it was quite a change from what it had been. I was surprised to see a plaque on the outside of that facility naming it the "Ambassador Frank Almaguer Residence Annex." At long last, our ambassadors to Honduras and their families were given a decent place in which to live.

The compound included a large swimming pool and tennis courts, which Antoinette and I opened to all of the official community, except for Sundays, when we reserved the pool area for our private use. Many families took advantage of this pool, particularly on Saturdays. When our dog, Salsa, died, we were surprised to learn how popular she had been among the families who used the pool. I guess we had not paid attention to the fact that Salsa would spend much of her time by the pool enjoying the food these families offered her! Salsa is buried at the Residence and has a rose garden at the Residence that my wife helped to design and named after her!

Q. What about official events?

ALMAGUER: We hosted many events during our time there. My wife bore the brunt of it since she was responsible for ensuring that all events and the food required went according to plan. I hosted innumerable official luncheon events, bringing together people around a common theme of general interest and I always had appropriate Embassy staff participation, including locally hired staff (FSNs). These were well attended and very popular. We all learned and accomplished a great deal at these events. Breakfast events were usually smaller. For example I hosted a couple of former presidents and the Cardinal, often for a heart-to-heart talk on a pressing issue or to get their take on issues of the day. Evenings usually involved a much larger crowd and we attempted to include a cross section of society. For those who may imagine these events as "glamorous," they were not there to see the work that went into them, particularly on the part of my wife. Unlike the British and other Foreign Services, we expect spouses to be a significant part of the U.S. representation but fail to compensate them in any way.

Fourth of July festivities were, of course, the single biggest event of the year and we hosted three of them. Developing the invitation list that included some 2,000 "of our best friends" was quite a complex exercise for all Embassy sections. Being on the invitee list was a point of pride for many Hondurans and being left out was a real issue. The media closely scrutinized who came to these 4th of July festivities, covering them live on TV and radio. The event was always held outdoors at noon and we all prayed for no rain before 3 PM, July being in the rainy season. We were lucky that none of our three 4th of July events were disrupted by rain. These were dressy affairs, with the President and First Lady of Honduras, as well as Antoinette and me, presiding over the speech making and hosting. The most popular part of the afternoon was the food – in institutional quantities! Shortly before our last 4th of July in Honduras, we received the visit of Ray Nagin, at the time Mayor of New Orleans, who came as part of the Sister City program between New Orleans and Tegucigalpa. He offered to send us a chef that would prepare Cajun food. "Chef Lyon" came as promised and for a day he was the most popular man in town. When the food was exhausted, I had to take him on stage where he received a standing ovation. One more successful Fourth of July!

Q. What about U.S. visitors to the Residence?

ALMAGUER: Our very first visitor, probably within the first week of my ambassadorship, was former U.S. House Speaker Jim Wright (D, Texas, 1987 to 1989). He had a very interesting story of why he was there, soon after a cancer operation to remove part of his jaw. Apparently his father had been involved in the design and construction of the Pan-American Highway from Mexico down to Panama and he was traveling its Central American leg.

Unlike most of the subsequent VIP visitors, Wright was not interested in meeting with the President. It seemed as if every visiting fireman wanted to meet with the president and that was not always possible or even appropriate. Nevertheless, under both President Flores and President Maduro, we were almost always able to accommodate those requests. Sometimes it was "above and beyond the call of duty." I recall the time a group of as many as 50 state legislators from South Dakota, led by the Majority Leader of the

South Dakota Senate, came to Honduras on a get-acquainted mission. I am not sure what their specific objective may have been, but we had no burning issues with South Dakota. Their only day in Honduras was on a Sunday and, of course, they wanted to visit with the President. I knew that President Flores reserved Sundays for his family and did not transact formal business. Nevertheless, when I informed the President about the visit, he said, "Sure, I'll meet with them." My wife and I hosted the legislators for breakfast at the Residence and then joined them on the bus ride to meet with the President at 11 AM. They were happy and even happier to see the President greet them in blue jeans and cowboy boots (along with a loud red shirt, the kind that one would wear around the house - which was very unusual since he was always impeccably dressed when attending official functions in his office). He regaled them with stories about his days in Louisiana and being a politician in a small country like Honduras. There was a funny ending to the meeting when the he said that he was glad they were from SOUTH Dakota because "I've always admired Southern hospitality."

Q: [Laughter.] What about the rest of the Diplomatic Corps in Honduras? Did they enjoy similar access?

Diplomatic Corps

ALMAGUER: Generally speaking, American dignitaries visiting Honduras received preferential treatment. This made me a bit uncomfortable at times when listening to the complaints of some of my Latin American colleagues in the local Diplomatic Corps. Some complained that lack of access to the President and some of his senior functionaries were hurting their careers. They wanted to send cables to their respective foreign ministers bragging about their meetings with the president or foreign minister but that did not happen frequently. They noticed the difference. One complained, "The Second Secretary of the American Consulate calls any official and he's going to get an appointment." True! One of the things that I learned very quickly was that I needed to engage with the Diplomatic Corps in a proactive manner to avoid hurt feelings and the view among them that the U.S. Ambassador was disinterested in his fellow ambassadors.

We only had some thirty of them and getting personally acquainted with each was easy. One of the first social events my wife and I hosted was a get-together only with fellow ambassadors and their spouses. I subsequently, became treasurer of the Diplomatic Corps and one of my jobs, every six months, was sending them a letter reminding them to pay their association dues. One time I succeeded in getting invited to the monthly luncheons of the GRULAC (the association of Latin American ambassadors). It came about because I argued (correctly) that by representing the U.S., I was representing more "Latinos" than any of them except for Brazil and Mexico. With the exception of the Cuban ambassador at the lunch, the rest seem to have been tickled to have the American Ambassador wanting to be considered part of the group.

Time to go home

Q: Well Frank, when did you leave and how was that departure?

ALMAGUER: As the three-year assignment was coming to an end, I was not sure of my next steps. I flirted with the idea of seeking another ambassadorial appointment. I was sure that if I got through the WHA gauntlet, I would have support up the chain. At the same time my wife wanted to go back home. The biggest attraction for both of us was that we now had a beautiful young granddaughter, Maya Talamantes, born in September 2000. Antoinette had done all that the U.S. Government could have expected, not only in Tegucigalpa but also at the previous posts. She had been active in the American community, had served as Community Liaison Officer at two posts (Panama and Ecuador), participated in the English-speaking women's groups at each of the posts, had done countless hours of volunteer work in the local settings, and had joined me in multiple site visits at all of the posts in which we had served. Her presence at all of these events served to enhance the personal relationship I wanted to have with officials and the public with whom I was visiting. Understandably, she was eager for something different, where she could devote more time to our family and to other interests, including art.

I loved every minute of my job but, after some 35 years in the Federal government, including 21 years abroad, it was time to do something else. I was not sure what that would be, but I assumed (incorrectly given my experience during the first two years back home) that things would work out and that I would quickly land a good job based in D.C. with one of the many contracting firms engaged with USAID or with one of the many NGOs (non-governmental organizations) based in the D.C. area. I knew that USAID wanted me back, even extending, without consulting with me, my TIC (Time in Grade) date for another four years, to 2006. I honestly did not want to do the same work I had done before. I may have accepted an appointment as a USAID Assistant Administrator, but none of those Senate-confirmed positions was opened at the time. Otto Reich, Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs, called one day and offered me a newly created position of coordinator for Cuban issues, overseeing the various Cuba-related activities being undertaken by a multitude of Federal agencies. I was grateful for his interest but the last thing I wanted to do at that point was to jump into the frying pan of U.S. - Cuba relations, particularly the highly politicized domestic side of the issue. So I went ahead and filed my retirement papers, with a separation date of November 30, 2002, to coincide with the end of the excellent FSI (Foreign Service Institute) Retirement Seminar. My three years as Chief of Mission would end in early August, but I agreed to postpone my departure until early September to reduce the amount of lapsed time between my departure and my successor's arrival. Ambassador-designate Larry Palmer was due to arrive in mid-September if the Senate hearings went smoothly (which they did).

Q. What did you do after your departure date was announced?

ALMAGUER: The period between our last Fourth of July party and our September 2, 2002 departure was hectic. It included the usual farewell events hosted by a multitude of groups and by the Government. I was invited to address the Honduran Congress, received the Order of Morazán (the highest civilian honor Honduras awards) from the Foreign Minister and my wife and I were personal guests of both former President Flores and incumbent President Maduro at their respective homes. Most of these events received

wide coverage in the media and one of the newspapers published a Supplement on the day we left covering my time in Honduras.

Q. That's quite a tribute….

The airplane story

ALMAGUER: This period between July and September also saw one of our most exciting (or perhaps scariest) moments in our Foreign Service experience. Christopher Columbus sailed to the Americas four times and it was only in his last voyage (in 1502) that he stepped on the American mainland. He and his party allegedly landed in what is now Trujillo in the North Coast of Honduras on a Sunday in August. He had among his crew a priest and when the party came ashore, the priest said Mass. This episode is celebrated by the Catholic Church as the first Mass ever said in the Mainland of the Americas. It also coincided with the naming of Honduras. The bay in which they landed is quite deep and it is said that Columbus was impressed by its "honduras," or "*depth*" in Spanish. The Honduras name stuck. This 500th anniversary was a big event, with all of the Presidents of Central America participating, along with all of the cardinals and bishops of the region. The Vatican was represented by another group of VIPs. The Diplomatic community was also invited. Most of the other ambassadors wanted to go but feared that the helicopter transport being provided the Honduran Air Force was not safe. I received numerous calls from them asking me to include them in our transport. Unfortunately, I could not do that because SOUTHCOM did not have a Chinook available. Hence, we were limited to our six-seat C-12 piloted by our recently arrived naval attachés at the Embassy. Those six seats were occupied by my wife and me, the newly-arrived DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission) and his wife, the USAID Mission Director, and one of my bodyguards. We took off on a beautiful day for a 45-minute ride to Trujillo.

Trujillo itself is a small town with an inadequate airport with a short runway that was adjacent to a four-story hotel. As we approached the airport, we could see that the tarmac was not only full of small airplanes, but also mingling among them were dozens of arriving guests. As the pilots approached the landing strip everything looked normal to them. However, they could see the crowd down below frantically motioning to us not to land. Our pilot quickly pulled back and managed to clear the hotel for another try at landing. Again, nothing unusual was showing up in the gauges and they assumed that the crowd was simply alerting our pilots of people near the runway. However, on this second attempt, at a lower altitude, the signal from the crowd was even more incessant and this time we barely cleared the hotel rooftop. Further, the "stall" warning began its incessant beep. It was not clear that we had enough forward speed to maintain a normal flight sequence. That was one of the tensest moments that I could recall.

The pilots managed to regain full control of the aircraft and finally were able to diagnose the problem as a result of conversations with the control tower: our left wheel was not engaged in its proper locked position for landing. Any landing that we did would have to be at best a "controlled crash." The pilots, who were visibly sweating, informed us that

we would be returning to Tegucigalpa for an emergency landing there – not a comfortable thought! My wife was the first to suggest that we go to Soto Cano, with its far-safer approach, longer runway and well-trained American emergency personnel.

We circled the Soto Cano runway for what seemed like two hours as we burned fuel and the staff on the ground prepared for the crash landing. We could see fire engines, ambulances and personnel wearing "HAZMAT" (hazardous material) uniforms. Our group was remarkably silent and subdued. I guess we were all deep into our own thoughts. As the time came to land, the pilots advised us that we would fly very low and very slowly, that they would remove the emergency door panel to give us quicker egress once we were in the runway, and that they would turn off the two engines, allowing us to glide in. The biggest fear at this point was out-of-control spinning once the plane touched the ground and tipped to the left. It certainly was eerie to be coming for a landing with the silent engines and only the sound of the wind outside. The landing on the right wheel was very smooth, followed soon thereafter by the tilting of the plane to the left – but it did not spin! We were able to rush out in seconds to our waiting rescuers. All of us were physically sound. As I was rushing to the grassy area someone with a portable phone followed me. It was President Maduro to check on our status and to tell us that the Mass had been postponed until the participants knew that we were safe and sound. We were glad that the Mass would not be turned into a requiem for the victims! I also learned that the State Department Situation Room was following the story as it unfolded – I suppose that a dead ambassador would command some headlines. I was honored to hear that Secretary Powell was following developments and send us his best wishes after he was informed that we were safe and sound.

After a late lunch at Soto Cano, some commissary shopping and some rest, we were offered to return us to Tegucigalpa either by an Army vehicle or a helicopter. I chose the helicopter to help us overcome the impact of the events of that day. I did not want to be shy about flying again. We arrived in Tegucigalpa safe and sound. (Sadly, we learned soon after our departure from Honduras that those helicopter pilots were killed in a training exercise.) When we arrived home, the Honduran Cardinal (Oscar Andres Rodriguez Maradiaga) called to share his and the Church's happiness that we had survived the ordeal. Of course, the fellow diplomats to whom we had denied a ride in our "safer" plane could not help but crack jokes about it. It was quite a grand ending to a very exiting three years in Honduras.

The day we left for the U.S., I was touched by the fact that not only the Country Team was there at the airport to wish us well, but also the Cardinal and several Government Ministers, who broke protocol in doing so.

Q. Quite a story…. What transpired next?

ALMAGUER: We had been home for only a few days when I received a call from the Department asking me to join the Secretary, who was going to swear-in Larry Palmer that morning. The traditional, well-planned swearing-in event had been moved forward by a few days to accommodate Secretary Powell's schedule. I was pleased to learn that the

Secretary was now participating in these ceremonies. As I mentioned earlier, Secretary Albright did not seem to share Secretary Powell's interest in being involved. As someone reminded me, the military takes "Change-of-Command" ceremonies very seriously and Powell correctly viewed these swearing-in events in a similar light. My respect for Powell grew further when, after the ceremony, and with many of the well-wishers eager to shake the Secretary's hands, he made a quick detour through the crowd to speak with me, thanking me for my many years of service. "Well-done," he said. Powell was a class act!!

Post-Ambassadorial Period (2002 – 2004)

Retirement Seminar and the USAID Iraq Taskforce

Q. So, what happened next?

ALMAGUER: Between the time I came back in September and official retirement on November 30, my wife and I attended the excellent FSI Retirement Seminar. At the annual USAID Awards Ceremony in early November, I received USAID's Distinguished Career Award. I also began to make contact with potential employers for my upcoming "second career" and soon discovered that I would have to work harder at that task. Something I found distressing was to hear from a least two potential employers that the many years of public sector service would hinder my prospects since I, presumably, "did not speak the private sector language." There was much truth to that but also some biases that I had not anticipated. The phrase "good enough for government work" seems to suggest that those of us who worked in government and had successful careers were nevertheless tainted by the widespread notion that government does not expect as much from its employees. Of course, I cannot speak for the totality of government, but what characterized all of the agencies for which I had worked since 1967 (the Peace Corps, the Office of Economic Opportunity, USAID and the Department of State) was a total commitment to the mission, and incredibly hard-working and dedicated staff and capacity to work effectively across political and cultural boundaries. It frankly annoyed me (and still does) to hear disparaging remarks about public service. At the same time, it seemed that I was more likely to succeed in my quest for a second career in a setting that interacted closely with the public sector.

A few weeks before my retirement date of November 30, I received a call from Andrew Natsios, who was the Administrator of USAID. I visited with him and he asked me to reconsider retirement and join him in setting up a "task force" (starting from scratch) to help USAID be prepared in case the White House decided that we needed to go after Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Like me, he was of the view that, as of November 2002, war against Iraq had less than a 50% probability of happening. Any preparation by USAID for such an eventuality would have to be done quietly and below radar screens since it was not yet politically appropriate for USAID to be making contingency plans. Administrator Natsios had been the Director of USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) during the Reagan Administration and he was well versed in the

capabilities of both the civilian and military agencies in Government to deal with both natural and human-made disasters. USAID's involvement in case of war was likely to consist of three overlapping parts: a humanitarian response, post-war reconstruction and subsequent development cooperation. The immediate humanitarian response in this case would likely involve the movement of civilian refugees and the need to respond with basic necessities such as potable water, sanitation food and shelter for affected civilian populations. At the time, media reports indicated that Saddam Hussein was prepared to cause an environmental disaster by blowing up oil fields, storage facilities and refineries. It was also speculated that he would put his heavy weapons in hospitals and schools as a way of maximizing casualties. USAID would no doubt be asked to play a major role in this phase and would have to be ready to do so immediately after the hostilities commenced. Natsios speculated that preparing USAID to respond soon after the first wave of military attacks against Iraq would be the major immediate role of this unnamed and unannounced Task Force. He wanted me to head at least this first phase of the effort. The second phase would consist of the post-war reconstruction effort (for example, rebuilding damaged hospitals and schools, as well stabilizing the flow of food and other supplies to where they would be needed). The third phase, further down the road, would be the more traditional USAID development cooperation program with whatever friendly authorities replaced the Saddam regime.

Q: Right.

ALMAGUER: I told Natsios that I was honored that he would have considered me for that role, but that I really did not want to do this since it was in a setting (the Middle East) that I knew little about. Further, while I had a good reputation as a manager and had prior experience assembling and organizing teams (as in the case of the Eastern Europe program), I suggested that there had to be better prepared people for the task at hand. But he was insistent, suggesting that my proven skills of working effectively across bureaucratic lines would be my strongest asset. I had the impression (although he did not share anything with me) that he may already have had run-ins with other agencies, perhaps even at the White House, on what role USAID would play. I was flattered by his strong interest in having me assume leadership of this initiative but I was too far along in the process of filing the multitude of retirement papers. I felt that I had to go through with plans to retire on November 30. I also assumed (correctly, as it turned out) that it would be easier to resign from the unnamed "USAID Iraq taskforce" if I was there as a temporary rehired annuitant or on contract. I am so glad I followed my instinct on my retirement plans. Nevertheless, I accepted his request and was I back at work at USAID, on a Personal Services Contract, on the Monday after my "retirement" from Federal service.

That arrangement lasted seven days! Since then I have said several times that my seven working days on the Iraq taskforce was as traumatic as anything that I have ever done.

Q: Seven days only?

ALMAGUER: Yes, because that's how long it took for me to realize that I was a mismatch – in the wrong setting at the wrong time and in a working environment that I did not enjoy. I did not share the perspective of key players in senior positions at the White House and felt that I would be trapped into something that I did not want to be a part of if I did not move on quickly. Also, out of respect for Natsios, I wanted to give him an opportunity to find a replacement before too many decisions involving USAID were made at higher levels. It was an ironic situation to be in: In the 35 years of work in the Federal Government, I rarely had a substantive issue with regard to my assigned responsibilities – and even when I did, as in the case of the 1996 USAID Reduction in Force (RIF), I always felt that my input would help improve a bad situation. In this case, I saw no way that this could happen and I had the freedom that I would not have had earlier in my career to "walk away" if I thought it was the appropriate thing to do – which I did.

Q: So, what happened?

ALMAGUER: First, it became obvious to me that having been away from USAID since 1999, over three years, had made me a bit rusty with regards to its operations. Staff turnovers and procedural changes during that period meant that I was not going to be up-to-speed in identifying and recruiting USAID staff for the Iraq team. I quickly opted to work closely with the OFDA team and the Bureau for Humanitarian Response and Food Aid, which amalgamated a number of previously independent offices dealing with rapid response requirements. It seemed odd to me that the leadership of that Bureau, knowing full well that the planning for an Iraqi humanitarian crisis belonged in that bureau, would be so welcoming and agreeable to let an informal Iraq taskforce take the lead: a behavior not common in any bureaucracy. The same was true for the geographic bureau handling Middle East Affairs. They were supportive but, from my perspective, too willing to let this issue be overseen from elsewhere. It was clear that at lot of interagency bureaucratic exchanges had already taken place and that many of my new contacts within the USAID bureaucracy felt that USAID was going to be put in a "lose-lose" situation. I was speculating, of course, but it was the only way I could explain the eagerness some of the key USAID players seemed to convey in helping me "take over" this "hot potato."

The issue was not so much whether we should go to war or not. As Government employees, everyone would no doubt salute the flag and support whatever decision the President made. More likely, many found the interagency process on this issue, particularly centralization of decision-making at the White House, too exhausting to tackle. Within a couple of days I got a taste of what others, no doubt, had already experienced.

On the third day on the job, and after a round of interviews with key players within USAID, I attended a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) at the office of the Senior Director for Middle East Affairs, Elliott Abrams. I assumed this would be a "get-acquainted" and planning session, involving my counterparts from other agencies and me. Clearly, the NSC was the obvious center of coordination and decision-making on issues related to a possible U.S. response in the aftermath of a war. Elliott Abrams, as

head of Middle East Affairs for the NSC, was the obvious person to chair that effort. I was acquainted with Abrams from his time as Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs during the Reagan Administration. In fact, I had traveled with him to Bolivia as part of the U.S. delegation attending the presidential inauguration of Victor Paz Estenssoro in August 1985. I knew Abrams to be a feisty person with strong convictions. He was involved in the Iran-Contra affair and with Lt. Colonel Oliver North during President Reagan's time, among some of his activities in previous roles under Republican presidents. For me, this meeting started in an awkward manner. Because of tighter post-9/11 security procedures at the White House and the Old Executive Building next door (where most NSC offices are located), I arrived a few minutes late. I quickly realized that this meeting involved less information sharing and discussion than one designed to impart instructions. Being late for such a meeting is always uncomfortable but, at the very least, I expected some type of greeting. "Good afternoon, have a seat" would have been good enough. Abrams just pointed to a chair and that was that. The other person who dominated the room was Robin Cleveland, whom I believe was Abrams' right hand person from her senior job at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). As a Congressional senior staffer for the Republican side in previous administrations, she was well known to USAID staffers, who considered her extremely intelligent and, like Abrams, hard charging and with strong opinions.

Q. How did the meeting go?

ALMAGUER: It was quickly evident that the rest of us were there principally as notetakers. When Abrams and Cleveland asked what the respective agencies were doing to get ready, it seemed to me that most were waiting for instructions, voicing willingness to engage as soon as it was clear what the White House wanted for the post-war period. When my turn came, I indicated that USAID was putting a team together, focused on identifying staff who were experts in disaster response and reconstruction. USAID was assuming that its role initially would be humanitarian in nature, requiring the delivery of urgent supplies to the internally displaced Iraqis. This would include potable water, sanitation, food and shelter. USAID also was considering its reconstruction efforts after a war that presumably would damage many schools, hospitals and other essential facilities.

Abrams' reaction caught me by surprise: "Are you saying that we're going to blow up schools?" I responded by noting that all wars bring about civilian casualties and that, according to media reports, Saddam would probably unleash an environmental disaster by blowing up oil fields and by placing his weapons of mass destruction in public buildings. This was all speculative, of course, but it seemed reasonable to plan for that eventuality if we wanted to minimize human suffering and get the country's vital services restored. He discounted that possible outcome and said that what he wanted USAID to do was to help return the population to normal activities. He rejected media speculation about the aftermath of a U.S.-led invasion. He then said that what USAID needed to do was to ensure that when Iraqi students returned to classes within a couple of weeks after the end of hostilities, they would have new textbooks replacing Saddam propaganda with the factual history of the country. He envisioned having backpacks and school supplies issued to students, perhaps with the U.S. and Iraqi flags printed into the backpacks. I

reminded Abrams that, assuming this was the priority, USAID would be handicapped since we had not been in Iraq for a long time, if ever; USAID's small cadre of education specialists had limited knowledge of the Iraqi education system; and, furthermore, this would require major expenditures up-front, long before there was a White House decision to invade Iraq. Where would the money come from and under what authority? I reminded the group that the USAID Administrator managed his programs under tight oversight and restrictions on the part of Congressional appropriators. Any planned shift in the authorized use of resources would likely require Congressional notification. I emphasized that, in my opinion, the Administrator would require legal authority to take monies from on-going programs for a non-existing program. "Well, tell Natsios to find a way and put up the money," was his response. I was further struck by his assertion that, in the long-term, money would not be an issue since all costs would ultimately be financed by Iraq upon the prompt restoration of oil exports. The "take-away" for me was that the rational assumption that there would be major humanitarian and reconstruction needs that required prompt USAID attention was not the premise accepted by this NSC team; rather, the assumption seemed to be that the post-war humanitarian and reconstruction phase would be minimal and that, eventually, the new Iraq Government would either pay upfront or reimburse us for our costs.

Q. How did Natsios take the message that you brought back to him?

ALMAGUER: Not well! Essentially, Natsios said, 'Well, go back and tell him that I don't have any money and that I cannot take it from existing programs to finance a program that does not exist." Although Natsios did not say it, I assumed that he shared my perception that any war with Iraq would lead to a humanitarian crisis for which USAID would be required to respond in a major way and quickly. I subsequently attended an interagency videoconference at the State Department with many of the people who participated in the Abrams meeting at the NSC. At the margins of that videoconference I had an opportunity to exchange thoughts with some the Department's experts on the region and familiar with the planning underway at the Pentagon. It was clear that they all saw a more complicated post-war scenario if Iraq and the U.S. went to war. Yet, our instructions continued to be based on a much rosier outcome. I felt like a fish out of water since I could not argue the politics of the region and I had no knowledge of military preparations. Soon thereafter I want back to Administrator Natsios and said, "It seems to me that I am not the right person to make the USAID case for how we should plan for the post-war period. I don't know the newer pool of USAID talent that could be tapped at this stage. Further, it would appear that the best USAID approach is to have the relevant Assistant Administrators, who are political appointees, argue USAID's views on planning priorities." Natsios was not happy that I was dropping out. However, I subsequently shared my decision with a couple of good friends in senior positions at USAID and they told me that they were not surprised at my decision and only wondered how long I would stay.

This was not the most pleasant way to end my Federal service. Subsequent events more than demonstrated that wars have human consequences. While Saddam did not cause the environmental Armageddon that some feared, it was a long time before schools could be

reopened and, as far as I know, we have not been reimbursed for the billions of dollars American taxpayers committed to this effort. While I wish I could have been a more productive contributor to USAID's planning efforts, I know I made the right decision. In March 2003, some three months after I left, the war in Iraq commenced. I was in Colombia at that moment, carrying out a short-tem consultancy in public administration financed by USAID in support of Colombia's efforts to reform that country's public sector institutions. I was happy to be there.

Q. I assume you were still trying to line-up a longer-term position.

Sierra Leone Evaluation

ALMAGUER: That is correct, but until that happened, I lined up number of short-term consultancies, the most notable of which was in Sierra Leone, my first significant experience with Sub-Saharan Africa. My classmate from the Senior Seminar, Peter Chaveas, was at that time serving as U.S. ambassador to Sierra Leone and my former USAID colleague, Annette Adams, was serving USAID Mission Director for Guinea and Sierra Leone (based in Guinea). Sierra Leone had suffered from one of the worse civil wars in that region's history. It raged for eleven years, from 1991 to 2002. Both sides appear to have used horrendous tactics against the civilian population: rape as a tool of war, mutilation of arms and legs, internal displacement of people and other inhumane practices. At the end of the war, USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) was called on to render assistance through a transition period. By all accounts, USAID did a terrific job in a difficult environment to help in the process of healing both the human and physical scars of that war. By early 2003, the ambassador and USAID were ready to consider longer-term development assistance. I was asked to spend a month there to help identify areas where U.S. development and humanitarian cooperation would benefit the healing process. It was an incredible experience. Another former USAID colleague and I were deployed to some of the most difficult and isolated areas, supported by a Russian helicopter with Ukrainian pilots, who ferried us to some of the locations. We also traveled a great deal by land (including the arduous drive from Conakry, Guinea to Freetown, Sierra Leone.) On several nights, we were lodged with Pakistani soldiers, under the U.N. banner, who had been deployed in the countryside to help maintain the peace. To say that conditions in those camps were primitive is an understatement.

Q: Yes. What did you find in Sierra Leone?

ALMAGUER: I was fascinated by Sierra Leone and its people. One of the good things about Sierra Leone is that it's more homogeneous than most West African countries. Secondly, it has world-class natural beauty, both in the countryside and along its Atlantic coast and beaches. Freetown itself was a far better place in which to be stationed than decrepit Conakry, Guinea. If anyone needs proof of human resiliency, Sierra Leone was the place to witness that resilience. By the time I visited the country (only a few months after the end of the civil war), people were beginning to return to their villages and reclaim the land that had turned to bush. And they were accommodating to the fact that many family members had been killed or mutilated; yet, these victims persevered. There

is no question that the country not only needed continued OTI support, but also longer term assistance in rebuilding the country's agricultural base, its road infrastructure and its health system, among other long list of needs. U.S. support for the transition phase was visible everywhere, but usually under the banner of American NGOs (non-governmental organizations), including CARE, World Vision and many others. One of the issues that I had (which is an issue in many other countries) is that with the expanding practice of contracting out the delivery of U.S. foreign aid, few people may have recognized that the assistance they were receiving from these NGOs actually came from U.S. taxpayers. I understand the logistic and political rationale for this practice. Nevertheless, I would prefer for U.S. official assistance to be more visible.

By the time we arrived in Sierra Leone, the country was back on its feet, which was incredible given what they had been through. Other donors were also very active, including of course the British, since this was a former British colony and it was Britain that mediated the cease-fire and the tenuous peace. They were good partners to have. Our report encouraged the rapid expansion of U.S. aid. Unfortunately, insufficient resources made that an unlikely proposition.

U.N. Human Rights Commission

Q. I understand that you served as a U.S. delegate to the 2004 Annual Meeting of the U.N. Human Rights Commission in Geneva. How was that?

ALMAGUER: Yes. Roger Noriega, Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs, along with the Department's Bureaus for Human Rights and International Organizations (IO), invited me to join the 2004 U.S. delegation. This annual meeting, lasting up to six weeks, in Geneva, Switzerland, always generates some controversy. Some of the most notorious human rights violators are voting members of the Commission and every year there are controversial resolutions, often directed at Israel. The U.S. has had a policy of raising at most of these annual meetings the issue of Cuba's human rights record. Cuba usually mounts a vigorous campaign in opposition to any resolution condemning Cuba. That country not only secures the support of some of our biggest detractors, but also counters with its own allegations of U.S. wrongdoing. That year, events in Iraq and Afghanistan provided fuel to Cuba's charges against the U.S., including the 2003 allegations of torture and inhuman treatment of Iraqi prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison. A U.S. resolution that year condemning Cuba would require much effort on our part.

Noriega and his Department colleagues in other bureaus asked me to be the point person in the U.S. delegation to lead the effort to achieve a Commission resolution condemning Cuba. I knew going in that this was going to be a difficult task. But I really had no idea the lengths to which both countries go to pass or derail such a resolution. For the U.S., this annual resolution was an important one domestically, including for political bragging rights in Florida. To complicate matters, some countries that could have been supportive were not particularly supportive of the Bush Administration and were going to be reluctant to grant a victory to that Administration. I spend a month in Geneva in what often seemed like hand-to-hand combat with many of the delegations from Latin America

who preferred to remain neutral. Some delegations from Africa claimed that they were going to go along with us, but in the end voted to abstain or against the resolution. I was both pleased and surprised at the length the U.S. would go to gain votes. For example, there were a couple of instances in which I shared with Washington concerns about wavering delegations and, in at least one case – probably more – the President himself reached to his counterpart to plead the U.S. case.

My best allies on the ground were Honduras, which had agreed to sponsor the Cuba resolution, and the Czech Republic, which shared our frustration that many delegations preferred to remain neutral. I learned a great deal about behind-the-scenes politics within the U.N. system. I also learned that for some countries having their president tell us that they would support us was not enough – their ambassadors in Geneva acted as independent agents, perhaps as a result of bribes or threats on the part of the Cubans. The vote condemning Cuba's human rights record passed in the end, with a U.S. "landslide" victory of 24 for and 22 against. I felt very good about that and it appears that the tally caught the Cubans by surprise. A Cuban-American observer who was helping the U.S. delegation by sharing stories about Cuba's human rights record with wavering delegations suffered minor injuries when a Cuban delegate punched him in the head minutes after the voting. Both our ambassador the to U.N. system in Geneva and I were nearby and witnessed the fracas. Soon thereafter, the Cuban communist paper, *Granma*, published an article claiming that I lied about my record as a career officer with Peace Corps and USAID, further claiming that I really was a spy for the CIA. Although the article was ridiculous, I was pleased that it reflected the fact that the Cubans were very unhappy with the outcome of the Cuba resolution and with me in particular. It must have meant that I did well the job to which I was assigned.

Civilian Agencies' Role in War

ALMAGUER: The other interesting consultancy that I did during this period was with the U.S. Military, through its contractor, General Dynamics. The Joint Forces Command, based in the Norfolk, Virginia, area, has responsibility for planning for future wars. One of the things their experience in Iraq had taught the military was the need to depend upfront and a great deal more on nongovernmental organizations and on civilian Federal agencies with experience with managing complex disaster relief and reconstruction programs. The military in the early days in Iraq were not only fighting rearguard actions against the enemy, for which they were well-trained, but also having to clean litter in the streets of Baghdad, provide for civilian security, and engage in some heavy-duty humanitarian and development work because the Pentagon (more specifically Secretary Rumsfeld and his immediate collaborators) did not engage USAID and the State Department early enough and with sufficient resources to be ready to support the military in the war's aftermath. Hence, the military was stretched to the limit. Part of the problem was the generalized lack of information on the part of the Pentagon and the military leadership on the type of expertise and resources civilian agencies like USAID could bring to the planning table.

Through the General Dynamics contract, I was able to participate in a number of training programs and exercises at Joint Forces Command in Norfolk and at Southern Command in Miami, role playing on behalf of the civilian agencies, particularly USAID, but also bringing in other agencies' assets, as well as NGO assets. The latter was particularly difficult for the military planners to comprehend or accept. Some could not fully understand how it was possible for these NGOs to draw from U.S. appropriated resources and yet be independent agents that retained discretion on how and when to respond. It was a great learning exercise that could perhaps lead to better unitization of civilian resources in future U.S. military engagements. I enjoyed those training opportunities that allowed the U.S. military planners to better understand U.S. assets that are available in the civilian world.

Closing this round of interviews

Q. Any concluding thoughts as we bring this round of interviews to a close?

ALMAGUER: One of the rewards of being back in the U.S. is having more time to dedicate to family. Throughout this set of interviews, I have alluded to, but insufficiently mentioned the role of family in this Foreign Service career. My wife and kids have had to bear a burden that has gone insufficiently recognized. This, of course, is true for all Foreign Service families. Military families bear similar burdens, but the military seems to have done a far better job of identifying those burdens and responding to them, both at home and abroad. Granted, our families also lead exciting lives, with the opportunity our service grants them to learn other languages, experience other cultures and become more attuned to the challenges and opportunities that more sedentary families may not experience. I painfully remember our move from Washington to Ecuador in 1986, when our daughter was eleven, going or twelve - a very formative moment in any child's life - and she cried the entire way there. She may not have said it, but probably was silently asking, "Daddy, why are you doing this to me?" And then, after gaining new friends and experiences, we come back home four years later, when she is about to enter 10th Grade at a school she did not know, with classmates who probably had no interest in what she did beforehand, and feeling excluded by classmates who had prior opportunities to bond. It was like being a fish out of water, having to answer nonsensical questions such as, "Do they wear clothes where you came from?" She had to relearn habits more in tune with U.S. norms and shed habits foreign to U.S. culture, such as kissing fellow students when you meet. This is one of the reasons why my wife said to me in 2002, "I am not moving again!"

Q: [Laughter.]

ALMAGUER: As I think about the years we have been reviewing, I feel privileged and honored to have served the U.S. government and my adopted country. There was not a day that I did not think of what an incredible experience it has been to arrive in the U.S. as am immigrant with no knowledge of the language and people and to spend the better part of my life representing this country, the best and greatest there is. I am sure my family shares in that sentiment. Special kudos go to my wife, Antoinette, who followed

me everywhere and when I would plan for a dinner party or other social event to further both U.S. interests and my career, voila, the dinner was served and our guests' needs were met. …and yes, we had "servants," but these things didn't just happen. Someone had to orchestrate them and that person almost always was Antoinette! And our two kids have turned well, no doubt getting ready to make wonderful contributions to the future well being of our family and of our country.

Q: I'm glad you're saying this here. Well, Frank, this has been a long trip.

ALMAGUER: Yes, it has been amazing!

Q: Well, we'll stop at this point then.

ALMAGUER: Yes, I have appreciated the opportunity.

End of interview