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

AMBASSADOR JAMES C. CASON

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is the 12th of November, 2009--

CASON: Friday the 13th.

Q: That's right. It's Friday the 13th of November, 2009. This is an interview with Ambassador James C. Cason being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training and I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy. And all right, do you go by Jim or?

CASON: Jim.

Q: OK Jim, let's start at the beginning. When and where were you born?

CASON: I was born in Atlantic City New Jersey on November 14th, 1944.

Q: All right. Can you tell me something about the Cason side of the family?

CASON: Yes I can. I know quite a bit as my hobby is genealogy.

Q: Good.

CASON: And I've been working on my family history for some 50 years.

Q: Well, what can you tell me?

CASON: First, I'm getting ready now to publish the family history.

Q: OK.

CASON: The Casons were in the first Jamestown Colony.

Q: Mm-hmm.

CASON: Three Cason brothers worked as laborers in the Colony between 1615-1620. One was killed by the Indians and the others died of illness or starvation. After the disbandment of the Colony, Thomas Cason came over from England around 1630, settling in the area of Lynnhaven in Lower Norfolk County, Virginia. He was a prosperous tobacco planter, and one of the original first families of America. Most of his descendants in the succeeding 19 generations also were farmers and tobacco planters, up to about 1900. Around that time one of my relatives became a wheelwright. Tobacco farming in the area was no longer profitable. The leaf sucked nutrients from the soil, which became worthless without fertilizer. Beginning about 1700, Casons moved south and then out west, looking for better opportunities than Virginia could afford. My great grandfather became a bookkeeper for the Norfolk Water Works for the city of Norfolk. And then my grandfather, who I did not know well, worked as a haberdasher. My father was the first Cason to go to college. He graduated from William and Mary, went into

insurance in Boston, and as the War loomed, quit and joined the Navy. He learned to fly in Pensacola, Florida, and became a dive bomber pilot, assigned to the newly christened carrier Hornet.

Q: Hence you were born in Atlantic City.

CASON: Hm?

Q: Hence Atlantic City.

CASON: Yes, that's right, because during the war my mother was living with her family in Atlantic City. Her father was in insurance and banking; she was Miss New Jersey in the Miss America contest, and my father met her when he was assigned to the area in 1943 teaching new Navy pilots to land on carriers.

Q: Oh, I was wondering because my brother was a naval aviator during the war and at one point after the war he was stationed in Atlantic City.

CASON: My father lived and worked all up and down the East coast in those days.

Q: Yes.

CASON: But he was basically a Southerner from Norfolk, or as he would say, "Nawfuc." He was a true gentleman and patriot. The Navy was his career. He flew Douglas Dauntless SDB-4 dive bombers in all the battles of World War II in the Pacific. He participated in Doolittle's Raid as a landing signal officer in 1942, and was in the Battle of the Coral Sea, Leyte Gulf, Midway, all the big carrier battles. He helped sink a cruiser in the Battle of Midway and won the Distinguished Flying Cross and many other awards. After the war we lived in California, Florida, French Morocco, and Virginia. He flew Hurricane hunter planes out of Miami –flying into storms to take measurements. He specialized in hunting Russian submarines, and took the first picture of a Soviet nuclear sub at the North Pole and the famous picture of Russian missiles en route to Cuba during the missile crisis. Eventually he worked his way up to Captain, headed Fleet Air Wing 11 in Jacksonville which had over 100 P2 and P3 patrol bombers, he was Commodore of the Middle East Fleet in the 1960s. And so that was the family I grew up in, a naval aviator's family.

Q: Are there any particular stories of World War II that stand out?

CASON: Oh, many stories, tremendous stories. He was on five carriers that either sank or were disabled. He was always jumping in the water after Kamikaze planes crashed into the ship --

Q: It sounds like the Lexington and the Franklin and --

CASON: Yes, the Hornet as well --

Q: I guess they didn't really want him to come onboard.

CASON: No *(laughs).* He was in the water all the time and dozens of his buddies died but, like most of that generation, he didn't want to talk too much about his exploits or what happened. But I'm lucky. Before my Grandmother died, she gave me my father's letters written from the Hornet and other places during the war, so I had access to his thoughts at the time--

Q: Yes.

CASON: He's dead now. As I said, he didn't want to talk too much about the war years because so many of his friends were killed. His whole war experience was in the Pacific. And he stayed on after the war in naval aviation, ending up with 30 years in the service. And so I grew up in a naval family and moved up and down and around the coast. I lived in 19 places, went to five high schools. In the early 1950s we moved to then French Morocco where my father was Executive Officer of a French naval base from which he flew P2s.

Q: Was that Port Lyau --

CASON: Port Lyautey.

Q: Port Lyautey, Yes.

CASON: So I lived in exotic Port Lyautey during the Moroccan breakaway from France and remember tanks on the base and it was all very exciting and new. I remember playing on the beaches near the Wadi Sabu where our landing craft landed in WWII. We played among the rusting wrecks on weekends. --

Q: Yes.

CASON: I had an Arab and a French maid while there. I used to know some Arabic and some French because of that. The experience of living in French Morocco at that time really peaked my interest in foreign affairs. And I was a stamp collector and I collected stamps from all over the world. That too gave me an abiding interest in the world outside the United States.

Q: Mm-hmm.

CASON: Another thing that peaked my interest in foreign affairs was a teacher I had in those days. I was about eight or nine years old. She urged me to read history books, including Winston Churchill's books on WWII. *The Turn of the Tide* and his other histories of WWII really helped me decide to get involved in world affairs. I decided early in life, before age 12, to become a diplomat.

Q: Just to keep going back a bit. Where did your family fit during the Civil War?

CASON: Where were they?

Q: In the Civil War?

CASON: Oh, they were Confederates, of course. I mean, our family were diehard Southerners.-

Q: Although Norfolk was very quickly in Union hands.

CASON: Right, but, but the citizens around Lynnhaven were staunch Confederates. And a whole bunch of my relatives were Confederate soldiers. And we never had a single Cason in the 15,000 Casons in my family tree that lived in the north. We all came from two Cason branches (Spotsylvania and Norfolk) in Virginia and spread out, all through the United States. And all Casons descend from Thomas Cason of England.

Q: OK, I didn't ask you your mother's side. Where do they come from?

CASON: Some of her relatives came in on the Mayflower. Some of their last names were: Cornell, Bunnell and Curlette. The Curlette family came in through Canada into New England and then New Jersey. And her grandfather was a telegraph operators and her father became a stockbrokers, banker and insurance agent. My father, as I said earlier, met my mother in Atlantic City.

Q: Was he the officer escort or --

CASON: No, he was a handsome, athletic Navy Lieutenant, a war hero. He met her at a social event. A couple of weeks later she broke it off with her boyfriend and they got married shortly thereafter, before he went off to sea again, in 1943. And I came along in 1944.

Q: Yes. All right. Well, how did you find being a navy junior, not an army brat, but a navy junior? How did you find growing up this way, I mean sort of -- did you have brothers? Sisters?

CASON: I have a brother and three sisters; there are five of us.

Q: Where did you fit in the --

CASON: I was the eldest.

Q: Senior.

CASON: I always had really good grades. I was the studious one. And my brother and sisters always chided me, you know, "you're studying too much; go out and party." But I

was serious and I got it from my father who was very much of a, you know, a shape-up-or-ship-out kind of man. He stressed hard work, duty, discipline, fulfilling promises, saving, studying, and getting ahead in life. I learned all that from him. Since we moved so often, I was always the new guy in class at the beginning of the school year, or sometimes in the middle of the year. I strove to make my mark by being the best kid in the class. There was no way I could be on a sports team or be accepted into the cliques in the community, so I became the kid with the best grades. My sisters thought I was kind of nerdy.

Q: Yes. Well, were you much of a reader?

CASON: Oh Yes, I read everything. I mentioned I read all the Winston Churchill books. Whatever books were on my parents shelves that looked inviting I read, along with the newspaper and magazines. I never saw TV until age 12. I studied Latin at one of my many schools and even learned great penmanship and to diagram sentences. All of this stuff that we used to learn in the old days helped me tremendously later in life.

Q: Take apart sentences, yes.

CASON: Yes. And for learning languages, Latin and diagramming sentences were the best things.

Q: Oh Yes.

CASON: And then being around foreign languages when I was in Morocco.

Q: Other than the Winston Churchill books, any other books that you were -- particularly when you were younger, that you recall reading that particularly struck you?

CASON: I can't remember now, but I just remember that I was always reading, always studying. I went to five high schools. At the end of every school year it was time to pack up and go, I knew I had to study to get ahead and be somebody. I was never going to be able to make my mark in sports. And to be known you've got to do something. So I was always the smartest kid in the class and always at the top. And that was sort of how I survived childhood. After class I mowed lawns, and in the morning before school I delivered newspapers. I used my savings to buy stamps for my collection.

Q: Well, while you were growing up was the Naval Academy in your sights or --

CASON: I wore glasses and couldn't do it. I thought about it. But they said well, you could be a supply officer-- something other than a line officer. I said no, thank you. I always had my sights on a diplomatic career.

Q: OK, where did you -- did you run across diplomacy? You know, because this isn't a title that really slips easily into a kid's vocabulary?

CASON: Well, all those Churchill books like *The Turn of the Tide*, talked about diplomacy and the big affairs of state. History and stamp collecting got me into wanting to be involved with foreign affairs. I didn't know much in the beginning about diplomacy, but I knew I wanted to be involved the rest of my life in things foreign. I learned more about diplomacy in high school and the news and became an International Affairs major at Dartmouth College and got an MA in it in graduate school. And I thought that I could contribute to the wellbeing of my country, make a difference, by being a public servant, by joining the Foreign Service.

Q: Did you run across anybody who was in the diplomatic business as a kid?

CASON: Never, never.

Q: So did -- I mean did you set about reading -- did you run across the term Foreign Service at all?

CASON: Nobody knew about the Foreign Service in the places where I lived. But I knew I wanted a career that involved exploring the world, helping my country during the Cold War. Some teachers suggested the best way to do that was to do as President Kennedy suggested, ask what you can do for your country. In high school my civics teacher said I should look into the Foreign Service. So I learned more about it and decided the best way to prepare for the career was to become an International Affairs major, which I did.

Q: Well, where did you graduate from high school?

CASON: Fairfax High School was my last high school. I also attended Nathan Bedford Forest High School in Jacksonville, Annandale High School, Washington and Lee, and Virginia Beach High School.

Q: Good God.

CASON: So I went to five high schools and -- as I said, we moved 19 times up and down the coast, from Carmel, to Miami, Texas, Rhode Island, Virginia.

Q: What were you doing in Carmel?

CASON: My father went to the Monterey Naval Postgraduate School.

Q: Oh that's -- Yes.

CASON: So I was there in the early, early days before Carmel became an exclusive tourist town.

Q: Oh Yes, well --

CASON: My earliest memories are from Carmel.

Q: Yes, well I used to go to Carmel. I was at the Army Language School. I was there 1950, 1951.

CASON: That's about the time we picked up and moved to Arlington.

Q: Did you have your eye pointed -- had anyone counseled you where to go if you wanted to get into the Foreign Service or anything or --

CASON: No, I had a lot of good undergraduate colleges I got into since I graduated in the top two or three of my class, I wanted to go somewhere outside of the South where I'd been living. I got into Duke and Washington Lee and a bunch of other schools. But I had a neighbor who was a Dartmouth graduate who recruited me. I fell in love with Dartmouth after seeing a catalogue with pictures of the snow and beautiful rural campus. I had never been up to New England, and that was my preference. So I chose Dartmouth. They gave me a full scholarship, and helped with graduate school at SAIS as well. It was one of the best decisions I ever made.

Q: When did you go to Dartmouth?

CASON: 1962. I graduated in the class of '66.

Q: Were you picking up anything about -- just to get a little social look -- about segregation and all that? Because you came from a southern --

CASON: Race was never a factor in my childhood. Although from the South, my father was a professional, educated and never showed any bigotry. Nor did my mother. Race just never crossed my mind. I mean I never saw blacks, you know. There were never any blacks in the schools I attended in the South. But at Dartmouth, we had a small number of blacks. I didn't have any prejudices because I'd never been exposed to racism. And the first blacks I met at college were superb students and great people. So while I lived in the South, I was never really a Southerner in the cultural sense.

Q: No, but I was just wondering whether you'd run across any --

CASON: No.

Q: Of course the Navy was pretty white.

CASON: The Navy was white and segregated, and even though we'd grown up in a southern family, my father was not a racist, and so the subject never came up. When I was at Dartmouth the Civil Rights Movement got underway. There were some students who went down to Selma to support desegregation. John Sloan Dickey, who was instrumental in the establishment of the United Nations, was the President of Dartmouth. He instituted a Great Issues course. We studied a lot about civil rights. And that course and my discussions with students opened my eyes to a new reality of the lack of civil

rights for black Americans. Dartmouth offered a small International Affairs major. There were only seven of us in that major, of which three later became ambassadors.

Q: Who are they?

CASON: Allen Keiswetter and John Keane. And John Keane was my predecessor as Ambassador to Paraguay.

Q: I know I've interviewed Keiswetter. Not sure about Keane.

CASON: John Keane.

Q: Did --

CASON: Calvin Silver was a major influence on my decision to specialize in Latin American affairs. He was a great teacher at a time when there was very little good academic research on the hemisphere. He steered me into Latin American studies. After Latin I picked up Spanish. I went abroad to Salamanca in my junior year, which was yet another eye-opener. Got to use Spanish a lot --

Q: This was right in the middle of Franco's dictatorship, no?

CASON: Yes. There were only seven of us from Dartmouth in Salamanca. I lived with a family and learned how little I really knew of Spanish. But I quickly learned a lot of useful vocabulary by studying hard, using flash cards. My Spanish was constantly improving.

Q: What was your impression of Spain at the time?

CASON: It was cold. All I remember was the cold-- they didn't turn the heat on until November. And we were living with a family that didn't have very much money, that's why they wanted to take kids in. And we had to take a bath with water boiled on the stove with a little bit of soap. And I just remember it was black water and *(laughs)* it was freezing in the bathroom. But we were studying and it was an adventure. We went with Professor Russell and studied Unamuno and Ortega y Gasset, and things of that sort. Our focus was on Spanish classic literature. We did a lot of traveling around Spain in the time we were there.

Q: How did Spain strike you at the time?

CASON: At the time it was pretty underdeveloped. We drove around in a SEAT 600D, one of those old cars with a gearshift sticking out of the dashboard. There were gypsy camps and horses on the edge of town. Few foreign tourists came to the city. It was very provincial, not at all cosmopolitan in Salamanca, life was cheap. We had little spending money but ate and drank well and learned to really speak Spanish. The city had a great historical university where we studied. It was a great experience. I went back to

Dartmouth determined more than ever that I wanted to get involved in international affairs.

Q: Did you have any contact with our embassy?

CASON: No. None whatsoever until after I went into graduate school, and then I had contact with the Embassy for the first time in Montevideo where I was studying on a Fulbright Fellowship.

Q: Well, at Dartmouth was there any knowledge at all of the Foreign Affairs community, of the Foreign Service?

CASON: Yes. My professors knew of course of the Foreign Service and suggested we consider it. A number of the International Affairs majors decided we were going to try to get into the Foreign Service. I did well at Dartmouth and had a choice of graduate schools. I picked one –the Johns Hopkins SAIS (School of Advanced International Studies) -- that was known as the school to attend if you wanted a Foreign Service career. The other graduate schools were more focused on preparing graduates for academic careers or business. I got an MA and then went into the PhD program, but I never wanted to be a teacher. I wanted to get enough knowledge to pass the tough Foreign Service exam.

Q: You graduated in '66?

CASON: I graduated in '66 and then I spent four years at SAIS.

Q: By the time you graduated in '66, had Vietnam gotten on to the campus scene or not?

CASON: Oh Yes. I was opposed to the war. I still have the papers I wrote debunking the arguments used for our presence in Vietnam, all the contradictory and inconsistent arguments the USG was using to explain why we were there. I did a lot of research and I became an anti-Vietnam activist.

Q: *What did you do in the summers?*

CASON: Every summer I worked. While I was at Dartmouth I worked as a laborer for the National Parks Service. My neighbor was Head of the Parks Service and offered me a job paying something like $2 an hour, big money at the time. I needed pocket money and wanted to get out of that Hanover cold and come to Washington, where my parents were living, and get out in the sun. I was the only white kid in the grounds crew. I worked with Mr. Green, Mr. White, and Mr. Black. I picked up garbage from every part of the National Capital Parks system. I watered trees, picked up trash, put up and took down crowd-control fences, and hoed weeds out of sidewalk cracks. I was picking up trash with my stick and burlap bag on the grounds of the Washington Monument when Martin Luther King made his famous I had a Dream Speech before millions of spectators.

Q: Oh Yes.

CASON: All the guys I worked with were black laborers and we had a great relationship. They seemed to be amused at having an Ivy League brain working hard alongside them. They used to stash beer along the GW Parkway for me to drink as I picked up trash in the summer heat of DC while walking to Mt. Vernon.

Q: Well, where did your family fall politically?

CASON: They were conservative -- they were Republicans. However, my mother actually worked in the White House for Jacqueline Kennedy. I don't know how she got that job, but she worked in the White House for the Kennedys, but we were Republican.

Q: And religious? Where, where --

CASON: Episcopal on my mother's side and Baptist on my father's.

Q: Uh-huh.

CASON: We were never active church goers. My father was away at sea often and my mother had five kids to care for, so there was a serious logistical challenge to going to church. We moved so much we just -- it was hard for us to, you know, to get rooted anywhere. Our life revolved around the family, studying and daily chores as well as before and after school work. We got used to one and two year stays, on bases, before it was time to pick up and move on.

Q: Yes.

CASON: You know, I actually looked forward to the next move, to the next challenge. That attitude helped prepare me for the Foreign Service. After a stint in one place, my view was, all right, we've done this place; let's move to the next one.

Q: Yes.

CASON: Off to another community and another high school. Let's see if I can make it there. And it was challenging, stimulating and often lonely, but overall a lot of fun. One of my sons is into that lifestyle now. He's a naval pilot, an officer like my father. That kind of a peripatetic life was one that was great for instilling discipline. I knew that I was not going to get ahead because of my friends, and that if I didn't study no one was going to look after me. I was never going to inherit money or marry into a rich family from the community. We didn't live anywhere long enough to make those kinds of friends.

Q: Then you went to SAIS.

CASON: Correct--right after finishing Dartmouth

Q: You were there from when to when?

CASON: 1966 to 1970.

Q: Did you get your master's -- your PhD --

CASON: I got my master's in '68 and then got a Fulbright to go to Uruguay where I wrote "The History of the Communist Party and the Left in Uruguay." Then I came back and finished my course work, took most of the exams, and wrote most of the dissertation. But in 1970 I took the Foreign Service exam and passed. The State Department said are you coming in or not? Selective Service was asking if I was ready to join the Army at the same time. And so I joined State in July 1970. I rationalized I would be able to finish writing my dissertation later and get my PhD. But, alas, I never finished it. I went to El Salvador and the press of work kept me from further academic work.

Q: Well, let's talk about SAIS at that time. Did SAIS have as you might say a political leaning or not or where did it fit?

CASON: We were concerned about the war and being drafted. I was anti-Vietnam War. Almost all of us were out marching in Washington on the big demonstrations against the war. And we all watched, you know when Nixon resigned and were happy that he did. I would say that the campus was liberal, very liberal. I wasn't liberal other than in relation to Vietnam. But I had a tremendous amount of coursework to do, you know, and I remained deep in my books. After two years I got my master's and SAIS invited me to stay on for the PhD program. I took advantage of the Fulbright and moved to Montevideo to do dissertation research. I stayed on for another six or eight months, spending almost a year and a half in Uruguay. That was in the period of the growth of the Tupamaros guerilla movement in the country. This was the world's first urban guerilla movement based on middle and upper class students and disaffected urban workers.

Q: Yes.

CASON: I happened to live with an anarchist who --

Q: You were in Montevideo?

CASON: I lived in Montevideo with a poor family, with a guy named Ulysses Graceras who was a sociologist that had studied at Notre Dame. He helped orient me. I engrossed myself in buying all the books I could on the country and in researching the left at the National University. I did a lot of electoral research, obtaining original electoral records for every block for 60 years in Montevideo. I tied all that in with socioeconomic data to try to explain why there was a Communist Party in a middle class country like Uruguay. And of course the embassy was very interested in what I was discovering. My Fulbright sponsor was in USIS (United States Information Service). I was there during the landing on the moon and it was an exciting time to be there and an exciting time to be studying the Communist Party when the guerilla movement was starting.

Q: What was the relationship between Tupamaros and the Communist Party?

CASON: The Communist Party was a Soviet oriented Party. The Soviets were interested in using Uruguay as a platform for operating in the Southern Cone. They were not interested in Uruguay per se. Their orders to the local Communist Party were not to rock the boat. The Uruguayan Government threatened to expel the USSR Embassy if the local communists got to obstreperous. The Soviets did not support or favor the Tupamaros. The Tupamaros were really a middle class rebellion of young people who saw no future in a country that was growing poorer and poorer after the formation of European Union and the loss of historical markets that kept the economy afloat. Uruguay was a small country that was artificially created by Britain as a buffer between Argentina and Brazil. Uruguay lived off of wars in cold places. When we stopped having wars in cold places nobody wanted beef and leather and meat from Uruguay any more. The European Common Market started setting up trade barriers. Uruguay started going downhill economically and its large middle class suffered tremendous loss of income and self esteem. The meat packing plant workers tended to go to the Communist Party, which fought for their bread-and-butter interests, as Uruguayans fought for shares of a smaller economy. Most workers remained conservative, however, like the bulk of the middle class.

Q: Mm-hmm.

CASON: And so many kids felt they had no future. They were the children of the elite. Architectural students and medical students joined a movement that said it would change the whole system for the better.

Q: and of course in those days, Argentina, there's no attraction for them there, I guess.

CASON: Millions of Uruguayans had left the country. These are the kids that wanted to stay and they were the privileged kids. But they looked at the future and said hey, we're finished. So they created the first Latin urban guerilla movement, which went on to kill American diplomats and proved hard to stamp out.

Q: Well, did you find yourself as an American on a Fulbright getting sucked into something?

CASON: No, I stuck with my research. I spent about every day in the national library. I read every single copy of the Communist newspapers from the 1920s on. I bought every social science and history book in print on Uruguay. I was preparing my thesis, putting everything in notebooks. I really felt that I was learning things nobody else had focused on, which was the local Communist Party. And I was only the second Fulbright scholar ever to go there. It was exciting. I had a chance to travel all over Latin America as well. I took a 50-hour bus trip to Tierra del Fuego and went to southern Chile, Rio de Janeiro and on my way home through the Andean countries and Jamaica.

Q: I was wondering, you know, working on the Communist -- reading Communist literature can be some of the most boring in the world.

CASON: It was. But I was looking at the sociology of it. I was trying to figure out why do these people join -- I mean, was this just a creation of the Soviet Union or was there some local, sociological reason for the party's existence? And I found that the party filled a niche, it catered to lower working class factory workers who used the party to better their economic lot in life. The middle class was represented by the Colorado and the Blanco Parties. But the meat packing plant workers, who processed the beef for export, got the short end of the economic stick. Their interests were of secondary interests to the traditional politicians who got their support from the predominant middle class. And so communist party militancy was a class thing. The party maintained discipline, got control of organized labor and managed to squeeze benefits out of the system for urban workers. And they hewed to the Soviet line. The USSR Embassy in Montevideo was one of the first Soviet Embassies in the 1920s in the hemisphere. The Soviets made sure the local communists were not too violent.

Q: Well, did it have any -- was there any relation between the Communists in Uruguay and the Peronistas? I mean they were both worker-based --

CASON: No, the Communist Parties were very much focused on getting benefits out of the system for themselves and their followers. They were not revolutionaries and opposed anarchists and insurgents as infantile and unnecessary. The Peronistas had almost no influence in Uruguay. They were Argentine phenomena, looking after the working class in Argentina much like the communists were doing in Uruguay. The Soviets did not want their communist parties in Latin America to rock the boat, so to speak. Generally the Uruguayans blindly followed the Soviet line on international matters, which were not of much concern to the rank and file. But Soviet invasions and interference in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and East Germany caused rifts in the party and some quit. But in large those in the party said to themselves-- these are the guys that are going to get us the goodies that the system won't provide us. Arismendi, the head of the party, defended the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, which occurred while I was there. He did what the Soviets asked. I looked closely at how people voted over a sixty year period block by block in Montevideo from the very first election. The Electoral authorities gave me the original electoral records. I was able to correlate the economics of a neighborhood, things like electric consumption, etc., with voting preference over decades. That research and analysis enabled me to understand the sociology of voting and the appeal of the left in Uruguay. Later in life I became Political Counselor and interim DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission) in Montevideo. My Fulbright research proved helpful in those jobs. I was in Uruguay during the period when the military was wrapping up the remnants of the Tupamaro guerrillas. I had 3,000 communist books in my house, and I think some Colonels felt I must have been a communist sympathizer. They later threw me out of the country, declared me persona non grata *(laughs).*

Q: Was there cooperation between the Communist Party and Brazil or Argentina or? --

CASON: They all exchanged information. But again, while following the Soviet instructions, economics, not ideology, was the most important focus of the parties. Only a few diehards joined for ideological reasons. The little guy, the industrial worker, voted communist and joined a cell for practical, self interested reasons—what group will best represent me and get me a higher salary? In the 1960s many U.S. academics felt alienated people became communists, or else were duped into joining. That may have been the case in America, but not in Uruguay.

Q: Well, you did this until what, 1970 --

CASON: I went there in 1968 and came back to Washington in late 1969.

Q: And you'd taken the Foreign Service exam.

CASON: I took the Foreign Service exam twice. I didn't make it by a whisker the first time. When I came back I took it again and passed. So I was on the roster in early 1970 --

Q: When you say taking it, did you -- was it the written exam that you --

CASON: The written exam.

Q: Did you pass the written exam --

CASON: No, it was the written exam that I didn't pass the first time. I got like a 68 when 70 was passing. So I tried again and did much better, qualifying for the oral exam.

Q: Do you recall when you took the oral exam the questions that were asked of you?

CASON: Yes. The questions were quite eclectic. They asked about the history of the gold standard. They wanted to know why it rained west of the Rockies and not on the other side. They asked me to explain the origins of the Sino-Soviet border disputes. I didn't have any problem with the oral exam. All that stuff was fresh in my mind after eight years in the university. And so I thought it was a breeze. And then, right there, after a few minutes deliberation, the chairman of the panel came out and said you passed, you're going to be on the roster. I was elated to say the least. I had obtained what I had always wanted, a chance to be a diplomat. I hoped I could finish up my PhD work before being called up, and hoped the timing would work out. But the local draft board was also breathing down my neck. They were saying well, you know, it's about time, how'd you like to be a soldier? Choose now between the army or diplomacy. So I had a lot of pressure on me. I got an offer finally to join State before I could finish my PhD work and I said this is what I've always wanted to do, so I better take it. I may not get another offer again, my time on the roster would expire and I'd have to start the whole process again. I could not take the chance and took the offer from State.

Q: Well, then you came in when?

CASON: I joined in July 1970.

Q: What was your A100, your basic officer course? How was it -- what was it like and your impression of it?

CASON: Well, there was a heavy focus on visas and consular matters, on mastering the Immigration and Nationality Act. We were all going to be vice consuls, except for those who were going to be picked to go to the CORDS program of rural pacification in Vietnam. I was the only one fluent in Spanish in my class. I had good Spanish. And there was a burning need for somebody to go to El Salvador to handle non-immigrant visas. So they picked me. Most others learned Vietnamese and went to Asia. In general the teaching was practical, almost vocational. We had no instruction on protocol, the history of the Foreign Service or other such topics. The structure of the Department and how to write cables and prepare airgrams took up a lot of our class time.

Q: What was the composition of your course? Of that group?

CASON: We were about 38 or 40, a relatively small class. Harry Geisel was in the group. In fact he's among the few still on active duty. He's Inspector General of the Department now. A lot of people eventually made ambassador out of that class. It was a really good group. I still have a list at home. We had Arlene Render, Joe Sullivan, Ron Neumann, and Allen Keiswetter. I forget who else, but it was a really good class. There were a few women too. There weren't that many in those days. Joan Garner was one. I think we may have had one Hispanic and an Afro-American. We all got along and put up with the touchy feely exercises designed to build trust at a training facility in Warrington where we'd do things like fall backwards and be caught by our colleagues. Like in the Geico commercial now. It was kind of silly. I mean, I thought it was. There were group exercises like figuring a way to cross a pretend river with just a few boards and sticks. So we all did it, playing along without protest. It was a necessary step on the road to the career we all wanted. We were all young, enthusiastic and eager. In those days you could tell the Department where you'd like to go on your first assignment, but they made the choice. The big drama was when they announced assignments at the end of the class preparation.

Q: How did your class feel about Vietnam at that point?

CASON: I don't think many people were very eager to go there, but a good number, including Allen Keiswetter, had to go.-

Q: It was winding down at that point. It was starting --

CASON: Yes. But still the CORDS program was a big giant sucking machine that took lots of entering officers. Those that didn't have the language went into Vietnamese language training. Again, I was the only one that had Spanish so I was the first one out to the field.

Q: So you went to El Salvador in 1970?

CASON: I went there in about November for two years. I bought a blue Camaro, my first car, and drove with Allen Keiswetter all the way down to San Salvador, through Mexico and into Guatemala, where we saw several bodies along the road, victims of the death squads. It was kind of risky, but we didn't know any better and I drove on down there. Everybody admired my new car. It had a burglar alarm which a thief stole one night in Mexico. So I was getting introduced to the realities of Latin America *(laughs).* When I got to San Salvador and reported to work, there was a storeroom full of passports waiting for me to process. I was the sole vice consular.

Q: Oh, why's that? Well, who was the ambassador then?

CASON: Henry Catto Jr. Jack Binns was DCM. I didn't have much to do with them. I was, you know, in the bowels of the consular section.

Q: Well, what was the situation in El Salvador at that point?

CASON: It was right on the verge of the revolution. In fact, businessman Sol Meza was kidnapped toward the end of my tour. And there was a fighting over electoral matters between the National Guard and elements of the military while I was there. I remember watching from the roof of my house artillery duels over the city. World War II planes, like the type my father flew, were strafing and dropping bombs on barracks near the Embassy. They flew right in front of the embassy, you know, machine guns blazing. It was like, wow. I was a junior officer. Welcome to the realities of the Foreign Service.

Q: Do we have any -- at that point did we have any particular side we were on?

CASON: No. I think it was just a surprise to us. This was military infighting over the elections. But I wasn't a political officer then. I was in the midst of a huge investigation of a massive visa fraud ring, which occupied my attention.

Q: What was the visa fraud ring?

CASON: There was a guy named Rafael Frankeko Meza Sandoval who had a travel agency and a school for maids, where he taught domestics English. He was counterfeiting visas and my signature. He did a pretty good job. However, he messed up when he faked a visa when I was on vacation. US Immigration intercepted the visa, made inquiries and we found out that someone had a forgery ring operating. So we knew we had a problem. I kept really good records and was able to track down that the imposter had been refused a visa by me. I researched, found out she was a student with Meza Sandoval, and after more research concluded he was behind the ring. I got the police to do a raid and they found the visa plates and reams of records. They took everything and gave the documents, thousands of pages, to me. There was no due process or any such thing in El Salvador in those days. So I got all of his records. They brought them to my house. Then I spent about a year going through all his records to find out the magnitude of this

massive ring. US lawyers, border patrol people, local police, were involved. It was a massive thing. I wrapped it all up and did a bunch of reports and got my first Meritorious Honor Award in that, my first tour, for uncovering the network and putting Meza behind bars.

Q: OK. So you're unraveling this. Were you getting any pressure from influential people?

CASON: Yes. Local travel agents tried to get me booted out. I felt we had been too liberal in issuing non-immigrant visas and began denying most visas. Salvadorans wanted to go to the US to work, not vacation. It is a small, overcrowded country with few opportunities for the poor. No visas meant no profit for the travel agents. So they tried but failed to PNG-ed me because I was Dr. No. Like many Consular officers, before their first interview they can't imagine denying visas. I thought it would be hard too. I never thought that I could deny a visa. But every day there was a massive line of people sitting in my office in front of me, all lying to try to get the cherished visa and a ticket to a better life. I quickly wised up and said to myself, that's enough; I have to put an end to this. And so I would just say no except in the rare case where it was clear the applicant was prosperous and would not overstay his or her visa. Many times the applicants would cry, make a scene or just not get up and take no for an answer. That slowed down processing and extended the work backlog. So I had a series of stamps made each with a year, like '72, '73, '74. After I'd deny a visa, and if the applicant dallied protesting my decision, I told them that, for every minute more they refused to leave I would increase by a year the time when they could apply again for a visa. And then I had a little buzzer put in. The Marines would come in and escort them out if they wouldn't leave. So pretty soon people knew they weren't going to get a visa from me. And the travel agencies were all up in arms that this guy's ruining our business. But the lines dropped down tremendously. We no longer had a backlog of applicants. It cost nothing to apply and one could reapply at will with no waiting period. But they knew applying was a waste of their time so they stopped coming. They then started going up on the buses to our southern border, sneaking across.

Q: Well, were you uncovering any visa fraud on the part of Americans or Salvadorian staff?

CASON: No, not there. We had a really great staff. It was the local police facilitating illegal immigration and the tour operators.

Q: But not there.

CASON: No, we had a good team. I was Mr. Vice Counsel. We had another guy who did immigrant visas. The Consul General encouraged me to run with the counterfeiting investigation and I said I'm going to get to the bottom of this thing. I love that kind of challenge, the thrill of the chase and the discovery of the truth and so we broke it up, and Meza got sentenced to 13 years in jail. The whole organization fell apart and I wrote it all up with a wealth of detail and names, and sent it all off to Immigration, which probably did nothing with it. Typical.

Q: Yes, well that's always the problem. What was life like in Salvador?

CASON: It was a really backward country then. There were very few good paved roads. The city was real small and crowded. Not much to do except to go to the pool and bar at the Sheridan Hotel up on the side of the volcano, near where I lived. I decided that my hobby was going to be climbing all the volcanoes in the country. That's what I did with a couple of other people in the embassy. We were all physically fit in those days. We climbed all the volcanoes, took pictures and drank a bottle of wine once on top, then came back down and went to the beach looking for girls. We had good food, lot of oysters. Salvadorans are very friendly people. I really enjoyed it. And I met my wife of 38 years there.

Q: Was there a significant Communist Party there?

CASON: No. The military there would have killed any communists. They were conservative, far right and did not tolerate leftists of any ilk. But a clandestine guerrilla movement was quietly organizing, under the radar. They began kidnapping and robbing gun stores. Some 10 families or 12 families comprised the elite that controlled the country. And the same pressures that were causing people to leave caused some of them to join the guerrillas to get their piece of the pie. The insurgency really took off after I left, but it had begun when I was there. Their strongholds were on the slopes of the many volcanoes. I was about the last person to climb those volcanoes for decades.

Q: Was there a banana republic type situation there of United Fruit or anything like that?

CASON: No, not in Salvador because that was Guatemala. Salvador was, you know, really small, it was really cotton, cattle, coffee and sugar and some assembly "maquila" type operations that dominated the economy. It was the local elites that had a real lock on the place. There'd been a revolution I think in the year '32, during the Depression and thousands of people were killed. And the military and the National Guard in particular ran things for years. They and their ARENA party made sure that no leftists hung around--they killed or drove them out.

Q: Did they keep you in the consular section?-

CASON: Yes, for my whole assignment.

Q: None of this nonsense about rotation.

CASON: No rotation. I was pure consular. And I was doing a great job in the sense that I got rid of the huge backlog of visas applicants and cut down dramatically on fraud.

Q: Yes.

CASON: My constant threat was that the travel agencies and their political allies might pressure the Embassy to boot me out for doing my job.

Q: What was the government like?

CASON: It was a non-progressive government. Like in so many places at the time, it represented the elites. The elites put in their people to run the government for them, not the poor majority. Their task was to look out for elite interests, keep power and control. There was no tolerance for other views.

Q: How stood El Salvador, from your perspective, with its neighbors?

CASON: Salvador had poor relations with Honduras because of border disputes. That later led to the so-called Soccer Wars. Hondurans tried to keep the Salvadoran immigrants out. Relations were not bad with Guatemala or Nicaragua. All four governments kept a close eye on Cuban meddling and the threat of Cuban-sponsored insurgencies.

Q: Soccer War and all that.

CASON: Salvador was exporting people all over the place. And of course Hondurans didn't like it because they were coming in and taking up Honduran land. Guatemala didn't have a problem because Salvador didn't really have any Indian problem, like Guatemala. And Salvador is really small and overpopulated so people had to be very entrepreneurial. Many of the richest people were those that had a puesto en el Mercado, or market stalls. Salvadorans had to scramble to survive. They couldn't wait, like in Honduras, for the mangoes to drop from the trees. They had to get out and work hard, till the fields. They were very ingenious too in committing fraud and finding clever ways to get to the States.

Q: So at that point were there any Salvadorian communities in the US?

CASON: Yes, many clusters in New York, New Jersey, California and Florida. But the destination of choice was Washington, DC, the capital. I knew Washington, of course, having lived here. I kept a notebook of every person that applied to go to Washington, logging the address they gave. We didn't have any computers then. If any applicant wanted to go to DC, I'd look up the address in my notebook and find if some else had used the same apartment. I pulled out the earlier visa applications and kept them on my desk. When the applicant told me where they wanted to go and why, I would ask who and how many people lived at the address. Usually they would answer "My mother or sister lives there." How many beds in the house, I would then ask? They would generally reply, oh, just a couple of beds. Then I would pull out the applications of all the people who'd used that same address and ask if they knew them. I said they all wanted to go to your sister's house. I didn't think there was room for so many people, I would say. You know, the problem is these other 18 people are living there right now. Until they come back there's no room in the inn, so to speak. I then denied the visa. The applicants just couldn't

understand how I trapped them. They would go back out and say to the waiting crowd "this guy knows everything about us." I kept a lot of records and was very systematic about how I went about the job. But I couldn't fault them for their imagination and for trying. I thought they were great people.

Q: What was the background of your wife?

CASON: She worked for Chilean Airlines—LAN Chile. Her father was a real big landowner. He had about ten square miles of estancias in San Vicente. He was an older guy, about 80, was a Spaniard, and had worked his way up in life. He was a very good landowner. He had thousands of workers and cows and everything you could think of. Don Manuel Aguiluz was very prosperous. He had eleven children. He tried to get me to quit the Foreign Service and help run his business. I said no, the revolution's coming and you ought to sell your land and invest somewhere and get out of it. He was a stubborn guy, he wouldn't go. He didn't do it and lost everything when the insurgency appeared and occupied the land and later when the government expropriated and paid in worthless bonds. I met my wife through a CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) officer female friend at the Embassy, who took me to a party where Carmen was. I was very shy and finally got the nerve to ask her out. She had long hair, had studied in Canada and spoke English very well and was very attractive. As she was working for LAN Chile, which did not fly people from El Salvador to the US, her clients did not need US visas. So there was no conflict of interest in dating her. She started taking me all over the country and I met all kinds of strange people that turned out later to be relatives. But at the time, my social life was a blur of all these people, who I couldn't at the time place genealogically in Carmen's family. I dated her until the end of my tour and one day I gave her a form and said if you fill this out we can get married *(laughs).* She said this isn't very romantic, but --

Q: Oh Yes.

CASON: But I had to do it. I had to ask State for permission to marry a foreigner. I told her I'm going to have to resign because I'm going to marry you --

Q: Yes.

CASON: And the Department will accept my resignation if they don't approve of you for some reason. But they had no objections. We got married in El Salvador and then again in Fairfax at the Truro Episcopal Church and went on our honeymoon later to South Africa.

Q: You said there wasn't much of an Indian population there.

CASON: No, almost none.

Q: Was that just because of the topography or they killed off the Indians or what had happened?

CASON: I don't know the reason, but Salvador was not like Guatemala demographically. It's more like Nicaragua racially, mainly people of Spanish origin with many mestizos. There were no blacks at all. My wife had never seen a black person in her whole life because it was illegal for blacks to immigrate, to live there. It was then and in that sense remains a very racist society.

Q: Well, when you left in '72 was it pretty apparent that all hell was going to break loose?

CASON: Yes. By then the kidnappings were occurring frequently. They found the body of Sol Meza back behind the embassy. He was a big landowner, the first prominent one killed. And it was pretty clear that the revolution was coming. That's why when Carmen's father said he wanted me to stay and work with him, I knew bad times were coming. I told him it's time for you to get out. He didn't do it and in the end he lost everything.

Q: So what did you do after 1972?

CASON: Well, then I was picked to be special assistant to Charlie Meyers, who was the Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America. I came up to Washington and became a front office paper shuffler.

Q: You did this for two years?

CASON: Two years, yes.

Q: OK, Charlie Meyers. What was he like?

CASON: He was a great guy. He came from Sears, if I'm not mistaken. Really nice person, a political appointee. I was one of three staffers. I was there during the whole period of Allende in Chile, you know. Many fascinating things were going on in the region, and the Cubans were meddling everywhere, exporting subversion. The Twenty Committee met at the highest levels to counter Soviet and Cuban thrusts into the hemisphere. I got to see all kinds of interesting, highly secret documents pertaining to what was going. For me that job was an eye-opener about how the Department and the world worked, the Foreign Service. I was the guy who ended up writing the efficiency reports of all the ambassadors. The Assistant Secretary or one of his Deputies (John Hugh Crimmins, Dan Szabo, Robert Hurwitch) would give me some points to make in the efficiency reports and I'd write it up and generally the bosses signed what I wrote*(laughs)*.

Q: OK, well let's talk about our policy. This is -- Henry Kissinger was -- well, he was at the National Security Council. Kissinger was pretty well calling the shots --

CASON: Yes, I think Rogers was Secretary of State. Kissinger was very concerned about

Castro's support to Allende in Chile and the Cuban involvement. This was at the height of the Cold War.

Q: What did you take away from that? How much were we involved in Allende?

CASON: We certainly knew an awful lot about what was going on in Chile. We didn't like or trust Allende. We feared that he would convert Chile into another Cuba, which was intolerable in the eyes of those running our government. We tried to undermine him, as I recall. I don't think we provoked or sponsored the coup. I think it was more an indigenous reaction of military and conservative citizens fed up with the direction in which Allende was taking Chile and of Fidel's personal involvement in Chilean affairs. We had a lot of covert action going on to support the ant-communist forces, but we did not make the coup or participate in Allende's death to my recollection. But for a young second tour officer coming out of pure visa work with my background studying communism and international affairs, it was a great time to be in that Front Office. That was my universe for two long years. We all stayed there every night until 10:00. Crimmins went on to become ambassador. Hurwitch became Ambassador to the Dominican Republic but got caught up there in a scandal and went out in disgrace. I don't know what happened to Szabo.

Q: How did you find the State Department at that level?

CASON: Well remember I had nothing to do with making or influencing policy. I had to move and track papers and make sure everybody had everything they needed when they needed it, that nothing failed to get logged in and nothing was misplaced. This was before the computer era. We had no computers so paper flow was everything. My job was mechanical in many respects. I got needed clearances, tracked everything and served as a gopher, which staff assistants still do today. I had no responsibility for substance at that stage in my career. I can't recollect that I had that much to do with the actual substance of what was going on in each of the geographic subdivisions.

Q: Well, what else was going on in Latin America during this time?

CASON: Well, we had the problems in El Salvador, where a full blown guerilla movement was underway. The Cubans were really in their adventurous phase. Everywhere the Cubans were involved in supporting guerilla movements. Ideological fights between the Chinese, Cuban and the Soviets over how the revolutions should be conducted were underway. Cuba was the real driver of revolutionary movements in the hemisphere—we viewed it as a proxy for the Soviet Union. But in fact the Soviet Union didn't want to see anymore insurgencies; they wanted to go slowly in building the groundwork for successful, lasting revolutions made by urban workers, not peasants. Fidel was flying his people down to support Allende, the Tupamaros were really going in Uruguay -- ambassadors were being kidnapped. Our Ambassador in Brazil was killed, no?

Q: Well, no. Burke Elbrick was kidnapped --

CASON: Kidnapped, you're right.

Q: -- but was not killed.

CASON: You are right. He was kidnapped. And we had diplomats and police advisors being kidnapped and killed in Uruguay by the Tupamaros. Fighting communism and insurgency was at the top of the policy agenda, especially how to counter the Cubans.

Q: Did you have any -- was there any feel towards how to deal with Cuba, I mean maybe we should sort of open up to them or not?

CASON: We had a big focus then on having junior officers make contacts with young people, university students in particular--there was a big push to get into the university scene and to combat communist influence there. A lot of it we did covertly. We spent a lot of money on this. I think there was a debate going on all the time about the best way to deal with the Cuban threat. We built up militaries, gave a lot of foreign aid, and spent a lot on USIS programs to capture hearts and minds. Of course the CIA did a lot clandestinely.

Q: Did you pick up any feel for -- I want to say the frustration in that Secretary Rogers, William Rogers, the Secretary of State, but Henry Kissinger was Head of NS -- National Security Council --

CASON: And Kissinger was really dominant.

Q: Really dominant. And --

CASON: His personality and --

Q: Yes.

CASON: You could see it in the Twenty Committee and I mean, I think this had the imprint of Kissinger, a lot of this stuff. I don't remember all the details of it now, but it was -- this was the beginning of Kissinger's blossoming. Let's put it that way.

Q: Yes. What about -- since you were writing efficiency reports, but also pushing papers and getting things done within the bureau, had an awful lot of political appointees, particularly in the Caribbean? I mean did that prove to be a problem or not?

CASON: I don't recall if it did. To this day the Caribbean Ambassadorial posts go only to political appointees. The desirable places go political. The DCMs really run the Embassies in the Caribbean, with some exceptions. Jamaica was the most important post in the Caribbean, and Manley was cozying up to the Cubans at the time. Barbados and Trinidad were not battlegrounds really. It was more Jamaica --

Q: Yes. Manley.

CASON: -- When I was the Head of the Interests Section in Cuba I went back and read through the history books. I never realized just how much the Cubans were involved in internal affairs of every country in the hemisphere, how much they were doing. They were beginning to move into other areas of the world to support Soviet aims and cause mischief.

Q: Manley really seemed to have fun twisting our tail, I figure.

CASON: Yes, well they wanted to squeeze assistance out of us, so they played us off against the Cubans.

Q: Yes.

CASON: Jamaica sent many people to Cuba for training. The Cubans had training camps for subversives from all over the world on the island. That was the focus of the Department in the two years that I was there.

Q: Did you by this time consider yourself a Latin American specialist?

CASON: Yes, it was clear that would be my specialty, which is why they promptly sent me to Portugal.

Q: Ah-ha.

CASON: In 1972 an officer still could not really bid on an assignment, the Department gave you one. I got Lisbon.

Q: Yes.

CASON: I did a good job working in American Republic Affairs, so they said "how'd you like to go to Portugal to the political section?" And I said, "Yes, I'm a political cone officer and would love the chance finally to do substantive political work. I'd taken Portuguese at graduate school, at SAIS, so I already had the language. The Department sent me to take a quick refresher course called HILT -- High Intensity Language Training, which improved my Portuguese immensely. I then moved to Lisbon six months before its revolution. The Ambassador was a retired judge Stuart Scott, who only lasted until January 1975. He was replaced by Frank Carlucci. Kissinger thought Scott wasn't up to the job and put in Carlucci. His DCM was Herb Okun. My boss in political affairs was Charlie Thomas. And I was there. I came in right at the time everybody started cycling out to other postings. Portugal in 1974 was a quiet place, with no hints of the revolution to come. There was really no political opposition, as Portugal was led by a dictator, Marcello Caetano. Being new to political work, I was given the safe job of domestic political analysis, and began making my contacts and --

Q: This would have been in '72?

CASON: No actually it was in mid-1973. So I started making my contacts and did a lot of biographic reporting. And I was given the task as well of watching the colonies from there, Guinea-Bissau, Angola, Mozambique. We had a whole rotation out of all the experienced officers. Politically, things were routine, quiet until one day in May 1974 as I was taking my morning train from Oeiras, down the coast, where I lived, I remember the crowd on the train was uncharacteristically very quiet. As we approached the downtown station, I looked up and saw this whole line of tanks along the train track with troops with guns out on the top. I thought perhaps the troops were on maneuvers or something. We were caught flat footed and had no inkling that the revolution was coming. As I disembarked at the Central Station I heard the crack of rifle fire--chuchuchuchuchu. I said, "Uh-oh," *(laughs),* alerted the embassy and took a cab there right away. The revolution was underway. It was a fascinating time to be in Portugal, particularly since my job analyzing the domestic politics now suddenly became very interesting. Young army captains and majors and officers from the other services who had been stationed in the colonies made the revolution. Within a few days, rebelling troops had taken over the country. The elite fled, including the Espirito Santo Silva family, and many of the bankers and regime supporters. The whole state security apparatus was rolled up; hundreds were arrested and others fled. None of us knew who these young officers were, what they wanted and their ideological orientation. They were complete unknowns, to the diplomatic community at least. They planned their revolution in secrecy while in Angola, Guinea Bissau and Mozambique. They snookered the whole government, taking over in a lightening blow with very few casualties. This was at a time when the world was pressuring Portugal to begin the decolonization process. The colonies around the world were more than ten times larger than Portugal itself and Portuguese troops had been fighting stubborn guerrillas for years. Men were dying and there seemed no end in sight. The wars cost the country much money, which could have gone to alleviate pressing poverty at home. Caetano resisted ending the wars and pulling out, so the young army officers took matters into their own hands. The revolution was to speed up decolonization, end the wars via negotiations, and improve socio-economic conditions at home. They also wanted Portugal to join the nascent European Union. Our dilemma was that Portugal belonged to NATO and its ministers had access to NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) secrets. The revolution scared our government. Was Portugal going communist, would it fall into the Soviet orbit? The uncertainty was a *big* deal for Kissinger and our President. Some observers gasped that oh my God, the communists have taken over a European country. That's because some of the officers appeared and spoke like Maoists, they really were far left. The head of the military, General Antonio de Spinola, supported the revolution but was a moderate. Soon it was evident that there were tensions between the junior officers and their seniors. The extremist spokesman was OteloNunoSaraiva de Carvalho, who we thought was a communist and who became our nemesis. Anyway, Kissinger didn't like the reporting that was coming out from the ambassador that basically said this is not a communist uprising but a nationalist one, which stemmed from frustrations with Africa's policy.

Portugal was a very conservative society and was not interested in communist ideology. I

reported that. People were fed up. They wanted to accelerate the decolonization process and end a dictatorship that had lasted for 40 something years and only benefited the entrenched elite. And so I reported that this is not a communist wave. The revolution took place the 24th of April. On May Day 100,000 communists passed by the embassy chanting "El pueblo unidojamas sera vencido!" Where did they come from? A couple of days later Mario Soares came in with 100,000 in his rally. He'd come in from Brussels, and was the socialist leader. And then several conservative parties popped up. All these parties had been banned under Caetano.

Q: OK. You're the political officer. How did you -- first place were you getting out and seeing these people who were -- the initial people, the communists and all?

CASON: Yes. I got out with my wife. We both had good Portuguese. I had really good Portuguese. And I used to go to Communist Party rallies where I'd sit in the stands. The communists chanted "El pueblo unidojamas sera vencido!" and --

Q: What does that mean?

CASON: It means "the people united can't be defeated." It was the slogan they used. I pretended that I was a Portuguese communist. I took mental notes, measuring the peoples' enthusiasm. I went to the socialist rallies too. This was a time of great tension and uncertainty. I decided that the only way to make sense of it all was to systematically create databases of all the people—civilian and military—who were popping up. They were all unknowns. Every day I read the papers, and began creating lists of people with whatever biographic data I could glean. This was before computers were available, so I wrote by hand initial lists, and then my wife would type and retype clean lists as I gathered more data.

I was able to discover all the members of the Communist Party Central Committee this way. I gathered something like 6000 names before leaving post two years later. I wrote the definitive work on the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and the relationship between the military and the Communist Party. I produced rosters of the members and leaders of the Socialist Party, the PPD (Partido Popular Democratico (Democratic People's Party)), and the CDS Parties (Centro Democratico e Social/Portido Popular (Democratic and Social Center/People's Party)). I became the expert on the parties and especially the communists and military officers. All the CIA and Defense Attaché contacts were gone.

Our Embassy challenge was in convincing Washington that Portugal was not "going Communist," that this was a nationalist revolution, not an ideologically-generated coup. Kissinger didn't believe his Embassy for a long time. His sources were telling him the place could go communist. That's why he booted out our political appointee Ambassador Scott and replaced him with tried and true Frank Carlucci. Carlucci quickly agreed with us, as did his DCM Herb Okun.

My job was to know all the players and keep in daily contact with them and our political

officer counterparts in other European embassies. I met Mario Soares, Freitas do Amaral of the CDS party, the PPD's Sa Carneiro, etc. I knew all the people. The CDS party suffered many attacks on their facilities by radicals, and they often called on me to be a witness as to what had happened. They viewed us as protectors of their right to participate. I did a lot of research at the Gallup Poll headquarters in Lisbon. I read all their polls with jived with what I observed, i.e., that the communist support was minimal in comparison with the Socialists'. We were secretly supporting the moderate opposition and helped them beat the communists. Just before the first elections I predicted the communists would only get something like 13% of the vote. It turned out to be about 12.9%. We were smack on target in our predictions.

The elite fled. Much like in what happened in Cuba after '59. They just packed up and moved abroad. Nobody knew what was going on. Groups of leftists with arm bands set up roadblocks everywhere, and stopped cars by putting boards studded with nails on the streets. They would check your documents. I had bought my Volvo in Sweden so I had a big "S" license plate sticker next to my CD diplomatic plates. To avoid hassle (the left didn't like US diplomats) I just said I'm Swedish so I could pass freely. It was a chaotic situation for a long period of time. Nobody really could figure out who was in charge.

As I said, this was a scary time, filled with uncertainties. The threat of violence hung in the air, even though the coup itself was relatively bloodless. I remember being invited along with several European political officers to sit as observers at a European Parliament Shadow Parliament Meeting at the Crystal Palace in Oporto. During the sessions we came under physical attack from extremists outside the Palace. Thousands gathered, incensed at the conservatives for daring to gather in their city. Shots were fired, and the crowd threw Molotov cocktails and began burning delegate cars. We had a thin police presence that was unable to hold back the mob, which got reinforcements from elements of the Republican Guard in Oporto. The latter had many far leftists in its ranks. Tens of thousands of people outside were intent on breaking in to do us harm. We put up barricades and hunkered down inside. Several police got shot and their leaders told us they needed outside help to keep the mob at bay. They asked me to call Carlucci for help. I told him that our lives were in danger and we needed military intervention. He called Spinola who sent in the paratroopers. They formed a gauntlet and escorted us to safety but the ordeal lasted some 24 hours.

Q: Was it the Portuguese Military that was attacking you?

CASON: There were factions in the military. Spinola was on the right, the Republican Guard was on the left and the Maoists, like this guy Otelo de Saravia, represented the far left. He was later jailed for trying to subvert the government. He threatened Ambassador Carlucci by phone at a later date. He was bad news and probably behind the attacks at the Palace.

Q: I've interviewed Carlucci and others. And you know, there was this period of time when Kissinger was ready to write Portugal off and put them into deep freeze as a lesson to all the --

CASON: Right, he wanted to cut them off from access to NATO nuclear secrets. Alvaro Cunhal, head of the Communist Party, was Minister without Portfolio and this worried Kissinger, having a communist with theoretical access to our NATO secrets.

Q: From NATO, the whole thing.

CASON: The big battle we had was convincing Kissinger not to write the place off, to support the moderate left, and to trust the people to make the right decision at the polls.

Q: Well, now Soares, did you have much contact with him?

CASON: Yes, the Ambassador, DCM and I met often for lunch with the Socialist leadership.

Q: What was your impression of him?

CASON: He was a real patriot, a true moderate. He recognized that it was time to come back from exile in Belgium to fight the communists and conservatives. He knew his people did not want to join the communist bloc. They had gone through decades of authoritarian rule and wanted something else. Soares was friendly to us. He gave me full access to all his people. We exchanged a lot of information. I obtained for them leader grants to get trained in how to run elections and campaign effectively. We also helped the PPD and the CDS in the same way.

Q: Well, now with the socialists, there were rather -- quite close ties with the Socialist Parties of France and Germany.

CASON: Right. Soares had spent years in Belgium and enjoyed easy relations with European democratic leaders. They gave him support after the coup.

Q: Was there much coordination between our embassy and the European embassies?

CASON: Yes. I was in touch all the time with the people at my level who were doing political analysis. We shared lot of information, intelligence about what was going on. We all wanted a moderate outcome for Portugal. So we worked together. As a junior officer, I recognized that I wasn't privy to all the support we were giving Soares behind the scenes, but overtly the moderates and outside observers knew where our sympathies were.

Q: Well, was there sort of a division between Southern Portugal and Northern Portugal as far as where the --

CASON: The Algarve and the south in general was much poorer than the north, where Oporto, the second city, is located. But Portugal then was poor and underdeveloped.

Q: How about the elections? I would think in such a situation it'd be rather difficult to have an election.

CASON: Yes but the people hungered for the chance to vote. Our support helped ensure free and fair elections. We made a real contribution to democracy in Portugal.

Q: I understand part of the problem was the head of the Communist Party was a guy brought back from Moscow's --

CASON: Yes, Alvaro Cunhal, a hard line supporter of the USSR.

Q: -- who was of the real old school, I mean didn't have an ounce of personality.

CASON: No, he had no personality or charisma, thank God. He was a bland party hack. I think the Soviets were as surprised as the rest of us at the coup and never had aspirations to turn Portugal into a Soviet client. They had bigger aims in Europe. They probably wanted just to have free space in Portugal for the Communist Party to function. They were more interested in Franco's Spain.

Q: Well, now did Spain play any role or were they --

CASON: No. Each country had its back to the other. They were not interested in each other's problems if I recall. But the Spanish didn't know what was going on either in Portugal and were suspicious at Portuguese border crossers, so they made it an ordeal to cross by car. I'm sure the Spanish sympathies were with the CDS and PPD parties, but Spain wasn't a player, no.

Q: Was there a mentality of the Embassy versus the State Department during that time?

CASON: Yes, when Ambassador Scott was at the helm. Kissinger just didn't trust him. Even after Carlucci was in place, Washington kept sending high level people to second guess us. I remember Ted Kennedy came, and so did Kissinger. Carlucci was trying to tell him not to panic and not to ostracize the country. Things were gradually turning out well. Herb Okun shared our perspective too. I think he went on afterwards as Ambassador to East Germany.

Q: He was ambassador to East Germany at one point.

CASON: Yes, after Portugal. We had a great team in Portugal, a tough team. And we had a good political section which enjoyed Carlucci's confidence. We did a lot of excellent reporting.

Q: How did you find Herb? He and I came in the same -- we were in the same Foreign Service class.

CASON: I didn't like him.

Q: I mean --

CASON: He was not a warm and fuzzy person, not very likeable.

Q: He's not a very likeable person.

But he was helpful to me. He gave me good grades and helped ensure a good onward assignment. I remember that I was so engrossed in Portugal that I couldn't let go after I got my assignment to Maracaibo. I wanted to stay engaged and ordered a year's subscription to the Expresso newspaper by mail. His advice to me when I left was that when you leave a post, don't try to follow developments closely afterwards. He said I should move on, focus on the next post. I kept the subscription but never read an issue when I got to the next post. He was right.

Q: He was right of course --

CASON: Yes. But it was my first political job and I got so involved. I knew so many people. The politicians appreciated our contributions to the development of Portuguese democracy. Not long ago, when I was in Cuba, I got a call out of the blue from Mario Soares' former Chief of Staff who was researching a book on the U.S.' role in bringing democracy to Portugal. I flew to Miami and answered his questions. We had declassified much of our reporting by then and so I was able to steer him to interesting pieces we did and to my study on the structure of the communist party. He was amazed and what we had been able to gather overtly about their chief competitor. He confided that we knew more than they did about the party at the time. He said, "My God, if we had had that information at the time." I haven't seen the finished book.

Q: Did we have many contacts with the military youth or attachés, or were the military a difficult nut to crack?

CASON: They were very difficult to access because they were not high ranking. We had some attachés that did their best, but these were captains and majors who didn't want to have much to do with us. Maybe they distrusted the former allies of Caetano and so stayed away.

Q: And they weren't very sophisticated. You know, that --

CASON: They weren't --

Q: -- at that level, you aren't.

CASON: They weren't sophisticated; they were doing their own thing. It was very hard to figure out what they were doing, which is why the open sources turned out in so many cases to be the best way to get a handle on what was happening. There was enough hidden in the newspapers to completely build an exact model of what was going on. But

nobody in the Foreign Service ever did that kind of work to my knowledge. I did it during my whole career, everywhere I ever went. And it opened up new kinds of information and knowledge when everybody else was doing clandestine stuff and memcons (memoranda of conversations), but I was building databases. That's what I was known for, database building everywhere that provided information on the power structure and who was who, relationships that I developed into family trees.

Q: Well, did --

CASON: My wife helped me.

Q: Hm?

CASON: Retyping, every day we put the new names in and then she'd retype the page again and then double space, and we'd put all the new names alphabetized into the document. For a whole year she was typing, typing, typing. She's always helped me in all my endeavors. Even with my investigation with the alien smuggling ring and visa fraud in Salvador. She was always there helping me sort things and we were always partners in getting to the bottom of what was going on.

Q: Did you have much of a social life there?

CASON: We were entertaining the whole time. My wife is an incredible cook and socialite, Latin and really personable. And she was always the one that would go out and find all these contacts. I could never have done it without her. She came back, said we're having dinner tonight with, you know, the Canadian political counselor and his wife and the Australian and this and that. She just ran it all. We had a huge home -- it was all marble and the owners, when they fled, left their crystal and their silverware for us to keep. So it was a good place to entertain. And our first child was born there too in the revolution.

Q: So we'll pick this up in 1970, what, 1975?

CASON: We can go back to just before the election. The election was around May 1st1975. I think. I stayed right through the election. We predicted the election right on. Everyone was happy and they said how would you like to be principal officer in Maracaibo, Venezuela. And I said, "Well, thank you." So that's where I went.

Q: Could you explain Maracaibo, where it fits into sort of the chain of command in the State Department?

CASON: Well, Maracaibo wasn't a Consulate General, but it was the consulate for the five states of Western Venezuela and I was picked, I guess, because of my work in Portugal. It wasn't something that I asked for, they just called me and said would you like to be Principal Officer. And since I was not a particularly high-ranking person at the time I thought it would be a great job. It was a two-person post that had been opened about

two or three years earlier and so I said great, I'll do it.

Q: Well now, what states did you cover?

CASON: I think it was Tachira, Merida, Zulia, Falcon and Trujillo. But it's the whole west of Venezuela. And it was quite a long way between there and Caracas, which was the embassy that I reported to. So I was pretty autonomous. John Collins was my deputy. And the two of us and our wives, we were in our late 20s and it was a great experience.

Q: OK. How were relations with Venezuela during this -- you were there from what, '75 to when?

CASON: I was there from '75 to '77.

Q: What was the state of Venezuelan-American relations?

CASON: It was great in those days. Venezuela's economy was booming. Zulia was the center of oil production as early as the 1920s. Lots of American oil companies were there, although they were now working as contractors for the Venezuelan government. But there was still a big presence of Americans. And that was the most pro-American part of Venezuela because of the presence of all the oil companies and long experience in dealing with Americans there.

Q: Well, what were you all doing there?

CASON: Well, we were doing many things. Our focus was on consular services. We issued many visas. Most Venezuelans had a lot of money, so the refusal rate was very low. We wanted to give visas to Venezuelans to go to the United States and spend their money. So a lot of what we were doing was consular work, and a lot of citizenship work. Interestingly, we took away the citizenship of about 120 Americans because they secretly became Venezuelans in order to continue to operate in the oil business. Companies had to have 51% Venezuelan ownership and a lot of these were one or two-person family-owned oil service companies. So the Americans felt they had to become Venezuelan citizens to meet the 51% requirement. At that time you could lose our citizenship for voluntarily taking another country's nationality. So we did a lot of citizenship work and a little bit of protection and welfare, a lot of representational work, much reporting on economic developments and economic opportunities with Corpozulia, which was a regional government corporation that was developing coalmines and oil properties and minerals. I put together a who's who of businesses and business people, politicians in Western Venezuela. It was the first of many such studies I ended up doing in my career. Caracas loved our reporting. Diego Asencio, if I recall, was the DCM at the time.

Q: He later went to Colombia as an ambassador.

CASON: He was the person I reported to. I forgot who the ambassador was, but we would carry our own diplomatic pouch from time to time to Caracas and basically help

all the embassy sections with knowledge of what was going on in Western Venezuela. We were pretty autonomous.

Q: You mentioned single-person oil companies. I mean how could an oil company be a single person?

CASON: Well, these were generally service companies, like wire line, mud, people that made the special mud, all the specialties. You know, a lot of people from Oklahoma, Texas, and Louisiana. They brought their expertise, incorporated and provided the essential services for the big oil companies. A lot of them decided to surreptitiously become Venezuelans.

Q: Well, then --

CASON: We took away more US citizenships in those two years than any other post in the world at that time because of that legal incentive to give up one's nationality.

Q: Well, did you have problems? I mean people screaming and yelling and --

CASON: *(laughs)* Yes, a lot of people were not very happy. What I used to do was to go through the Venezuelan Gazette Official each month with a ruler and look for all the names that looked like they were English, that I thought could be American names, and put them in a card file database. When a citizen came in to report a lost or stolen passport, I would check to see if they were on the list of newly nationalized Venezuelans. You see, they had to turn in their American passport to the Venezuelan Government to get their new Venezuelan passport. So they reported their American passport to us had been stolen or lost. We discovered this attempt at fraud by diligent database building. Generally they were shocked that we found out. And at that point we said well, you will have to choose which nationality matters most to you. Neither country permitted having two acquired nationalities. I would say you still have a chance, you can renounce your Venezuelan citizenship. And they usually said no, no, I've got to live here, I'm going to make my future in Venezuela. So most of them went not too gently into the night, but they lost their citizenship and the Department backed us up completely.

Q: Yes, I think later on the law changed. Or at least the courts changed it.

CASON: Yes, that's right. But in those days that was one of the grounds for losing your nationality. And I didn't want to do it, but that was one of my duties.

Q: No, of course. That's -- well, what about the protection and welfare side? The American roughneck, and I'm using the technical term, the oil field worker is usually a pretty rough guy. And you know, they go to the bar and beer up and all that, I mean, and get in fights or something. And did you have that type of problem?

CASON: No, we didn't have too much of that. We had a number of the crazies that would come wandering through that part of the world- they could go into Colombia along

the coast. They would come in, so once in a while we'd get some whackos. They definitely had their mental problems and we had to go take care of them and get them back to the States on a plane. There were direct flights from the United States to Maracaibo. The oil workers did their drinking in the Maicao restaurant. Sometimes newcomers would arrive at the airport and tell the taxi driver to take them to Maicao, thinking it was the restaurant. But Maicao was also the border town inside Colombia. They would end up being driven 100 miles to the Colombian border instead of the restaurant they wanted to go to. But that was the main watering hole for expatriates. They all flocked in and got along great with the Venezuelans. I think they were generally on pretty good behavior because they all drank together and they were responsible people because they had businesses. Again, the clientele wasn't so much the roughnecks, but the small business owners who were there to make a lot of money, which they did.

Q: Well, I take it drugs had not penetrated that area from Colombia at the time.

CASON: No drugs and no terrorism. When I arrived I was shocked at the decrepit condition of the facility. It looked like a Mexican bus station, you know, in Tijuana or something. It was awful. We had no protection whatsoever for the consulate and we had to do our own cleaning after closing time. We got a floor polisher from the embassy and after we finished work, we'd go out and clean everything up, windows, toilets, chairs, etc. We fought to get funds for new chairs. The place was a disgrace, a disaster. The Consul who had opened the place a few years earlier did not care apparently and let the place deteriorate. John and I spent a lot of time cleaning it up and trying to get some safety features to separate us from the public. We eventually put up a metal barrier on the counter, metal shielding that had a little door through which we could converse. Maracaibo then was generally safe, with no crime. It was very hot. It could reach 115 degrees. It was just boiling. I brought from Portugal a Volvo with wool seats but no air conditioner. And I remember it was just --

Q: Ooh.

CASON: *(laughs)* -- excruciating. But John Collins and I and Felicia and my wife, Carmen, we had a great time together. It was a great learning experience. Too bad a lot of those smaller posts are gone because it's a great training ground.

Q: Well, did you have much contact, both obviously on the island, but also in the other districts you went to with the local government?

CASON: One of the things I used to do was to go visit the governors, mayors, and the political people in my five states. So I had a lot of contacts in my bailiwick. Maracaibo was the only consulate. The budget people in the Department always wanted to close Maracaibo because it was just a consular outpost with no strategic importance, they thought. However, with the advent of the FARC guerrillas in Colombia and the movement of drugs along the border into the US, the consulate gained new importance and eventually became a drug fighting base for the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration). The oil companies pressured the State Department to keep the consulate

open. But while I was there we were always teetering on the verge of being closed. They closed it a few years after I left for a period and then they reopened it again. I think now it's closed. It was really the oil business kept us there. The oil business wanted consular and citizenship services and so that's how we survived, against the best efforts of the department.

Q: Did the embassy pay much attention to you?

CASON: Not too much because they really liked what we were doing. They really liked our reports. They said they were some of the best they'd ever seen from a small constituent post. So we kept them fully informed of what was going on. They didn't really need to worry about our neck of the woods. That was our job, to keep them out of our knickers, let us run the place as we saw fit. They would make an occasional trip down. I think Myles Frechette was the ambassador, if I'm not mistaken.

Q: Yes.

CASON: Yes. And Miles would come every once in awhile, and so did Diego. We would go up biweekly to meet with them. So basically they thought we were taking care of that flank, and they concentrated on their high-level stuff and we did our consular regional work. And as I say, it was a great learning experience. We did have a lot of spot reporting, and learned to do representational work as well. Our communications weren't particularly good with Caracas. As I say, we brought our own pouch back and forth so nobody needed to do that. We had an old telex machine to do name checks and an emergency radio. The pol-economic sections liked our input. We didn't report directly, but fed them material that they used in their own reports. Caracas certainly gave us a great deal of autonomy. I think we were a model, in those days, for a small consular post.

Q: Yes. Well, when you say reporting, what were you reporting on?

CASON: Well, we reported on political developments, attitudes about U.S. relations, the parochial fights among the political parties in the west. We did a tremendous amount of commercial and economic reporting on the state of the economy in the west, the business opportunities, and on new projects being developed or contemplated. We would recommend great opportunities for American companies to get a piece of the action. And we knew who the players were. We had a tremendous set of contacts for the economic and commercial sections.

Q: Were there any union problems there?

CASON: I don't recall that there were. This was a time of great prosperity when so much money that was coming in to the area. It was a boom economy. I think a lot of that trickled down to the oil workers who were well paid. The companies y wanted to keep their skilled workers. They weren't squeezing them like today. I don't recall any union problems.

Q: You know, in all the accounts of Venezuela's problems today, it's clear that the Venezuelan oil companies had been extremely well-run prior to Chavez.

CASON: That's right. The US, European and Venezuelan oil companies were growing; things were humming away, everybody was prosperous. There was almost nothing else produced in Venezuela then. The elites and middle class Venezuelans bought their luxuries in the US. Our flights to Miami were full. Venezuelans brought back millions of dollars of US goods weekly. People had their yachts and some Lear jets. They were doing very, very well at the time. The political difficulties occurred later. There was a political left in the west. We had to keep track of the Communist Party and Communist Party members and that type of thing, but it wasn't a major problem. It was a booming Wild West kind of a place.

Q: Well, within Venezuela, at least the area you were dealing with, was there much of an anti-Colombian attitude or not?

CASON: Yes. The Colombians were the illegal aliens. It's a lot like our Mexican problem. The illegals were everywhere. They were the laborers. The better economy attracted them. Venezuelans didn't do manual labor. There were a couple hundred thousand Colombians in Zulia. They were the maids, cooks, and grunt workers. There was probably more Colombian resentment against the Venezuelans than vice versa. There was a lot of smuggling which of course the government didn't like. But the citizens liked it because they could go across the border to Maicao, which was a town of 25,000 people, where the language spoken was Arabic. Every single store was run by a Lebanese. It was a lot like Ciudad del Este in Paraguay. The roads to the border were just white along each side from all the wrapping paper discarded from the goods that were being smuggled in by motorists. They'd buy 10 shirts and put them on and then walk or drive across the border. So it was a place to go to buy anything you wanted. And the authorities didn't like it and tried to stop it, but it was fruitless.

Q: Well, after this almost idyllic period where'd you go? It'd be '77, I guess.

CASON: After '77 I told the Department I wanted to get advanced economic training. So I went to the 26-week economic course in '77 and '78. I had had economics in college and graduate school, but I think I was the only political officer in the economic course. I thought it'd be good for me to become better versed in economics.

Q: Well, how did it go for you?

CASON: Actually, it went tremendously. I graduated in the top 10% of the class and in the top 5% of the country on the GRE (Graduate Record Examination) exam. I had not taken math since about seventh grade. So I was worried because the course was very heavily mathematical. On the way out of Maracaibo, I passed through El Salvador and pigged out on oysters at the beach. When I got to Washington and enrolled in the course, I felt a sharp pain in my side. MED called me and said my exams showed I amoebas in the liver. So I had to go spend two weeks at the George Washington Hospital right when

the course started. We started out with algebra, which I hadn't had in years. My wife would come over every day to the hospital and bring me the books and I would sit there and study and try to master the material on my own. When I got out of the hospital I was able to catch up with the class and we went through statistics and econometrics and matrix algebra and probabilities and all those sort of things. And surprisingly, I learned econometrics. It took me weeks to catch on but then, in a flash, I finally understood and did well in the course. I never quite figured how I could use it in the Foreign Service. But just like everything else, you know, you're supposed to learn it; it's like a language, I learned it. And it's probably one of the most rigorous things I've ever done, next to National War College. I spent 26 weeks there and we had a great class. I excelled, to my surprise, and I'm really glad I took the course. I still have the books.

Q: I was wondering, did what you learn translate into job enhancement skills?

CASON: No, it didn't really. They offered me a chance to go to Italy. I wanted to learn another language. So they said OK, you can go to Milan to either the economic section or to the trade center. I said, "Let me do something different, let me go to the trade center. I'd like to learn export promotion." So that's what I did and of course I had no use whatsoever for econometrics in that job. One of the problems with that excellent course was they didn't show you the relevance of what you learned to real problems-or how to convert problems into the math. They should have done that more so that you could take a problem and solve it through econometrics. But my focus in the trade center was on selling Italians a booth in my shows.

Q: OK. When you went to Milan in -- what are we talking about, '77?

CASON: '78.

Q: '78. And you were there for how long?

CASON: I took Italian for six months after completing the economics course. Once I finished economic training I went right into learning Italian, and then went off in '78 to Milan to the U.S. International Marketing Center in the Milan Fairgrounds. We were an integral part of one of the world's largest trade centers.

Q: Yes. Who was the consul-general in Milan at the time?

CASON: I don't remember because we were kind of apart. We didn't do much with the consulate.

Q: It's not necessary.

CASON: But Jim Goodsill was the head of the trade center. We were separate entities, the Trade Center and the Consulate. They were doing economic reporting on the kind of the things that I did in Maracaibo but on a larger scale, whereas we promoted US products throughout Southern Europe. The Trade Center, and the commercial function,

belonged to the State Department until the end of my tour when the Commerce Department took both over. We were promoting U.S. exports throughout Southern Europe, not just in Italy. It was a really fascinating job, something totally new to me. We became the most profitable U.S. trade center in the world. We made a million dollars annually and it subsidized most of the other trade centers. That partly was because we had unlimited space for shows, being part of a Milan fairgrounds, which had millions of square feet of exhibition space. Our own facility had 50,000 square feet, and our back door opened up into the huge Milan Fairgrounds facility. We had a wonderful facility that attracted hundreds of thousands of businessmen each year, so it was the natural place to do trade promotion work, while drawing visitors from all over the world.

Q: Well, what was the -- attitude -- were you part of the commercial service at the time or --

CASON: Midway through my tour Commerce took over our work, but I stayed on as a detailee. The State Department said, "Look, we're giving Commerce this function. You want to continue on for the last year of your assignment on detail to Commerce or do you want to leave?" I said I want to continue on. So I stayed a year working for Commerce because I really enjoyed what I was doing and they wanted me to stay. Even though I became a Commerce employee on paper for awhile, I was still getting State Department evaluations. We had no training for trade promotion work at the time. I just reported for work and learned on the job. We had to think up the show themes, we had to recruit the participating companies in the United States and from subsidiaries all over Europe. Some were new to exporting, new to market while others were well established internationally but looking for agents or distributors in Italy or elsewhere in Europe. The basic criterion was that they had to be American companies, or companies showing only American products. We had to design the show. We had to advertise, we had to create databases of all the visitors, which was something the exhibitors wanted. Personal computers were in their infancy then. I hired a software development company to design a program to capture all the relevant information about who was coming to these tradeshows so that our exhibitors could follow up. We were jacks of all trades. We did TV and print commercials. We sorted invitations by zip codes, put them in mailbags and took them to the train station. We did many shows on many themes during my tour. Our star show was EDP USA which was the largest computer show in Europe. We'd get 60,000 visitors and up to 500 participating companies. It was an enormous operation with many moving parts. My job was to go recruit the companies, draw in the visitors and put it all together. We had to cover costs and make a profit to show Commerce and the State Department that they should continue to support the center. They liked our work. We helped our firms get hundreds of millions of dollars of new business at a time when exports were really still not a focus of most American businesses.

Q: Well, did you get much direction or assistance from the Commerce Department?

CASON: A little. They would find some companies that they thought might like to get into the European market. We would have to close the loop with the prospects and get them to pony up the cost of a booth; they cost $10,000 each, which was a lot of money

then. We had to convince the new- to- market or new- to -export companies that the investment would pay off. Once we decided on a theme I would scour all the trade magazines for companies that I thought might be interested in being in our show. I'd send them invitation letters a year in advance of the show. Basically I recruited the vast majority of the exhibitors myself, except for the occasional one that Commerce found. It was a very, very intense job. I learned to be a salesman, advertiser and hand holder; I was involved in all the facets of export promotion.

Q: How did you find -- I mean were these mainly Italian business people who participated or was it much more European?

CASON: It was primarily Italian. Northern Italy, Milan, was the industrial center of Italy. Milan was a main economic engine of the economy, a dynamic, creative, wealthy area of Italy. We did most of our trade shows in the Milan center, but also in Spain, Switzerland, and Yugoslavia. We did shows around Italy, in Rome, Bari, Bologna and Verona. The attendees were principally Italian, but we had visitors from all over the world. Sometimes we had 40 or 50 large companies show up because our shows were often showcases for the latest technology. We tried to make it exciting for the business people and get them together with potential investors and buyers. We were well known as the premiere trade center in southern Europe and one of the most successful export promotion venues.

Q: Was it difficult to get American business people and say, Italian business people to essentially talk the same language and make good deals for each other, or were there problems?

CASON: No, the American companies that came generally had done their research. We helped them with market research as well. We told them whether or not we thought their product would be of interest to Italians. And a lot of the people that the exhibitors sent spoke or thought they spoke Italian well; some were of Italian origin. The Italians spoke a lot of English, so they managed to talk. I was fluent in Italian. I had to be to work the floor and sell to tough minded Italian businessmen. I had to work mainly in Italian. I served as interpreter if needed. I would walk round and round during the shows, asking exhibitors how they were doing, had they met anybody, did they need any help. They were very pleased. At the end of each show we'd ask them about sales and future prospects. We'd come out of some of these shows with hundreds of millions of dollars of done deals or about- to- be-done deals. We had some exhibitors that would come back again and again. The EDP show ran for many years. However, about the time my tour was up the Red Brigades appeared in Italy and our security folks were fearful the large crowds we attracted might bring terrorists to our doorstep.

Q: Oh yes.

CASON: They had captured I think it was Aldo Moro, if I'm not mistaken.

Q: It was Aldo Moro, Yes.

CASON: After I left they closed the trade center because of these security concerns. There was no way you could secure a U.S. trade center. The Red Brigades indigenous terrorism, way before international terrorism became a problem, spooked the U.S. Government so that we shut down a wonderful operation. That was a shame because we were really, really good at what we were doing. My stint at the Center was enjoyable. I learned a great deal about business. This kind of career variety was what I loved about the Foreign Service; you could do about anything in the Foreign Service if you just decided you wanted to do it.

Q: Did you have any problems with Italian financial authorities or any, you know, this sort of thing, or were they pretty good?

CASON: No, no. The heart of Milan is the Milan Fairgrounds. It brought in billions of dollars of business from fashion to nuts and bolts. Our success was good for the city and the economy. Cooperation was excellent. We did really neat shows, even a shoe show in Bologna that was very successful. We brought in Sioux Indians to promote US moccasins. We showed US work boots. We always found a niche in the market we could exploit. Our shoe shows were very well attended and successful. The government saw us an integral part of Milan, which was a cosmopolitan, international trade oriented city. And we had no problems whatsoever. I lived very close to the Milan Fairgrounds. We had a great relationship and lots of fun and job satisfaction.

Q: Had there been any threats from the Red Brigade or the Prima Linea or anything like that sort of on your operation?

CASON: Not at all. In fact, we only knew of it from the newspapers. It was all happening in Rome. But then I think it moved up to Bologna and we did some shows in Bologna. We did a few shows there. We really didn't have much of a security apparatus at the embassy at that time and everything was open. I guess our security people figured the most likely place for an attack on US interests would be against something like the trade center because it was wide open and there were so many people who entered with no screening. The Red Brigades could have planted bombs I suppose but we were never informed that we were a target. We were never concerned about security ourselves. We were all caught up in the excitement of helping our businessmen prosper. Terrorism was never anything that concerned us or seemed like a likely threat. But the Commerce Department closed the Center after I left because of a fear of terrorism.

Q: Well, then when you left there, were you at this point an economic officer or a political officer?

CASON: I was always a political officer. Despite my economic training and trade promotion tour, I was a coned political officer. And I got promoted in the political cone out of Milan! It was fascinating.

Q: So where did you go? You left in, what, would this be '78?

CASON: I was in Milan from ’78 to ’81.

Q: OK, and then where?

CASON: Then, perhaps because I’d done my Fulbright in Montevideo on the Communist Party, the Department asked me if I wanted to be the political counselor in Montevideo. And I jumped at the chance-- “Yes, definitely. I really want to go.” It was at the beginning of the end of the military rule in Uruguay. They had roundly crushed the Tupamaros and the military were just beginning the slow transition to returning to their barracks. That didn’t happen until 1985. The Dirty War was going on in Argentina and this was before the Falkland War. My research on the Communist Party and detailed knowledge of the history of the country and of the left in Uruguay made me a natural fit for the job. I was very junior for the assignment but I got the nod. Eventually they asked me to become DCM. I went but was there for roughly a year before I got declared persona non grata by the military government.

Q: OK, well let’s talk about -- what was the status of Uruguay at the time when you went?

CASON: Uruguay was a unique country. It had been established by the British as a buffer between Spain and Portugal, Argentina and Brazil. It was a neutral country, one that thrived on beef, wool and leather exports to Europe. Those exports were enough to sustain the small, homogeneous population. A large middle class developed. Jose Battle y Ordonez became President in the early 1900s and brought political stability to the country and his innovative political and social reforms that were a model to the world. But by the early 1950s the economic model ran out of steam. There were no longer wars in cold places. The market for Uruguay’s commodities began to dry up. The major traditional market was Europe. As Europe began to recover from WWII and integrate, it put up barriers to Uruguayan products, which competed with European domestic production. Uruguay had created a huge social welfare system built on commodity exports. As its traditional markets withered, it became harder and harder to sustain the welfare system. Jobs dried up and the middle class elite youth for the first time began to believe their future was bleak. Some disaffected university students, and some workers, joined forces to form the urban Tupamaro guerrilla movement. They began to kidnap and seize weapons and eventually to attack the police and military, who responded. In a few years they captured or killed most Tupamaros and decided to run the government themselves. This brought international condemnation and Uruguay became a pariah state. They were running the economy, trying to turn it around, with only moderate success. There were tremendous human rights problems. The military had thousands of Tupamaros and leftists, union people, and communists in prison or in exile.

Q: Were there, as in Argentina, the disappeared?

CASON: There were some but not many disappeared in Uruguay, maybe a hundred. It was not at all like in Argentina. There they grabbed you. The Uruguayan military had unraveled the Tupamaros because of deficiencies in their cell structure. They were able to

unravel them, put all of them in jail. Then they went after the Communist Party and all the labor leaders and anybody, as I said, to the center left, and put them all in prison. My arrival coincided with a period of tremendous human rights concerns about the militaries in the Southern cone, about their abuses. U.S.-Uruguayan relations had deteriorated tremendously after Jimmy Carter became President. Under Carter we hit bottom. Relations improved slowly under Ronald Reagan. He started allowing limited non-lethal military sales, and let some of their commodities to come in. So relations were on the upswing when I got there. General Alvarez, Armed Forces Commander at the time, was releasing more and more prisoners. But they still had quite a few of the Tupamaro leaders in jail and there was no political opening to speak of when I arrived. The military produced a plan to turn power over to the civilians by 1985 that they referred to as the cronograma. The transition scenario excluded far left parties, however, and some traditional party political leaders who the military felt had been too close to the Tupamaros. This was the situation when I arrived at post in the summer of 1981. Only the traditional parties were to be allowed to participate in politics again.

Q: Well, what was your impression as you looked at it, of the effectiveness of the military government?

CASON: The government was very effective in eliminating the Tupamaros but less so in fixing the economy and in gaining the trust of the average citizen. The economic problems were intractable really, structural. There was little they could do to fix it.

It was a difficult time because the military were very suspicious of the United States. My predecessor, John Yule, had actually had several death threats. Someone attacked him on the street, knocked him out. The government boycotted the Fourth of July. Tom Miranda, our new political ambassador, was just arriving when I got there. There were a lot of "proscribed politicians" who were not allowed to talk, meet with us under threat of imprisonment. But we met with them anyway, which caused a great deal of concern in the military. This was the period when the Falkland War broke out, which was really a shocking development for everybody.

Q: Well, how stood Uruguay viz-a-viz the Falkland War, because Uruguay had had pretty close relations with Britain at one point.

CASON: That's right. The UK was their major trading partner, as was Argentina which received a lot of Argentine summer tourists. Uruguay found itself between a rock and a hard place. They declared neutrality. It was the only country in Latin America, to my knowledge, that declared neutrality, which brought tremendous pressure on the Uruguayan government from the Argentines. The British Embassy was still functioning. We had picked up information that the Argentines were going to come over and kill some of the British diplomats. Separately I had discovered that the Uruguayans were allowing the Argentine navy to patrol within Uruguayan waters looking for mines. The Argentines feared the British were going to mine the Mar del Plata to bottle up the Argentine fleet. The Uruguayan Foreign Ministry was upset that I had found out about this secret arrangement which violated Uruguayan sovereignty. They were not happy with me from

that point on. So there was a lot of tension. After the invasion Uruguay allowed the British wounded in the Falklands to come in through Montevideo on their way back to England. The Argentines wanted Uruguayan support and were threatening to cut off tourism to Punta del Este. The Uruguayans felt really squeezed. But they didn't want to get drawn into it because they're always a neutral country.

Q: I mean we were gradually moving more and more to the side of the British. How did that play, you know, as you were doing your work?

CASON: Very badly because Uruguayans were caught up in the excitement of Argentina taking on the big guy and winning. It was a shock. The Argentine Air Force was doing quite well in terms of their exocet missiles, and it was tough for the Brits for awhile. And I think the general public was rooting for the Argentines. Our Secretary of State Al Haig began overtly to side with the Brits. Anti-Americanism was growing in the area. Pressure was rising on Uruguay to do something to show support for the Argentineans.

Uruguay was looking for something they could do to appease their neighbors, especially as they began to lose the fight. As I mentioned, I had discovered the violation of Uruguayan sovereignty. This was very embarrassing to the military government, since they were allowing another country to operate in their waters. At the same time, it came to the government's attention that I had a very large stash of communist materials in my house, which were the papers I used in my PhD research on the Communist Party. I had military contacts visit my home and they must have passed this tidbit on to higher authorities. I guess they thought I was personally a communist sympathizer or fellow traveler. And I was also handling the human rights portfolio to boot. I had to go in and demarche the Foreign Ministry on human rights matters.

Kissinger asked us to propose a prisoner exchange of Tupamaros for dissidents in the Soviet Union. That didn't go over at all with the Foreign Ministry. They may have thought it was my own idea. General Alvarez's brother had been killed by the Tupamaros so he really had it in for them and he'd rather see them dead than exchanged for Russian dissidents. He wasn't about to make a prisoner exchange. I think the combination of my human rights exposure as the Embassy's point man, my extensive knowledge of the left, and my discovery of the naval patrols caused the government to want me out.

About this time the ambassador asked me to be his DCM. I was an FSO-2 at the time and that was unheard of. DCM Shaw Smith and Tom Miranda went back and forth with the department trying to get me the DCM job. The Uruguayans faced the prospect of me becoming the number two in the Embassy. The Ambassador decided that I was the only person that was going to be allowed to interact for a while with the British Embassy. The British Embassy had 14 years of files that they wanted to destroy in case the Uruguayans booted them out. They didn't have a shredder, it had burned out. I put an Embassy spare shredder in my car and at night passed it from the trunk of my car into one of their official cars in a garage. As allies, we went to great lengths to help them. The Uruguayans were not amused, I'm sure.

Just before the Falkland War ended, I got a call from the Foreign Ministry late one night to take a sealed envelope urgently to the Ambassador. I went in to the Ministry, got the document and took it to the Ambassador who was at the opera. He opened it, read it and blithely announced "Oh, it says here you're persona non grata." What? The bastards made me go get my own PNG note. It said I had 10 days to leave the country. To spite them, we agreed that I would leave at the last minute of the 10th day. The post gave me a Meritorious Honor medal. I walked out to the plane wearing the medal for the press to see to show I had embassy support. We were all shocked at my unmerited expulsion but Uruguay paid a price. We PNGed their DCM in retaliation. There went my chance for the moment of becoming DCM.

Q: Was it with regret or how did you feel?

CASON: Yes, because it was totally just a shock. Thinking back on it, a bomb went off maybe a block away from my house a week or 10 days before I got PNGed. And that was very unusual at the time. And I remember reporting that to one of my Uruguayan military contacts and he said, "That's strange. We didn't hear anything about it." So I think they were sending a signal to back off. The military was very suspicious of us. We were still on their case for human rights. Enough is enough, they must have concluded. Just get rid of that guy. And they had expelled diplomats over the years, but generally Russians, Czechs, Poles, communist diplomats. Since the 1920s that was always the way the Uruguayans dealt with the leftists or Communist Party. They would threaten the Soviets with expulsion if they didn't keep the communist party quiet. I was the only non-communist diplomat ever expelled from Uruguay. I went back to the department and they said, "We want to send you to Panama."

Q: So you left there, was it '82?

CASON: '82. I left there towards the end of May in '82 and went back to Washington. They assigned me to the political section in Panama. Ashley Hewitt was the political counselor and Ted Briggs was the ambassador. Bill Price was the DCM. I never thought I'd be going to Panama, but off my family and I went off to Panama where we remained from 1982 to 1984. And my job was to track the PRD (Democratic Revolutionary Party), the government party, and keep an eye on the left, the Cubans and the National Guard. It was a really exciting time. I really enjoyed Panama. I would have enjoyed the stay more in Uruguay, but what are you going to do?

Q: But anyway, I mean the fact that you were PNGed did not go to your discredit with the department.

CASON: On the contrary. That's why they immediately PNGed the higher ranking Uruguayan diplomat, their DCM, and awarded me a Meritorious Honor Award, with a big ceremony. They told me to wear the medal to the airport, that they supported me 100% and that I should be proud, since I had been doing what they asked me to do. "You did a great job and it just shows the precarious nature of our relations in the heat of the Falkland War," which was then winding down to Argentina's detriment. I was surprised

that Uruguay was willing to risk a further decline in U.S. relations, which were still not very good at the time, but pressure from Argentina was just too great to resist.

Q: Well then, you were in Panama from when to when?

CASON: This was ’82 to ’84 and --

Q: OK, what was happening when you got there? What was the situation?

CASON: The National Guard, under General Manuel Noriega was very much in control of Panama when I arrived. Panamanian military officers were in cahoots with Colombian drug traffickers. Our focus was on the drug trafficking. Also Arnulfo Arias, who had been president before, was trying to become President again.

Noriega also allowed Central American insurgents of all stripes to operate in Panama as long as they didn’t bother Panama. He pursued a bugger thy neighbor policy. The country itself never had guerrillas. The National Guard made the representatives of the insurgent groups located there promise not to interfere in their affairs. Panama was teeming with all kinds of leftists collecting and shipping arms to their countries. Many Cubans were entering from Havana, passing through Panama en route to the US. The National Guard took a cut. Cubans as well were using Panama and the Colon Free Zone as a way to get around the embargo. They had offices there to buy anything that they needed. So our focus was drugs and thugs,

The PRD party, created by General Torrijos, had been running the place politically for a long time. I followed political movements and the opposition attempts to win power at the polls but my focus really was on figuring out what the Panamanian military was up to, their links with drug traffickers and with the Cubans. So that’s what I did day in and day out.

Panama had elections while I was there and Arnulfo Arias won, but the electoral authorities sided with the PRD which doctored the final tally in their favor.

Q: Is that when they beat up the presidential candidate and --

CASON: Yes, it was Nikki Barletta. There’s a book called Our Man in Panama. They have a chapter on me in there. I took the PRD’s election figures, not the oppositions’, and showed how the PRD committed mass electoral fraud. The PRD’s own tally shoed they lost. I sent along air gram to the department on the fraud and how it occurred. Nobody paid any attention since Panama was helping us with intelligence on the Central American insurgencies and that took precedence.

I produced the first ever Who’s Who in Panama. And it was a one hundred page family tree of all the major families. It is still in use today. I looked up the owners of a thousand companies. I would spend afternoons at the public registry going through company records and putting the owner’s names in this database. Using the sort function of Wang,

I would alphabetize the names and put a code next to each entry indicating the page of the company in a separate company name database. And I added in the National Guard owned companies. I got some income tax returns for the National Guard companies that, upon analysis, and showed how they were working with the Cubans to set up front companies and drug trafficking companies. I obtained the list of all the records of airplane owners in the country, and put them all into one big database stew which showed who owned what and their connections with the politicians. And that was my major study, one that I replicated in just about everyplace I ever went afterwards. I spent the two years daily on this project in addition to my regular reporting work.

Q: You were there before we went in.

CASON: Yes. I was there before we went in.

Q: Well that --

CASON: Our relations with the National Guard steadily deteriorated during my tour. We were really on their case because they were very much involved with drug trafficking. I worked a lot with the DEA and others and we were able to show that this was an unfriendly government that was hurting our interests, dealing with the Cubans and drug traffickers. So we did not have good relations. And then they stole the election and were underhandedly supporting the Sandinistas.

Q: Well, I imagine you were keeping book on Noriega. At one point he'd been sort of, I won't say our guy, but we, you know, we'd been cooperating with him or he'd been cooperating with us. Was that a problem or --

CASON: Yes. He was snookering us in the sense that, you know, he was everybody's agent.

Q: Yes.

CASON: He was everybody's informant. He would rat out to the DEA drug cartels that weren't cooperating with him. So DEA loved him because he was informing on or helping apprehend members of other Colombian groups, but he and his cronies were running their own narcotic operations and networks. We were helping him get rid of the competition in essence. He was a CIA contact and a military paid informant. Who knows how many agencies from how many countries had Noriega on their payrolls. He played them all off against each other. He was very, very good at what he was doing, and everybody thought he was a bad guy, but since he was helping them with their particular needs, they gave him a pass.

Q: Well, as I recall it, I mean sort of the last straw was when he allowed his national guard, toughs, to start messing around or roughing up the American wives and military men.

CASON: That's right.

Q: That started when you were there or?

CASON: That was at the very end. I think his thugs harmed a US military member of one of their family. I don't recall exactly what it was, but after I left is when it really hit the fan. When I was there I could still travel unmolested around the country, including to military bases. I remember having lunches with Noriega. I went to his offices; he had a collection of sapos or toads. Sapo means toad and in slang it means informant in Spanish. So he had informants everywhere and he had this collection of toads in his office. We had a lot of dealings with the opposition, which the Guard didn't like. I got to know all the PRD leaders. It was helpful to my work and was my bailiwick.

Q: Well, were you, either you as the individual or you as part of the country team, looking at the possibility we might have to go in there with troops?

CASON: No, not at the time. That would have been above my pay grade at any rate. That might have been something Ambassador Briggs and DCM Bill Pryce discussed with Washington, but they pretty much kept these issues to themselves. We in the lower ranks were upset about the elections having been stolen. Really we wanted the government -- our government-- to protest or do something about it. My airgram recounting the fraud was inconvenient in that we were ostensibly supporting the democratic process. The Front Office was not particularly happy when we asked to send in our report by cable, not an airgram, which nobody would read. They decided it would go as an airgram rather than a cable. Yes OK, there was fraud, but they're cooperating with us in Central America. So we were not particularly happy and that came out in that book, Our Man in Panama.

Q: Were the Cubans involved there?

CASON: Yes. The Cubans established an office in the Colon Free Zone. It was their principal procurement base for circumventing the US trade embargo. They set up front companies in conjunction with National Guard to buy US products in the Colon-free zone and then ship them to Cuba. They were very much involved in Cuban and Chinese alien smuggling as well. The Panamanians and the Cubans collaborated on smuggling Cubans out, they would share the money. Lots of Chinese were coming in also; sometimes through Havana into Panama. So there was lots of smuggling of that sort going on in addition to the drug smuggling.

Q: Well, were you under any threat while you were there?

CASON: No. No, they allowed me to go to their military bases and travel around. I didn't have any problems there surprisingly. They could have bothered me had they found out I had discovered their electoral fraud; they probably knew I had been PNGed from Uruguay too. But although they didn't like me, I was always left alone. Thank goodness.

Q: Yes. How about social life there?

CASON: The social life was really good. I went to a lot of events, but again, I wasn't the head of the section there. I was the number two. And a lot of what we were doing in the political section was related to the negotiations over the Panama Canal. So I was the domestic political analyst, like in Lisbon. We didn't have a particularly luxurious apartment. We had little kids, so it wasn't the most intense social life. In later years we had much, much more of it. I think it was just because of my rank within the political section and the nature of what I was doing. There were no constraints on us, but we didn't have a lot of money, we didn't have a lot of facilities, and we had little kids.

Q: Yes, I know exactly -- I've been in that position too. I understand that you were called to participate in the last stages of the invasion of Grenada?

CASON: Ambassador Briggs asked me to fly to Grenada via Barbados and help out Ambassador Gillespie. We had set up a small, temporary Embassy in a motel and they needed bodies to report on developments. When I got there, the Ambassador asked me to travel around the island and report. He also gave me permission to "take over" certain facilities that had been run by the Former government. I could choose which ones I wanted to intervene. I chose Grenada's Immigration offices first. I walked in unannounced with a radio, which was a badge of authority. I said who I was and that I wanted to see who the Grenadians had been giving passports to prior to the invasion. I suspected Cuban intelligence agents might have some passports and that Grenada was training local agents for overseas operations on behalf of the Cubans.

I found Phil Agee's passport. He was a renegade CIA officer who had gotten Grenadian travel documents. I was able to discover dozens of local citizens who had been through Cuban training programs to be spies. I also found a Cuban-run safe house that was used to intercept Grenadian letters and that served as an espionage platform to monitor what locals did. I found piles of opened letters, surveillance reports, photos, syringes and other evidence of intelligence activities. I also visited a Cuban military camp that we had bombed to oblivion with our C-130 Puff the Magic Dragon gunships. Every inch was bullet riddled. I found training manuals and other Cuban documents there.

I also found the house of the Attorney General. The landlady let me in. The Attorney General was a British Communist. He left in a hurry and I found thousands of pages of documentation. He was preparing to rewrite the school books to teach communism. I found correspondence with Fidel Castro. He left the historical papers of the Guayana Communist Party, address books, all kinds of interesting correspondence that I seized and turned over to our intelligence services.

Sweet revenge for my having been PNGed in Uruguay—I found out that the Cuban Ambassador was still holed up in his residence outside the capital. The Grenadian government had not thought to expel him. They didn't have a clue how to boot him out. I instructed their Foreign Ministry to PNG him. I drafted the note from memory, and went up with officials to the Ambassador's house while they delivered the expulsion note.

What satisfaction!

We found a warehouse near the airport chock full of revolvers which were apparently to be sent to Africa when the Cuban runway was finished. The average citizen was elated and relieved that President Reagan had invaded. They thought for sure a communist fate awaited them. As I drove around citizens would emerge from their homes to embrace me, thank America for saving them. They made T shirts that read "Thank you America for Saving Grenada." I will never forget their genuine joy at being liberated. After several weeks there, I returned to Panama to finish my tour.

Q: After Panama you went back to the Department for a desk job, no?

CASON: Correct. I spent three years as Guatemala Desk officer and backup officer for Belize. This was at the height of the wars in Central America. Elliott Abrams was Assistant Secretary. The Office of Central American Affairs was a frontline concern of the President and Department. We had some of the best officers in WHA working there. We worked long hours and were one of the few offices to get 18% differential pay because of the long hours.

I became the expert on Guatemala. Several Marxist-inspired guerrilla groups were battling government forces, and had been for years. There were human rights abuses on both sides. But the NGO and human rights community attributed most to the military. They exaggerated the number of killed and disappeared tremendously, for political effect. There is no doubt that the government and civilian death squads killed innocent Indians, but often the Indians were members of the insurgency. It was hard to ascertain fact from fiction.

I began preparing a database of every published case of someone killed or mission. I treated every case as political. For three years I tracked trends in violence. Guatemala has always had one of the highest murder rates in the world. But I was able to show trends, spikes and dips in violence through my database, the only one of its kind that existed. I found that even if one treated every case as political, the NGO community greatly over stated the numbers involved.

I had to adjudicate every case of a Guatemalan applying for political asylum in the US. I found most cases were clearly fraudulent, claiming threats from areas of the country that had never suffered from insurgency or counter-insurgency. I recommend most cases not be granted. As I knew what was going on in Guatemala, and where, and from my database, I felt I was able to make fair judgments on these cases.

I traveled frequently to Guatemala. I had good relations with their Washington Embassy. The GOG began moving to hold free and fair elections. The insurgency was winding down. We withheld most lethal equipment from the GOG but provided some training. Relations were correct but not cordial. But the situation on the ground was confusing and the place was an ideological battleground. The international left made all GOG officials out to evil murderers. It was not so. There were moderates and hard liners. I tried to bring

some balance to our treatment of Guatemala. I think I was successful. I got a Meritorious Honor Award for my work and an assignment as Political Counselor in Bolivia.

Q: Today is the 15th of September, 2010, interview with Jim Cason. OK, in 1987 or so you went to Bolivia as a political counselor and Bob Gelbard was the ambassador. Can you describe what were our interests and what were we doing?

CASON: We had two main interests: promoting a deepening of the nascent democracy and fighting cocaine production and trafficking. We wanted a government that would be a really good partner with us in fighting the cocaine traffic that was taking off in the United States at the time.

Q: What was the Bolivian Government like at the time?

CASON: Well, the traditional parties were jockeying to form coalitions to keep power. You had the MNR (Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (Revolutionary Nationalist Movement)), which had been in power for a long time. That party was sclerotic and voters were gravitating away from supporting it at the polls. The conservative party was the ADN (Accion DemocraticaN acionalista (Nationalist Democratic Action)) under General Hugo Banzer. There was a nascent indigenous people's party trying to get a place for Quechua and Aymara people in national affairs, and there was the left leaning MIR (Movimiento Independiente Revolucionario (Independent Revolutionary Movement)).

Very strange coalitions of the right and left appeared; the MIR and the ADN and the MIR and the MNR formed coalitions and shared power. I had to follow all of these developments. We provided training to the anti-narcotics police and the military and encouraged them to draft very strong narcotics laws, because they didn't have them at the time when cocaine -- coca production was booming in the Yungas and in the Chapare.

Q: Those two names represent -- they were sort of the jungle area or what?

CASON: Yes, the Chapare region was the low land and the Yungas was the traditional coca growing area. The Yungas coca leaf was traditionally used by the miners to stave off cold and fatigue; it was chewed. But a lot of that coca was getting into the illegal trade, which was basically centered in the Chapare. So we significant programs supporting the Bolivian Special Forces, the Blue Devil helicopter pilots and we vetted and trained people to go in and look for the coca the labs and paste pits. Our mutual goal was to take down the drug organizations. The political section worked closely with the DEA (Drug Enforcement Agency) and INL (International Narcotics and Law Enforcement). When I was there the programs were small. They later became huge, multi-million dollar efforts.

Q: Well --

CASON: As in Lisbon, Maracaibo, Panama and on the Guatemala desk, I created an enormous database of the owners of Bolivian businesses, but this time added in all

persons who had run for political office and all pilots. I ended up with 15,000 companies and some 50,000 individuals. This was of invaluable help to our DEA, CIA and military offices who needed to know who certain people were and what organizations they were associated with. My information served as the core for an eventual TAT (Tactical Analysis Team). We had never before had a central repository of this type of useful information. My data on the bad guys was available to all the agencies. The first TAT, I think, was in Bolivia.

Q: Well, in working to suppress the drug trade, were we aware of how the farmers can sustain themselves?

CASON: With the decline of the tin industry, a lot of miners were unemployed and left Potosi. They moved into the Chapare and were encouraged by the traffickers to grow coca, which was not indigenous to the Chapare. Chapare coca leaf was not suitable for chewing, only for making cocaine.

Q: Well, were we able to offer something in -- to replace this income earner or --

CASON: Yes, we had very large AID (Agency for International Development) programs looking at alternative development opportunities for the farmers. We have never been able to find a good substitute crop that could compete with coca. You can make a lot more money in cocaine than anything else. But nevertheless, we did a lot of development in the Chapare, planting oranges and all kinds of high value low-weight products that could be moved out of the Chapare or Bolivia relatively easy and sold. It's something we do wherever coca leaf is grown in Latin America. What are the best crops and how can we encourage people to grow them. I'm not sure we've been very successful over the years. Our strategy was two fold: pursue alternate development and capture and dismantle the drug organizations.

Q: Well, who were the traffickers? Were they indigenous Bolivians or?

CASON: Colombians came down as did Peruvians to encourage the campesinos to grow coca and make coca paste. They would then fly that out in small planes. It was cheaper to fly out concentrated coca base and the paste than the bulkier leaf. The traffickers would fly it into Colombia and process it into cocaine there. So they formed alliances with local growers, like the current President, Evo Morales, who was the head of the Coca Growers Federation.

Q: Had it turned violent within the country?

CASON: There wasn't that much violence then. We took out a large number of the trafficking organizations. They were obviously not happy about it. Occasionally they would fire back. But Bolivia never has had the kind of violence that developed in Peru and in Colombia. Bolivia's a little bit different. There were never any indigenous large guerilla groups in Bolivia linked to narco trafficking.

Q: Well, when you say you did research, what do you mean by that?

CASON: Well, I did something that nobody else had ever done. And I won the CIA National Human Intelligence Prize in 1989 for my work as the best intelligence collector in the U.S. government. For the three years that I was there, I went to the public registry, and spent a couple hours every day building a database of 50,000 people, as I mentioned earlier. I made family trees of the biggest families. I got hold of all of the electoral registry books for drug producing areas. So I had the actual voter registration books for a period of time in my possession. I looked at places like Santa Ana in the Beni, and other big drug towns. The books contained names of everybody that voted, along with thumbprints, date and place of birth and ID number, occupation and address. The narco families all came in to vote as families, along with their bodyguards, drivers, etc. I found chemists and telex operators, airplane mechanics, and other occupations of interest to our drug and intelligence folks. As a result, I was able to point out where the traffickers lived and where their relatives resided. We used that as a basis for operational raids on the drug towns and for an intelligence who's who database. The Blue Devils mounted helicopter raids on Santa Ana and used my data to arrest major traffickers.

Q: Well, was there a problem that you were uncovering the power structure in this?

CASON: Yes. In fact, at every post where I served I tried to map the power structure with precision. It's what I would always do when I first came in; see who owns the country, who's who. Starting from the bottom up, with data contained in the company registration. I would add in everybody running for any office at whatever level. And I would flesh out the power structure and put the individuals in family trees. This approach always revealed a tremendous amount. Give me a name of someone in whom you had an interest, and within five seconds I could provide you all about the person-- what they owned, their lawyers and associates and their relatives were. This was a new kind of intelligence that fit in between what the CIA would do and what the DEA focused on. I would also read all the obituaries and social pages, looking for weddings or events that families all attended. This gave me missing data to fill in the family trees, since most family embers would go to a funeral or wedding of a clan member.

Q: Well, did you find, I mean, for example with Mr. Cason going down to the public registry on a daily basis, the clerks were probably supported by drug money. I mean what --

CASON: Well, I would always tell the clerks that I was looking for good joint business partners for American businesses, so I needed to know who the business people were and who owned all the companies. I began my search always with somebody's list of top companies and lists of trade fair participants and business directories. Every company got a number, and every time I added a businessman I'd put a number next to the name that linked him/her with that firm. I had a 50 foot wall lined with volumes of the firms. I used the old Wang system's sort function to organize the large volume of data. That was good enough before we had any access to small computers. This information and it was also very helpful to the commercial section *(laughs).* They actually did find it useful for joint

venture research. I always had a cover story for why I was doing the research.

Q: What about say, like the political part of Morales? That was the coca growers, wasn't it?

CASON: Yes, coca growers then were allowed under the law to plant a certain amount of coca. It was supposed to be for chewing only. But Chapare coca leaves were too bitter. Everybody knew it went into making cocaine. That was the price the government had to pay to get a strong coca law. We lobbied all the parties to write a strong anti-cocaine law that limited coca leaf production to the Yungas area. I would sit up at marathon all night sessions of Congress that hashed out the law. We lobbied all through the night. We were able to get, for the first time, a coca law that restricted the amount of acreage that could be planted and really increased penalties for the people who were processing it.

Q: Well, did the law have enough teeth to tie it in to the production?

CASON: It was a good law for the time because it enabled the people we were training to actually have something to enforce.

Q: Ah.

CASON: And it was considered to be a very good law because there was nothing really on the books before. The political section got our Superior Honor Awards for pushing that through. It was a big accomplishment at the time and Ambassador Bob Gelbard was very happy as was the Department.

I had a lot of fun in Bolivia. I even had at one point a small group of informants working for me, providing tactical information on a major drug trafficker. One day a woman came to me complaining that "the CIA and the DEA won't listen to me. I am in with one of the major trafficking organizations and I have all kinds of information about them, where they're located." Nobody would pay attention to her, but I did, and it turned out she was correct. She had the keys to the front door of the trafficker's house and the frequencies to his radios and the combination to his safe. I checked out her allegations and found she was telling the truth. We were able to raid this guy during a birthday party that she set up. We arrested him and flew him straight away to the States where he's serving 20 to 30 years. This is why it was a fun place. It was wild and vast and one of the more exciting assignments I've had.

Q: Well, I don't want to get into classified stuff, but how about our military and our CIA at the embassy. Were they involved in this?

CASON: Yes, they were all involved in trying to take down the major traffickers. But they worked on specific cases with informants to make arrests but they weren't interested in the strategic underlying intelligence of who's who. That's where I fit in. My analytical reports and databases enabled them to do their jobs better. That's why Gelbard put me in for the National Human Intelligence Award, and to my surprise I got it. It was a secret

award at the time and came with $5000. I produced some 15-20 analytical reports on the drug cartels. They had names like Narco trafficker families of the Beni, mechanics and airplane pilots of the Beni, Telex operators, etc. The DEA and CIA used these as leads to recruit informants. The thumbprints helped confirm identities of arrested traffickers.

Q: Well, just thinking of the mechanics, I mean I assume these are large registry books --

CASON: They were bulky, big volumes.

Q: How do you get the thumbprints off of them?

CASON: Well, a member of the Electoral Tribunal lent me the books. I won't say how I got them, but I had them in my house. And so I had all the thumbprints. We xeroxed the prints. I began the project by asking the DEA for the last names of the major traffickers. As I read through the 70,000 names in the 50-70 volumes I'd recognize a name and be able to fill in the missing links in the family. I had very, very complete family trees on the major traffickers that included the kinds of data needed to identify them, all coming out of the electoral registries. And eventually I got the complete computer tapes of every voter in the country. That kind of background material allowed us to dismantle the organizations and to identify the corrupt people in the government. We managed to get a number of interior ministers and police chiefs other people fired and jailed using, in part, this kind of data.

Q: Well, in Bolivia at the time, was there what you can call a political class?

CASON: Yes.

Q: And was this political class knee deep in narco work?

CASON: Yes. The traditional politicians in the ADN, the MIR, and the MNR had run the country for years, excluding the indigenous majority from political life. They looked after themselves and their particular interests. A guy named Compadre Palenque decided to mount a challenge to the white elite with his new Condepa party. He gained the support of the Aymara in the town of El Alto, around La Paz. I spent a lot of time with Compadre and reported on the attempt by the Indians to get into national politics. In recent years Evo Morales won the support of the indigenous and is the President. All the traditional parties were discredited, lost support and eventually vanished.

Q: Did you get much help in doing this from say, the Colombian or the Ecuadorian Embassies?

CASON: No, what I did I just did quietly because I didn't want people to know what I was doing. So I did all this by myself, basically at lunch *(laughs)* and after hours in the wee hours of the night going through these books and putting them together using the primitive Wang computers we had then.

Q: Washington was really supportive of what you were doing, wasn't it?

CASON: Yes. I got many congratulatory letters from officials saying wow, nobody's ever done this, keep it up, congratulations. But you know, when I told Gelbard that I was going to do it, nobody believed that I could construct a map of who owned the country. And it was the same reaction I got everywhere I went afterwards. I just said, don't worry, when it's done, I'll tell you. And I just sort of did it and afterwards they were impressed. That was just my way of operating.

Q: Well, it reminds me of the criminologists who -- I mean it's a different thing, but they would read all their newspapers, extract who was there -- I mean they would build up sort of orders of battle within the Communist Party from open sources --

CASON: If you remember when we talked earlier, I did that in Lisbon at the end of the revolution there, I produced the Central Committee of the Communist Party from open sources.
And I did the same thing in Maracaibo, and then in Panama. So it was my trademark, unique to the Foreign Service. As I got more experienced, I added new types of data. For example, I went to the consular section for applicants' bank data and visa pictures. And I tied all that into the database afterwards with photos, passport numbers and other useful data. So I learned as I went along how to get different types of open-sourced material to provide a unique, novel product.

Q: Well, was there much, you know, sort of open political life that really was of interest? Or was sort of the drug trade the name of the game?

CASON: The background of everybody that was there really was the drug trade. But there was a lot of maneuvering going between the elite trying to keep power -- I'm very cynical about it, but it's realistic, to steal as much money as they could for themselves, to get rich. They didn't care about the poor people. Indians didn't get much out of this. So this was an elite game they'd played for centuries, divvying up the pie. That's why they made these strange alliances of the right and left, which didn't make any sense, such as you looked at them as a way to divvy up the resources of the country for themselves. We followed all that and reported extensively on all of those kinds of relationships and coalition building and all of the elections.

Q: Were you able through social contacts or lunches or whatever, to pick up additional information or not?

CASON: Yes. Knowledge is power. My databases gave me great insights. If a contact thought you knew a great deal about them or an issue, they would volunteer much more because they thought you knew it already. And so I would show them in various ways how much I knew about various relationships and they would just chime in and say Yes, "But do you also know that--" and allow me to get what I needed. Many contacts had the mistaken belief anyway that the United States knew everything at any rate.

Q: Yes, you could always point up to the sky and say, you know, sort of imply that the satellite is reading their mail.

CASON: I know. I'd joke that we know everything at any rate, so what additional information you give us we probably already know. It was quite easy. I traveled all over the country. I had a Land Cruiser and I went to isolated places like Pando, where nobody at post normally visited to meet the political people.

One target of ours was a man named Max Fernandez, a beer magnate who we felt was a narco trafficker. He was trying to create his own political party and get into the political establishment. I was able to get a tremendous amount of documents from people as I traveled around the country about his narco past. We obtained enough incriminating information to deny him a visa. We began to use the visa weapon there against traffickers. Bob Gelbard was very supportive.

Q: Well, I would think the visa weapon would be particularly potent, not for the narco guy, but for his wife and the kids.

CASON: Exactly. I've found everywhere that when you take away the ability of the fat cat to take his kids to Disney World and his wife to go shopping, they get really upset. And lots of times they break down and cry. But we denied visas on solid information. We kept them from coming to the United States.

Q: Well, I would have thought that at a certain point the drug people would have caught on to what you were doing and sort of would target you.

CASON: No, they never did. I'm surprised. I got away with it. So *(laughs)* I guess I'm lucky.

Q: Well, was there any contact from the embassy to the government, places in the government, to say we know what's going on or don't do this or raid there or --

CASON: When Jaime Paz Zamora became President we told him not to appoint certain corrupt police as Chief. Don't put the police chiefs in these cities because they're narco traffickers. And we showed them the information and they took our suggestion. And when they did put people in who turned out to be corrupt, with narco ties, we provided information to them about what they were doing and the President fired them. With the intelligence we had we were able to put a lot of heat on the government. Unfortunately, too often, they'd put another guy in and he turned out to be a narco as well. So it was a never ending battle, but we were at least tactically successful at blocking a lot of appointments and getting people fired during the three years that Gelbard and I worked along with others on this issue.

Q: Well, what about the judicial process in Bolivia at the time?

CASON: It was weak. We worked with judges, but AID had not yet really gone

wholeheartedly into judicial training of prosecutors and the judiciary. We preferred, given the corruption, to either extradite or pick up somebody and fly him to the States. We got permission from the President beforehand, and he would wink and say go ahead. We snatched a lot of bad guys and took them back to the States, rather than try them in a corrupt system.

Q: Well, what was our rational for bringing people to the States?

CASON: They'd be out of business and they'd stay in jail. Whereas if they stayed in Bolivia and went to trial the corrupt judges would find some excuse to release them. None of the big traffickers ever stayed in prison. The threshold of impunity in a place like Bolivia was probably a thousand bucks. If you had more than that you could buy your way out of any legal problem.

Q: Well, how did we -- on what grounds would we extradite --

CASON: We would present the government with the information –our indictment-- and we'd go through the notification process and eventually get permission. Snatches were done occasionally. I gather we don't do that anymore. But that was something that was done in the area at the time. Usually the ambassador would go in and tell the president -- "We've identified a major trafficker who is doing you a lot of harm and hurting the image of your country. We have a case against him, and we'll prove it in our courts." The President generally let us take him.

Q: Well, how successful were we in prosecuting in the States?

CASON: They received long sentences.

Q: Were there protests? Outcries?

CASON: No. I think Bolivians accepted this, if they even knew about what we were doing. The traffickers were running about everywhere and educated Bolivians knew what was going on. The narcos had not yet bought up the newspapermen or rallied public opinion to their side.

Q: What was the role of the rest of the political section in all this?

CASON: We did a lot of work computerizing our bio files. I was always a big believer in passing on good files for our replacements. We produced computerized lists of all our biographic holdings, indicating whether or not we had a photo so that as when we perused the papers we would know whether to clip a photo for the file or not. We did a lot of work on memoranda of conversations we had and the traditional human rights reports and the many mandated annual reports. I probably met hundreds of people in a year to discuss developments. We divvied up the parties. I handled the MIR, which was the center left party headed by Jaime Paz Zamora. It turned out to be one of the more corrupt parties. But we had not had much contact with them before I arrived because they

were wrongly viewed as an extremist far left party. There was a tendency in those days unfortunately to stay away from the left, rather than to try to get to know them and influence their thinking.

Q: How did we evaluate Morales at that time?

CASON: He was then a local coca grower union leader, one of many. I felt he was part of the narco system because of his advocacy on behalf of the Chapare growers. Nobody ever had a clue that he was going to become president one day. It appeared Compadre Palenque was more likely to prosper politically than a coca grower leader. But in time Condepa fizzled out, although it was popular in and around La Paz. So nobody thought of Evo Morales as other than one of those pesky coca grower leaders that would mount demonstrations if the drug police eradicated too much Chapare coca leaf.

Q: During this time -- you were there, what, three years?

CASON: Yes, three years.

Q: '87 to '90?

CASON: Yes.

Q: Outside of the tremendous work that you were doing in the narcotics area, were there any other political developments that involved you during that time?

CASON: As a section, we worked closely with the narcotics assistance section on judicial matters. We promoted free and fair elections, and followed sporadic Bolivian efforts to gain access to the sea. But Chile would not budge on allowing Bolivians to have sovereign access to the sea through their hard won territory. Our primary focus there was on the cocaine menace. The US drug problem was growing worse. Cocaine was becoming the drug of choice and our real mission was to understand the narco trade, find out the main players and make cases against individuals while dismantling the rings. I left it to the rest of the section to do the more traditional political reporting.

Q: Well, one of the things about the cocaine trade is that a country will say well, we produce it, but we don't consume it? It's you gringos who are sniffing the stuff. There tends to be a lot of blowback and the people get involved. Was this happening in Bolivia?

CASON: It was. But we pointed out to the politicians that it was their elite kids who had the money to afford to experiment with cocaine, and they're doing it. There in fact was a spike in local cocaine consumption of cocaine (but not crack). We began offering some demand reduction programs. We pointed out that the poor kids didn't have the money to buy coke; the poor kids chewed coca leaves to dull their hunger and cold, but coke use was an upper and middle class scourge. We urged them to join the fight with us and enforce their drug laws because it's going to be your kids who are going to be consumers and it's going to spread to the rest of the country. And there was some resonance. They

passed the narcotics law.

Q: Did Brazil play any part of this?

CASON: No.

Q: I mean --

CASON: At that time they didn't pay attention to Bolivia and drugs. Coca base and paste did not yet pass to Colombia via Brazil. The small planes flew through Peru into Colombia for further processing into cocaine. Cocaine wasn't a problem for Brazil yet and they were not particularly interested in Bolivia. Bolivia had not then begun producing the oil or gas that later drew Brazil's interest. Brazil was not a partner in fighting cocaine in those days.

Q: Well, 1990, where did you go?

CASON: They picked me to go to the National War College. I had a choice of senior training and so I decided to go to the National War College. I was there during the first Gulf War. It was a fascinating time to be there, one of the best years I've ever had. I've never read so much in my life.

Q: Well, what were you picking up from your military colleagues about the Gulf War? Was there sort of a feeling that at least we've made up for Vietnam or --

CASON: The class started in August. And the war started while we were there. My military colleagues, Colonels and Captains, had training all their lives for a ground war of this size. They wanted to be leading their divisions. They wanted to be on the battlefield, not in class. So my classmates were chafing at the bit, lamenting the fact that they were in senior training at the wrong time. But we civilians learned a lot from this because our military brethren knew the capabilities of our weapon systems. We worried about the sand and the size of the Iraqi forces. Our colleagues reassured us that we had the technological advantage. Our weapons would work. They told us what would unfold. Our weapons weren't going to get clogged with sand, they were going to work. We were going to send bombs through windows and onto tanks with pin point accuracy.

We went to the National Reconnaissance Office on the eve of the invasion and saw thermal image photos of buried Iraqi tanks which we were going to take those out in the first wave. As the war unfolded each morning the College showed us jet gun turret photos of what was going on. It was a fascinating time. We followed the progress of the war on the big screens. Our guys would proudly explain to us civilians "look at our neat weapons and what we can do."

Q: The media was playing up the Iraqi Army as being battle-hardened and big and, you know, there would be a sea of blood and all that. Were military people saying, you know, this isn't going to happen this way?

CASON: Our guys were extremely confident. They said, "We're going to cream 'em. Trust us."

Q: Well, I mean --

CASON: "Don't worry. We've been training for this. We've got a whole arsenal that has never been tried out, but we know they will work kin combat because we've done many exercises with them. Trust us. It's going to be a cake walk." They were right on. We were amazed, awed. The shock and awe was among the civilians.

Q: Well, was there any concern about the end game?

CASON: We were taught at the War College that the end game was obtaining the political outcome we wanted. We were told that's how to think strategically. In our war game exercises we stated the political outcome we wanted to achieve kinetically. We debated whether we should go on past Basra and eliminate the Saddam regime. But the coalition was only going to remain together if we respected the original mandate, which was only to get Iraq out of Kuwait. There was no consensus to eliminate the Iraqi regime. We had lots of interesting discussions. I think the allied coalition was successful because it had a limited mission. We completed the mission and didn't have a mandate from the UN (United Nations) or anybody else to go farther. There was a grudging understanding of that even though some officers were itching to take out the bad guys. But that's what the professors were trying to teach; in the end, you need a viable political outcome. The kinetic solution is not the final solution.

Q: Well, in a way I imagine your course was -- you couldn't help but be concentrated on what was happening there.

CASON: The course went on despite the excitement of the war. We focused very heavily on strategy, on the great writers like Sun Tzu, and read all of the great theoreticians. We had so much reading to do. I read hundreds of pages a day and at course end had maybe 15 or 20 linear feet of reading material on my shelves at home; only recently did I get rid of it because I couldn't stand to throw such interesting material out. I had a chance to go to Czechoslovakia and Poland and Austria during our course. We were the first War College group to visit the two ex-communist countries after the fall of the Soviet Union. The militaries were eager to meet with us and expressed their desires for closer relations and eventual NATO membership. The Polish military in Gdansk showed us their base and their preparations to invade Denmark. Everybody was happy they were no longer a vassal of the Soviet Union. One Czech pilot gave me one of his medals—they wanted to be buddy-buddy. It was a fascinating time. They were in awe of our success in Iraq, of our superior equipment.

Q: Was there much discussion about NATO and what we were going to do with our military?

CASON: This was a time when some authors were speculating that the end of the USSR meant this was the end of history, the end of big conflicts. We had defeated Iraq easily, the Soviet Union was kaput. Was this the end of ideological battles? Was there a need for a Foreign Service, for USIS, for a large military? I think there was an underlying worry that politicians would downsize, declare victory, and as we historically always did after a war, drain the security accounts. There was a concern about whether NATO would survive and whether it needed to get involved outside Europe. Could we convince NATO political leaders to move into new missions?

Q: Did you find you were able to pass on your experiences in the field of narcotics? Was there interest in this?

CASON: Yes, the military officers were extremely interested in the views of the 16 of us in the Foreign Service that were there and of the few from the other agencies attending. In fact, my senior paper was on the role of high tech on the southwest border. I was looking at the role of sensors in tracking drug traffickers and alien smuggler coming into the United States. My co-authors and I went down with the Border Patrol to see what, if any technology, they were using in their work. We discussed the latest developments in robotic mobile sensing platforms. I was just appalled at the state of our border and wrote a paper called "What role high tech on the Southwest border." Colin Powell gave me the Joint Chief's and the Defense Intelligent Agency Writing Awards for that. Immigration wanted a copy of the study for their consideration. The sensors they were using were primitive Vietnam era devices.

Q: Well, did you know where you were going next?

CASON: I didn't know where I was going. I was hoping to go as the political counselor in The Hague. One of the advantages of being in the War College was that you had a special advantage in terms of onward assignments. They gave you more or less what you wanted. As this was senior training, you were able to break into areas that you normally wouldn't be assigned to. My career track was Latin America, although I'd done Italy and Portugal. So they said, "Yes, we'll give you that job." And then I got a phone call from Cris Arcos, Ambassador Cris Arcos, who was Ambassador in Honduras, and he asked me to be his DCM. So I ended up breaking my assignment to The Hague. I'd bought my Netherlands guidebooks and was all prepared to enjoy the windmills and cheese. So I ended up going to Honduras.

I was very happy that the professors chose me as a distinguished graduate, as one of the top ten students in the class. So I really spent a lot of time studying hard at the War College. I took it extremely seriously. I read every single thing and participated in all the programs. And so I got that award and I think that's probably one of the reasons that Cris, who I knew from our days together in the revolution in Portugal, chose me. He was an information officer and I was a political officer in Lisbon. We knew each other and our kids were friends.

Q: Yes, I've interviewed Cris.

CASON: Yes, so out of the blue he said, "Jim, come work with me." And I said, "Honduras!" But "I'm an FSO-1 and that's senior officer job. That's a double stretch, nobody gets a double stretch."

Arcos said, "I'll make it happen." And I got it. Another FSO-1 who went to Jerusalem and I were the only double stretches to an FE-OC job. And Tegucigalpa was the tenth largest post in the world at the time; it was a major, major assignment. The Contra wars were over and a large post in Honduras was no longer needed as a platform. We were downsizing the post to a more normal sized embassy. We had a thousand employees and the largest CIA station in the world.

Q: Well, you were there from 1991 to --

CASON: 1995. I stayed four years under Cris and under Bill Pryce.

Q: When you got there in 1991, what was the situation in Honduras?

CASON: Well, we were still winding down the Contra operations and finishing the Contadora process. We had a huge CIA and military presence. Our priority was to get the post downsized. We had 14 agencies and 1300 employees in this monster place which no longer was of much strategic importance. So we had to shed people. I had to recommend who should go and rejuvenate the post's anti-drug efforts because the drug traffickers were moving into Honduras out on the Bay Islands. Traffickers were reacting to our moves in South America, moving drugs by fast boat, truck and via small planes from Panama through Central America. Traditionally Honduras had a great deal of corruption. We tried to fight that (without much success). And alien smuggling rings were operating big time in Honduras, bringing Chinese through Honduras on their way to the US border. We had Cubans, Chinese pouring through because corrupt Honduran officials were colluding with the traffickers. Even as DCM, I developed a Who's Who of some 35,000 Honduran businessmen. I led our anti- alien smuggling, anti-drug efforts.

Q: Well, did they have good records?

CASON: Yes. They had a good public registry there. I spent four years there and built up a massive who's who, which we used extensively for law enforcement and business development purposes.

There was tremendous corruption in the government that hurt our interests. President Callejas was corrupt. AT&T competed for an expansion of the country's telecommunications network. But then we discovered the president's brother-in-law, who worked for Siemens, got the contract after Siemens paid a five million dollar bribe. We expressed our displeasure to the President and suggested he solve this problem by enlarging the contract to provide each company with a piece of the action. We wanted a level playing field for our companies. We had a problem in the Bay Islands where American investors were coming in and buying what they thought was a nice piece of

land on the coast. After paying they discovered somebody else owned it. Local government officials were in collusion, selling the same piece of land over and over again. So we used our visa weapon again, revoking the visas of all the local officials, which put a quick end to that problem. And later some of Senator Helms staffers came to find out what we could do to put a stop to this type of scam. The Sandinistas had taken the property of many US citizens so it was a regional issue. They asked what they could do. And I said take away their visas. And this provision made it into the Helms-Burton Law.

Q: So it turned out to be quite an effective weapon.

CASON: Yes. I mean it had to be used correctly, selectively, based on guidelines. But I'll tell you, when you take a visa away from a mayor in a Bay Island tourist area and he can't take his kids to Disney World anymore, they sit up and listen. I would go in to an official's office with a "cancelled" stamp and ask them to let me see their passport. And I would cancel their US valid visa right in front of them. "Oh my God, what did you do? And I would say, "You've been defrauding American citizens, and we don't want you in our country. The word got around quickly and they straightened up their act. The visa weapon was very effective.

Back in 1986 some drug traffickers set a mob loose on the AID annex. The building was burned and the government had never compensated us for it. They and we had forgotten about it. I found out told the Hondurans we were going to cut off our Foreign Aid if they didn't compensate us. They studied the issue and gave me a check for the $700,000they owed us, which the State Department was happy to receive out of the blue.

Q: Well, was the Contra business over by this time?

CASON: Yes, it was all winding down-- old business. There were remnants of it here and there. I came in on the tail of the downsizing.

Q: Were the Cubans involved in Honduras at all?

CASON: Not as much as they were in Panama and Nicaragua. We were onto their case. They were not major players. I don't even think a Cuban Embassy existed in Honduras when I was there. We didn't want them there and the Hondurans didn't want them either because the Cubans had been trying to subvert Honduras.

Q: How stood the narco problem?

CASON: It was big. The Bay Islands were being used for transshipment of drugs into Mexico and Jamaica in shrimp shipments. The Honduran Navy did not have the resources or much will to do anything about it. As in Bolivia, we were very much involved in promoting good legislation and building up a local capacity to do something about it. But corruption is endemic there. They'd take your assistance and intelligence tips. Later on we'd learn our side had given or sold the information that we gave them to the bad guys.

We didn't make large numbers of drug busts given these problems. We had some. We had a program to search all of the tractor trailers coming down through Central America for hidden compartments. Occasionally we'd find labs in remote areas, or seize planes. I worked very, very closely with our intelligence people to detect and counter wrongdoing in the government. We had success in breaking up the very big alien smuggling rings involving the Chinese and Cubans. We got the President to fire the Foreign Minister for his personal involvement in alien smuggling. Corruption in Honduras was probably our number one obstacle to success and one of the major things that we spent our time fighting at every level.

Q: Yes. Well, I'm just -- did Mexico play much of a role?

CASON: No, nothing.

Q: Except for illegal activities, there was not much legitimate traffic, was there?

CASON: Except for the Bay Islands Honduras did not attract many tourists. Honduras had been very useful in the Contra days. It was a base for our operations. After that ended, it became your typical "thug's and drugs" post. I always seemed to end up in "thug's and drugs" posts.

Q: Well, were the Hondurans a violent people or --

CASON: Not at the time. They did not yet have gangs. We had not yet begun to deport Honduran criminals back to Honduras. But there were a lot of human rights problems in places like San Pedro Sula where members of the business community and the police sponsored death squads to kill local petty criminals. The problem was the courts didn't dispense quick justice so the elite took matters into their own hands. We tried to get them to stop that. They were hurting the country's image. But they didn't have the violent gangs that now have come in and taken over. It was still a pretty friendly environment for American investments. We had large shrimp farming operations and banana businesses there. But it wasn't a big market.

Honduras wasn't sending many illegal aliens to the US. There weren't that many Hondurans as Salvadorans or later on Guatemalans immigrating to the US. At the end of my three year tour I asked Ambassador Bill Pryce if I could stay another year so my sons could graduate with their senior class. He agreed. I got selected to the Senior Foreign Service in my first year. That made my DCM job easier because a lot of my section chiefs were senior officers, of higher rank than I. That was kind of awkward to be their supervisor. They didn't like it. When I got promoted it helped in that respect.

Q: How about with the Indians? I mean were the Indians of concern, the Honduran treatment of Indians or --

CASON: No, we were concerned with Indians from India that were being smuggled in wholesale. Honduras had few indigenous people left, unlike in Guatemala. The situation

was totally different. Neither Salvador nor Honduras had Indians.

We'd had problems with the Maquilas. Some American NGOs (non-government organization) were complaining that textile firms in the maquilas were mistreating their workers, offering them relatively low wages. Some of the Taiwanese firms there were not as good as the American firms in terms of worker treatment. Although the salaries were great in comparison with wages outside the maquilas and everybody wanted a job there, US labor and their NGO friends badgered us to try to improve conditions and get the Hondurans to crack down on the offending foreign firms. We didn't have very much success. The Hondurans wanted maquilas to stay and felt that pressure on the Taiwanese would just cause them to pack up and go to other equally low waged countries. In reality, conditions were generally ok in the maquilas.

Q: Well, I'm just looking at the time. Maybe this would be a good place to stop.

CASON: Yes, -- after that I went on to be the political advisor to SACLANT (Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic) and to the Atlantic.

Q: OK, so we'll pick this up in -- what are we talking about, '94?

CASON: We're going to pick it up in 1995, '97.

Q: We left off, you'd left Honduras and you were off to -- was it SACLANT? You were going to be --

CASON: -- two jobs. One was Political Advisor to the Commander of the US Atlantic Command, which had 80% of U.S. combat forces, and also to the Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic for NATO. I had to provide political advice for both.

Q: It was General Jack Sheehan.

CASON: He was an interesting guy, unusual for a marine. He was a Marine General who came out of a Jesuit school, Boston College, where he majored in English*(laughs)*. He was an out of the box guy.

Q: Now --

CASON: He didn't generally like State Department people, but I got along great with him because I gave him unusual information that a military aide would probably not have thought of. On arrival he said "Go look for some pretty pebbles on the beach that I've not seen and that military guys won't pick up so I can have a different perspective."

Q: All right. How would you have put the situation -- where were his problems and where did you fit in?

CASON: Both SACLANT and the Atlantic Command (ACOM) were co-located in

Norfolk. SACLANT was on one side of the street and the Atlantic Command on the other. I lived on Admiral's Row in Norfolk in the Powhatan House. The Atlantic Command specialized in training all services to coordinate efforts on the battlefield, so-called joint task force development. We had very good facilities for that. The idea was to get the military to fight as a team, not as the Army/Navy/Air Forces separately. Our big training facility was in Suffolk. We also involved civilians, bringing their expertise to the military to solve common problems. Gen. Sheehan was far ahead of his peers in that aspect of his work. ACOM later morphed into the Joint Forces Command.

ACOM also had the geographic responsibility for Cuba and the Caribbean. He oversaw the invasion of Haiti and the rebuilding afterwards and the handling of the refugees coming out of Cuba in the last rafter crisis. He managed the camps in Guantanamo. At SACLANT, he was Supporting Commander for NATO in Europe. We ran Partnership for Peace (PfP) training in the United States for all of the countries that wanted to get into NATO.

Q: Well, where did you fit in? I mean what -- where did you see your job?

CASON: My job was to provide him with information, perspective, context, and policy advice. For example, I focused on Kosovo. I said, "As supporting Commander, some day Kosovo's going to blow up, you may be called upon to provide forces and you need to know about what's going on there now." So I did a series of weekly reports on the internal dynamics there. I produced about 50 reports at a time when nobody was thinking about Kosovo. I used to travel at least once a month to Europe. I would go to Brussels and to the War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague. In Brussels I would talk with all the PERM reps (NATO Ambassadors). I would go to Vienna and talk to the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), because we were also supporting the implementation of the Bosnian Accords. I had to become an expert on the Bosnian Accords, the civilian implementation of the Bosnian Accords, progress, problems, etc.

I traveled with him, prepared his briefing books. He always read my briefing books before looking at the military's, because the military books were all dry, order of battle and things of that sort. When we went to Poland I gave him background on the Polish contributions to U.S. independence, material on their Polish heroes and music; when he gave toasts he had interesting things to say.

Q: Yes, I can see that there would be much more of a meeting of the minds, given his background and his ability to appreciate the same things when he was in Poland about say, the military, and the contributions during the Revolutionary War and all that.

CASON: Yes, he loved that. The Atlantic Command was unusual. We were also the Defense Force for Iceland. He would go to Iceland periodically on his P3, which was his command plane, and we would talk to the Icelandic Government about defense issues. We had stationed there several F16for the defense of Iceland. We got to travel around that beautiful country. It was really fascinating work. One week we'd be in Iceland and then we'd go off to Latvia where we looked at their Special Forces training. A lot of these

countries were trying to get into NATO. We were prepping them on what they needed to do in their armed forces to prepare for entry. I remember a Latvian Special Forces demonstration; a team of Latvians tried to show how macho they were to Jack Sheehan by breaking beer bottles on their heads and banging nails into boards with their hands. Sheehan thought it was appalling, terrible. He went to the hospital and visited an ordinary soldier whose hands were wounded from this display of bravado. He said, "This is not how you treat your soldiers in NATO.--that's the Soviet way. We don't treat our soldiers like that." Jack was outspoken and gave good advice. He was very interested in all these countries.

Our NATO bailiwick for training under PfP covered all of Europe, over as far as the "Stans"–Kazakhstan and in the north over to Finland. Since we were headquartered at the naval base in Norfolk with all the fleet, we got a lot of visits. Leaders of the Russian Duma and the Head of the Russian Navy came to look at our ships. I remember what most impressed them was that we served four meals a day on our ships; they were not amazed at our armaments but the fact that we had enough money to take care of the troops. The Russians were flabbergasted. During my stint we flew to Moscow to talk to the Russian Navy about confidence building measures. We had suggested that they work with us on a joint submarine rescue hatch. But they were too suspicious and didn't agree. Later the Soviet Kursk submarine sank and all aboard perished for lack of a rescue hatch that others could attach rescue modules to. Eventually the US and the Soviets ended up developing such a device.

Q: Yes.

CASON: Those were the sort of different things I helped on.

Q: I mean we were proposing that we have rescue equipment and the idea is that they or we, whoever was closest, could send rescue stuff down to the submarine and it would fit.

CASON: That's right. They were still suspicious of our motives and didn't want to do it. Maybe they felt we wanted to get a look at their technology. But as I said, later on we did it. We were always looking for ways to build bridges with the Russians. We traveled to Romania and talked with the Romanian president and to Poland for similar talks about NATO membership. They all were very interested in getting into NATO so they could hold off the Russian bear in the future. We also held annual meetings with all the Caribbean Armed Forces, discussing a whole range of issues. We would go to Trinidad and Jamaica and Barbados. We provided a great deal of anti-drug and maritime interdiction training and our expertise on joint forces operations.

Do you remember when the movie Independence Day came out? In the movie the aliens were landing and the President tells his aide—"Get me the Atlantic Command on the phone." the guy --

Q: Yes.

CASON: "Get me the Atlantic Command" *(laughs).* We were responsible for the defense of the continental United States when I was there. Later Northern Command took over that responsibility.

Q: Well, you mentioned Finland. We had a few planes there, didn't we?

CASON: I don't understand-- I'm sorry.

Q: Not Finland, I'm talking about Iceland. I'm sorry.

CASON: Oh Iceland, Yes. Well, Iceland wanted us to station jets there. Since World War II we've been their defense force. The Atlantic Command was in charge of Iceland's defense needs. Keeping F16s there was costly and we wanted Iceland to pay something towards their maintenance. We had six planes there to defend, but as the Cold War wound down, the question arose as to the need to keep them there-- against what? Our presence made them feel good. They had a lot of issues over who should clear snow from the runways --mundane things of that sort. We trained them on how to prepare for disasters like earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.

Q: Were we trying to bring the newer countries both in -- the ones that were in NATO, but also the ones that were coming into NATO or potentially coming into NATO -- were we trying to get them to specialize? In other words, these troops would be mountain troops, these troops will be marine landing forces, et cetera, so that they wouldn't try to replicate the whole panorama of military specialties?

CASON: Well there already was specialization of a sort in NATO. The Dutch provided anti-missile units. It was their specialty. Some of the Eastern Europeans were specialized under the Soviet system in biological warfare and radiological countermeasures. The Czechs offered this capability. They were all very eager to get in. They wanted to be accepted and they wanted the seal of good approval that stemmed from participating in Partnership for Peace. Countries couldn't automatically qualify for PfP. They had to be accepted. In PfP exercise in the US different militaries trained together. We encouraged countries to participate or at least send observers. Our goal was to wean them away from the Soviet system, to prepare themselves to work in joint and combined operations with us. Our own allies were ill prepared for these types of modern operations. They were not really prepared to operate with us in our joint task forces because of simple things like not having the right fuel couplings on their ships and tankers.
Imagine how much worse it was with Latin American navies. We knew that in the future, war would be coalition warfare, and not us fighting alone. So were trying to get people revved up and prepared to work with us, particularly as we moved into NATO out- of-area operations in places like Yugoslavia.

Q: What were you ultimately responsible for with the Bosnia deployment?

CASON: We had a support role for the civilian implementation of the Bosnian Accords. I

would monitor how it was going, what the problems were, what was working well, were the Serbs and the Muslims getting along, etc. I got very deeply into an area that before I knew nothing about, which was the reason I traveled so frequently. So I became a real expert and prepared a constant stream of material for the General on what was going on in the Balkans.

Luckily I had a Navy Commander (who later became Captain and one of the DIA (Defense Intelligence Agency) chiefs) working for me. That enabled me to do a better job understanding what the bosses wanted and what the J1 through J8s needed from my office. I supported everybody and they would come to me for information. I would travel up from Norfolk almost every 10 days to the State Department and other departments to collect information on what was going on. I often got NODIS (No Distribution) and EXDIS (Exclusive Distribution) cables and policy option papers that the general needed to know about in his various capacities. I got what his military aides couldn't get. I had unique access to thinking in my Western hemisphere Bureau in State. I would come back with the little pebbles that for him were very unique and interesting and that his people couldn't get. H liked and relied on me and we had a great time. He gave me the highest defense department award for civilians at the end of my tour, which was his way of saying thank you. He was a gruff guy and he didn't generally suffer fools, but I did what he wanted and provided what he needed. And so it was a very interesting, enlightening and educational tour for me.

Q: How did Brazil fit in? What was your impression of Brazil and its cooperation?

CASON: Atlantic Command had the Caribbean. The Southern Command had South America. After a later geographic command shakeup, the Unified Command Plan gave all of our non-U.S. responsibilities to the Southern Command. So ACOM never had Brazil. We had Cuba, we had Guantanamo, we had Haiti, and we had the Caribbean Islands.

Q: Well, I assume Cuba was not a particularly military problem. Was --

CASON: No, it was refugee camp operations in Guantanamo.

Q: Refugee.

CASON: We built a camp for 60 or 70,000 Cuban refugees that we intercepted at sea and took to Guantanamo. We had to build camps from scratch and keep the refugees relatively happy so they wouldn't mutiny. We had to feed them, keep them entertained, teach them English, coordinate work with all of the civilian agencies that were processing the refugees. We also maintained contact with the Cuban military on the other side of the Guantanamo gates. The northeast gate issues we called them. We talked with the Cuban commanders surrounding Guantanamo on issues like firefighting and air craft approaches, fence demining, practical issues. The only meetings we had with the Cuban military were those periodic meetings at the northeast gate.

Q: What about the Canadians? I mean were there any other issues with them?

CASON: Yes. There were lots of problems with the Canadians. I'm not a Canadian expert, but they are very sensitive regarding sovereignty issues. They were allies, but different, less "kinetic" than the U.S., so to speak. They were more touchy feely. You had to be very, very careful how you dealt with the Canadians, particularly on continental defense. They wanted to have an equal role, not only in missile defense, but in all other NORAD defense issues. Particularly in terms of Cuba, they were very, very wary of collaborating with us on anything to do with Cuba. They had robust diplomatic relations and we didn't.

Q: Well, was there much of a Canadian Navy, for example?

CASON: Yes, but it's shrinking. Canada once had a bigger navy with mine sweepers and destroyers. I would go up from time to time with our ACOM folks we'd see the Canadian west coast fleet based in and the Atlantic fleet in Halifax. They were shrinking. Canadians didn't want to put their money in their military and I thought getting a free ride. We were handling their defense and they could spend money their budget on social programs. But we were always urging them to enhance their capacity to work with us in combined, joint operations especially on the seas.

Q: Did the Northwest Passage raise itself while you were there?

CASON: No, no. Not at my level.

Q: Over in Kosovo, what was sort of the military feeling? You know, as you looked at it, what did you see we were probably going to do?

CASON: I was quick to realize that Kosovo might become another Balkan flash point. It was on one of civilization and religion's historic fault lines. Kosovo was part of Serbia but wanted independence. I read State Department cables and read of a growing independent movement there and increased discontent. The problem could only grow more acute. Some day the Serbs are going to have to fight the Kosovars who want their independence. I began to start learning everything I could about Kosovo about which there wasn't very much reporting. We didn't have anyone based in Pristina at the time, perhaps only a small consulate. My role was basically to keep an eye on Kosovo. I would periodically brief the Command on Kosovo.

The General treated me as a three star. I actually had three stars on my car. This ranking got me respect from the military. There were very high level people at the Atlantic Command, like Admiral Fallon, the Deputy CINC (Commander in Chief). He went on to become CINCPAC Commander. Vern Clark became head of the Navy. Another general who was there with us later became head of TRANSCOM (United States Transportation Command).Sheehan had a tremendous team. I got the Command to be thinking about Kosovo their support tasks should we ever get involved. I believe we were better prepared for our supporting role in providing forces when NATO eventually got involved

there.

Q: Did -- I mean the Middle East was completely beyond --

CASON: It was not in our area of operations.

Q: But was the Sixth Fleet under our command?

CASON: No. We had the Atlantic Fleet. Vern Clark was its commander at the time. Our fleet participated in training in the Caribbean operations. UNITAS was the name of our annual fleet cooperation with South and Central America and the Caribbean nations. We would sail one of our aircraft carriers into Latin America and fly local politicians out to the ship to schmooze and show them our capabilities. Our goal was to get greater Latin contributions to our counter drugs and counter weapon operations. We promoted joint ops with our Coast Guard and Navy.

Q: How did you find the State Department? Was it a good support for you?

CASON: No. At the time, PM (Bureau of Political-Military Affairs) really had not figured out what to do with POLADs (Political Advisors). They didn't know how they could support us. For example, we didn't have representational funds. When Sheehan invited me to attend an event at his house, say, with the head of the Latvian Armed Forces, we all had to pitch in money for the party and I never got reimbursed. I finally managed to convince ACOM to give me a home on the base. I had to rent it, of course. It was very important to be in a house on admirals' row for the socializing, which is so important in the military. Having grown up in a military family I knew that and so I insisted. I also needed and got a deputy and access to a car so we could go to Washington. The command gave me the tools I needed to be a good supporting officer. I got great support from the military, but the State Department didn't really know what to do with POLADs and they weren't as flexible as the military. They knew the Commands appreciated having POLADS. We'd been providing them for a number of years. But they had no training programs for us, no structure and they didn't send us any information about what was going on, they didn't arrange anything for us. So it was up to us as individuals to fight for the support we needed. I was very grateful to have Commander -- later Captain-- Frank Berger as my deputy. He really helped me find out what my military bosses expected because generally the military wouldn't provide explicit instructions or feedback. They just expected you to know what you needed to do. As a Foreign Service person, with no political military experience, I could have floundered without a savvy deputy and without any support from State. So my deputy was really important.

Q: Well then in -- you left there in '97. Where did you go?

CASON: Then I went as Deputy Chief of Mission to Kingston, Jamaica.

Q: You were there from when to when in Jamaica?

CASON: ’97 to 2000.

Q: What was the situation in Jamaica when you arrived?

CASON: Well, Jamaica is a very physically dangerous environment. It is a beautiful island. Kingston was very dangerous, with shootouts in the areas that we lived. The “posses” or drug gangs controlled the capital. We had a lot of problems with drugs there. Jamaican cocaine mules were bringing large quantities of coke into the US and the UK. Something like 70 or 80% of those arrested at US and UK airports for drug trafficking were Jamaican. The posses were well-established criminal organization. For the embassy, counter-narcotics work was very important. Jamaica is the largest and most important Caribbean country. As DCM I was back again doing the coordination of law enforcement efforts. We worked especially closely with the Coast Guard of Jamaica, helping them professionalize. We gave training and intelligence, and they allowed us to eradicate marijuana within the country. That was a lot of what we did.

Politically, relations were only lukewarm. Superficially they were friendly to us. But they did not vote with us in the UN. They had good relations with the Cubans--even sympathy, because they’d been trained by the Cubans. So we didn’t get anywhere with them on countering Cuba. They were standoffish politically and in foreign affairs areas of interest to us, but nominally allied with us on a number of law enforcement matters. In one area, we never saw eye to eye. That was criminal deportees. Many Jamaican criminals, when they got out of US prison, were deported back to Jamaica. The Jamaicans claimed these deportees were the cause of crime waves. They claimed they were not criminals when they immigrated to the US, but learned from US criminals and then we sent our problems back to them. That was not true. I researched all the deportee criminal records in Jamaica (with the help of the police) and found that most of them had criminal records before they left Jamaica. We were able to debunk the charge that they learned to be criminals in the States. They went to the States, lived in Jamaican communities, hobnobbed with Jamaican criminals there, were arrested and came back home they had been convicted and finished their sentences.

The Jamaican gangs were very smart. They penetrated our consular section over time, putting “sleepers” into key jobs over decades. Some of these people printed visas after officers had adjudicated them. Some got jobs as drivers then applied for a job in anti-fraud operations, or in running the section’s computers. Deported posse members came back after serving time for cocaine trafficking. Their friends in the consular section would give them a new visa right away and they’d go back with a new identity and a fresh 10-year visa and get back into the drug trade in the US.

An informant told us we had a problem and gave us a Jamaican passport with a new US visa that had not been approved by an officer. How did this happen? I spent many months pouring over printouts of every keystroke made by anyone in the consular section to look for anomalies to determine who in the consular section was involved. I was successful. It was very sophisticated. I figured out how they did it. I took all the printouts for a year and

a half period from each computer home. It was about a 20-foot high stack of print outs. I eventually realized that several locals had gotten access to officers' log-on passwords. When the officer stepped away from their computer or went on vacation, one member of the group would "adjudicate" the visa and a week later an accomplice would print the new visa. I discovered that the bogus visas were in passports that did not have any holes in them where we would staple the receipt for payment for the visa interview. They lacked the normal holes, since of course the "applicant" never appeared much less paid the fee. That was the give away. So we knew we had a problem and eventually figured it out. There were no Americans involved. They were sloppy with their passwords.

Q: Were there any arrests in your consular section?

CASON: Yes. Two members of the group were fired and arrested. I found out that this operation had gone on for years. After a number of successful years, the bad guys made a lot of money and moved to Fort Lauderdale. Their successors continued on.

Q: Who was your ambassador?

CASON: We had Gary Cooper and Stan McLelland. The first was a Two-Star General in the Alabama National Guard. He was also banker. The other was in oil, a lawyer for Valero Oil Cooperation. Both were political appointees who had given big bucks and were rewarded with a posting in the Caribbean. They were there for the prestige and fun, scuba diving or golf. I was very disappointed that neither was interested in working. I ended up having to be the defacto ambassador most of the time. They were in and about, running around spending the post's scarce program money on their golf and scuba diving adventures. This was my first experience with a non-involved political appointee.

Q: Did you have to tread carefully to avoid sensitivities?

CASON: You bet. They had paid well for their positions. Program money was scarce in Jamaica. That pot of money was for consular officers, the Front Office and to fund political section activities. To the extent that an Ambassador used it for his hotel expenses, little was left for post activities. Jamaica was very expensive. The Ambassador could not travel without bodyguards because of the crime. Diplomatic Security paid the bodyguard expenses and the gas, but not per diem for the Ambassador. When an Ambassador went to the North Coast to Negril or to other places to golf or scuba dive local hotels were very expensive, geared to tourists, costing $500 a night. By definition, when an Ambassador traveled everything he did was "official." The trip would end up just costing thousands and thousands of dollars, which was a program expense, so it came out of whatever little we had for programs.

Q: Yes. It's always a shocker when you think about it--it happens in places like Jamaica I think more often than some other places, where --

CASON: Yes. We had a good Peace Corps presence in Jamaica. The Peace Corps volunteers were fun to work with. As in Honduras, our post tried to get Jamaica to pass

stronger narcotics laws-- in large it was thugs and drugs and fugitives. We got the US Marshals to come in and search for US fugitives. They had good success and the Jamaicans cooperated. We worked with the GOJ on joint marijuana eradication efforts and maritime interdictions. That was our focus and those were the kind of things that political appointees were just not interested in. So that was the down side of serving there, but it was a fun post and I learned a lot from it.

Q: Was the drug traffic Ganja?

CASON: Yes.

Q: Marijuana being produced --

CASON: And increasingly cocaine. Marijuana was grown in Jamaica and then shipped by sea out from clandestine little harbors all around Jamaica, which had thousands of miles of coastline. Often go-fast boats would come into Jamaica to bring in fire arms in exchange for coke. A constant stream of vessels sailed to and from Jamaica, entering Cuban waters and running right on the edge of Cuban waters all the way around Cuba, so we couldn't do anything about it. And then they exited on the other side of Cuba, making a dash for either The US coast or to Puerto Rico. Small planes from Colombia hauled coke as well using isolated dirt airstrips in Jamaica. Jamaica needed to have drug agents monitor these air strips but the GOJ had no funds for housing agents. I went to FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) and asked them to donate some of the mobile home trailers they used as post-hurricane shelters. INL (Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs) helped us with expenses of getting them shipped by sea to Jamaica. Drivers drove them down from Tennessee, put them on a ship, and then we had to drive these long trailers on little mountain roads in Jamaica to runways in Port Antonio and places like that. Jamaica then stationed Jamaican anti-drug people there to keep the airfields --basically strips from World War II-- from being used by the bad guys.

We tried to get the GOJ to pass legislation trying to seize drug planes if tests showed the presence of cocaine on board. Modern forensic techniques could reveal that the plane, in fact, had been used to transport cocaine and therefore should be seized. We never got that law because there was so much corruption and so many high level people involved. They knew that law would kill their business. So like everywhere, trying to get the locals to do the right thing in terms of legislation and performance was hard. I constantly engaged with the equivalent of the Minister of Justice and Interior located just across the street from us on all of these matters.

Q: Could you use the visa weapon against the drug lords like in some of the Latin American countries where you've been involved, Mr. High and Mighty, you've been involved with drugs so we're not going to give you or your family visas to --

CASON: Right.

Q: -- the United States.

CASON: Well, remember in our last conversation, that's what we did in Honduras for the first time and --

Q: Yes.

CASON: -- the Helms-Burton people codified it. The problem there was we cancel or deny visas but unbeknownst to us they had been getting visas, fresh visas in different names, for bad guys because of the infiltration of the consular section. We figured out the got 500- 600 people multiple entry 10-year visas, fresh new identities. So the visa weapon wasn't particularly effective when they could just manufacture a new, seemingly legitimate one.

Q: You know at one time we'd had rather bad relations. I think it was under -- was it Manly?

CASON: Manly.

Q: He was anti-American, anti-white and all that. How stood things with the government when you were there?

CASON: As I say, relations were correct if stiff and formal. There was always a racial under current. Jamaicans were subject to slavery for a long time and they harbored tremendous resentment for the way they were treated under slavery--it was particularly harsh. So the white man was, you know, still the enemy. And you would see it in all of the Jamaican songs. You know, the underlying attitude was they were oppressed—you whites did us wrong. Jamaica is a black and mulatto society. It was not easy to socialize with Jamaicans. They thought they were the natural leaders of the Caribbean. They wanted special treatment from the United States, but were not willing to reciprocate. It was always give us, give us, give us. You owe it to us, that sort of thing. They wanted us to stop all guns leaving the United States. We replied that's kind of difficult with 100 million containers leaving the US a year. We offered to help look at containers leaving Jamaica that might contain cocaine, which fed this whole business. They fought to stop us from deporting their criminals. But they had to take them back and we insisted they do so as was their legal obligation. It was not easy dealing with the Jamaicans.

Q: Was there a rather strong very wealthy American presence there that sort of lived on its own and wanted special treatment?

CASON: No. There were lots of tourists but no, there weren't that many resident Americans. The wealthy US tourists stayed on the North Coast which had some fancy hotels. There were a lot of rich Jamaican families whose fortunes stemmed from sugar, bananas, tourism and rum. We knew them and they were friendly. These families had been there for generations and were into exports, shipping, tourism and nickel and aluminum. Those were the major export products. The country's economic situation was bad due to tremendous corruption and vacillating commodity prices. They never could

get their roads built. It was a very poor country, beset by the drug trade and the armed gangs that the two political parties had created to fight each other and get votes at election time. These gangs got out of hand. Eventually the army had to go in and take out the leaders at a high price in lives lost.

Q: Yes --

CASON: Jamaican drug leaders knew they were going to die young, so they lived it up, they'd get killed around 25 or 30. Their culture was gangs and ganja. Kingston was a very poor town. Tourists didn't want to go there and there was not much to do. All of the international activity was on the other coast, which was a different world. Cruise ships would come into Dunn's River Falls and Port Antonio. I used to go fishing over. I had a fishing boat. That was my hobby, to go out deep-sea fishing with some friends, and have some fun. But other than that it was work, work and --

Q: Well tell me, did you have a problem as DCM -- You were basically responsible for the personnel there -- was it difficult for Americans working for our embassy?

CASON: Was it difficult?

Q: Well I was wondering, you know, I mean given the --

CASON: It was hard to recruit people for the post because of the fact that Kingston was not a desirable city and due to the danger. We had good schools. But the embassy itself was terrible. It was in a rented office building-- the air conditioners didn't work sometimes and it'd get 100 degrees inside. It was just not a nice place to live-- everybody wanted to live on the other coast. So on the weekends everybody would take off for the other side of the island. It was not a particularly easy place. Nobody really wanted to go to Kingston.

Q: So you were there from what, '97 to when?

CASON: 2000.

Q: So then what?

CASON: Then Lino Gutierrez, who was one of the Deputy Assistant Secretaries, asked me if I would please, please, please come up and be Director of Plans and Policy Coordination, PPC for the Western Hemisphere Bureau. And he said "good things would happen" to me if I did it. It was not the job that I wanted. I wanted to be in charge of a group of countries. But in the WHA (Western Hemisphere Affairs) Bureau, you have to be an office director to be an ambassador. And so this was the way to the top, and I accepted. So I ran the office from 2000 to 2002. We covered32 functional areas. Any issue affecting more than one country fell to my office to handle. These were all the crosscutting issues. We also did assessments of evolving trends in the hemisphere that could affect our nation. I had a pretty large staff. The work varied. Basically we moved

paper, did studies, and prepared the front office for conferences and meetings with the Russians, the Brits, the Canadians, the Brazilians, any country that wished to discuss hemispheric issues with us. In a certain sense the work was fun, but we weren't responsible for relations with any country, which I would have preferred. But it was a necessary assignment to take to move up.

Q: Well looking at the Western Hemisphere, in the first place, how did Canada fit into all this? Or was it off to one side?

CASON: Canada was brought into WHA just before I got there. My bureau used to be called ARA, American Republic Affairs, but when the European Bureau ceded Canada to us we changed the name to WHA. We then had the whole hemisphere in one bureau from Canada all the way down to Tierra del Fuego. At first Canada did not fit in well – Canadian issues were different from those facing most of the rest of the hemisphere. The issues were much more developed country issues, water rights, fishing, pipeline locations, etc. People generally dozed at staff meetings during the Canada brief. Over time Canada melded in the bureau

Q: Well during this time there was a change of administration from the Clinton to the Bush Administration. Was there much of a -- from your perspective were we looking at Cuba and what to do about Cuba?

CASON: Yes. Both administrations had a great deal of interest in Cuba. We were concerned about rafter crisis and human rights abuses. The Clinton Administration, like so many before it, was trying to engage with Cuban Government. There are discussions, you think you have made progress, and then the Castros sabotage the process. Just when you think you're almost there, the Cubans do something on purpose to sabotage it, like shooting down the Brothers to the Rescue plane that was flying over international waters looking for rafters and informing the Coast Guard where they were so they wouldn't drown and get eaten by sharks. Cuban pilots shot them down and you hear them laughing as they related what happened over the radio-- they got medals. So that ended another step towards normalization. Clinton agreed to the codification of a lot of Executive orders related to Cuba. They were incorporated into Helms-Burton legislation which removed executive branch flexibility in dealing with Cuba after that.

I got to watch up close our evolving Cuba policy. That was helpful since a year into my job at PPC Lino Gutierrez asked me if I would like to be the Chief of Mission in Havana. I had never thought of that possibility. I said yes, after consulting with my wife. That would be a totally different kind of experience, and not necessarily pleasant. I had a year to really prep up on Cuba, which was a real advantage.

PPC was a busy place. We proposed foreign aid levels for each WHA country, prepared for UN General Assembly meetings, oversaw preparation of the WHA Mission Program Plan submissions to the Secretary, approved munitions export licenses, and with INL ran police and judicial assistance programs to Central America. And we worked very closely with AID.

Q: Well, I would have thought that the biggest hunk of your AID work and interest work would be with Colombia at the time.

CASON: Yes, Plan Colombia was really growing and absorbed much of the Front Office effort. With that Plan we tried to support drug trafficking and the FARC guerrillas. The office of Andean Affairs honchoed the daily work. The program kept sucking away money that otherwise could have gone to other countries. I had to hold off all the other offices that wanted money and tell them that Trinidad and Tobago was not a top priority like Colombia. But we did establish forward operating bases in Salvador and Curacao and eventually in Ecuador. So Plan Colombia was not my main focus, because it was a single-country issue, but it impacted on the amount of money available for other pressing needs. There was much pleading from other posts for funds, and as money was scarce there was little I could do for hem.

Q: I can't remember the timing, was Chavez a factor at this point?

CASON: The coup against him occurred when Otto Reich was Assistant Secretary. It was a shock to everybody that it happened. Nobody had any advance notice.

Q: Well, was there any debate of what we should do? We had the standard policy that we did not support coups.

CASON: Right. I think a lot of people were personally happy to see that guy ousted, but our dilemma was that it didn't happen democratically. So in the end we had to support his return and release from captivity, but I think at least some people's hearts were not in it, but that was the policy. I didn't get involved, but I remember it came as a shock to us and the initial reaction was wow, he's gone, but whoops, wait a minute, this was not done correctly-- this is not our policy. So that was the dilemma.

Q: Did your organization, since you were Policy and Plans, I'd think you would have been involved in the thinking about how we should deal with this.

CASON: No, because the Front Office and Andean Affairs together handled this single country issue. I don't know why they called PPC Plans and Policy Coordination. They should have called in Office of Regional Affairs. Ours was the place where anything that didn't fit within a country exclusively fell to us by default. If the issue crossed a geographic boundary or was something functional like drugs and the AID, PPC had action.

Q: When you were there during the change of administration was there quite a difference between the Republican/Democratic approaches to Latin America? --

CASON: Bush set out to make the hemisphere a priority in his foreign policy. He was determined to make many trips to the region and particularly to Mexico. WHA made many preparations until 9/11. Then our priorities shifted to the Middle East and the fight

against terrorism. WHA dropped back to its usual place farther back in the pecking order.

PPC worked hard coordinating our posts' efforts to get their countries to approve treaties and accords that would help all of us fight international terrorism. We urged the UN, the OAS and other bodies to propose money laundering and terrorist financing treaties. We also tried to get a hemispheric agreement on free trade, but that floundered on Chavez' and other countries suspicions of the US. We had to drop the hemispheric idea and try to forge a coalition of the willing. But the Democrats won't approve free trade with Colombia and Panama which pretty much put an end to the momentum.

Regardless of which party had the Presidency, there was a large thread of continuity in policy and what we did on the ground over the 38 years I was in WHA. A lot of things just continued on. I mean you had new people at the top, but much of the policy really was being made at the embassy level. In most of the places I've been unless the issue is really a national security or economic hot button one, the Ambassador and country team decides on what should be done. Generally no one ever objects. If a post is well run and the country team consults with Washington frequently and well, you hardly ever get a demarche.

Q: How did 9/11 affect you? I mean, Secretary Powell was --

CASON: Yes.

Q: -- in Peru at the time.

CASON: He was at an OAS General Assembly meeting when the Trade Towers were attacked. He stayed on in an effort to invoke the Rio Treaty's collective defense mechanism. He asked the WHA countries to come together to support us. My office was in charge of keeping track of all the things that needed to be done in terms of treaties and international agreements. We kept track as well of the foreigners who died in New York, Pittsburgh and Washington. I was in the office watching the TV when the first plane hit the Twin Towers. I couldn't believe it. I misunderstood when the second plane hit the other tower. I thought it was another angle on the accident, but it was the second plane. As I looked out the window I could see smoke coming up over the Pentagon and then the sirens went off. We were told to get out of the building and go to the mall because we thought that the third missing plane was going to hit the White House, three blocks away. Everybody evacuated, the city shut down and we had to walk home. But after that PPC's principal job was on coordinating counter terrorism efforts in the hemisphere. It was a full court press.

Q: Well, were there problems that you were concerned with trying to get the coalition of the willing together in the Latin American context?

CASON: Yes. Few Latin countries had many laws on the books related either to terrorism or terrorist financing. Those problems were largely foreign to them. We worked 11 hours a day just trying to coordinate what would be done under the OAS

(Organization of American States), what would be done in the United Nations, what we would do bilaterally. First off we needed an inventory by country of who had signed what treaties. We had to get from the international experts a priority list of what treaties were most important. That took time. We ended up with a matrix of 20 or 30 different treaties we wanted to track. Then we cabled our posts with requests that they push their host governments to pass them. We also assembled lists of international terrorists and pressured governments to block financial transactions with them and to not allow entry into their countries of these terrorists. We urged governments to improve airline security, produce more secure passports and visas and share much more traveler data with us. It was just a lot of very detailed work. We began to do a lot of anti-terrorism training. We had to refocus much of our assistance money from traditional areas to fighting terrorism.

Q: OK, so we'll pick this up the next time. We'll talk about, what?

CASON: Cuba, my three years as head of the Interest Section in Havana, and then three years as ambassador to Paraguay.

Q: Today is the 4th of October, 2010 with Jim Cason. And Jim, we have reached the topic of Cuba.

CASON: Cuba, yes.

Q: How did the Cuban thing come about?

CASON: Well, I was Director of Plans and Policies. And one day, it must have been in about 2001, Lino Gutierrez, who was the principle DAS, came into my office and said, "How would you like to go to Cuba?" I was shocked. It had never crossed my mind to go to Cuba. I went home and asked my wife who reluctantly agreed. So I said OK, I'll do it. I had a year to study up on Cuba. I started reading anything I could get my hands on to be prepared. I arrived on September 10th, 2002, and stayed until September 10, 2005. The interesting thing is that I was never really given any marching orders. Otto simply said one day over lunch—you're not at a mission, you'll be on a mission. Your mission is to tell the Cubans about the world and support them morally and logistically. He left it up to me to decide what to do. It was exciting but I knew it was not going to be a pleasant experience.

Q: OK. Now Jim, you're in the bureau of Western European Affairs. Is that right?

CASON: I was in the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs.

Q: What were you getting from these various sources about the situation in Cuba and our relations with it?

CASON: First of all, my impression was that this was going to be a very tough job because we don't have relations with Cuba. Our relations were hostile to say the least.

Cuba is one of the few countries where we have a presence but no relations. It was called the U.S. Interests Section of the Swiss Embassy. We had more employees than any other embassy in Havana. So I knew I was getting into a very difficult environment but the assignment was an important one for the Bush Administration. I started talking to the Cuba desk and getting everything I could read, all the background materials, books on Cuba, policy papers, studies. I did a lot of research. And I thought I was quite well prepared when I went.

I moved out of my house and packed everything up and the Cubans wouldn't give me a visa. I waited 50 days and still no word. I was getting very antsy because somebody else had come into replace me in PPC and I had moved out of my house. What was I going to do if I didn't get a visa? So I talked with Otto Reich who was the Assistant Secretary at the time. "Look, you know, my Cuban equivalent, the head of their Interests Section in the Swiss Embassy in Washington, is in Havana on consultations." I said, "Look, why don't we tell him that he can't come back to the United States unless I get my visa." And I got my visa the next day. I learned how to deal with Cubans from that incident. I flew to Miami and got on the charter flight and landed in Havana, where I was met by my Deputy and taken to the Interests Section right away.

Q: Well had you talked to Cuban groups in New Jersey or Miami, these very powerful political interest groups? Had you had contact with them?

CASON: Yes, I had -- in addition to reading everything I could find on Cuba, I went down to Miami and met with a wide variety of people there. INR arranged a round table meeting where various academic experts and others briefed me on various aspects of Cuba, its history and relations with the United States. So I thought I was very well prepared going down.

Q: Well did you sense that in the Cuban exodus of the refugee group, whatever you want to call them, there was a growing disconnect -- or split in the community, between the younger community who sort of were for this, let's get on with it, and the older people who wanted revenge or what or --

CASON: Well, there's always been a difference. Remember, the first group that went out, that were forced out, were the middle and upper class, many of whom had been supporters of Fidel and wanted to perfect Cuban democracy, which you know, was flawed. But the situation in 1959 was by no means as bad as in most countries in Latin America. Cuba had free elections and Batista won, but morphed into a cruel tyrant. Fidel defeated Batista's forces with the help of the urban resistance, composed of elites who wanted a more perfect democracy and believed at first that Castro was a reformist, not a communist. When they discovered –too late—that he was a totalitarian dictator they were greatly disillusioned and began to flee. He forced the elite to leave and stripped them of everything that they owned. These people often had to send their kids out ahead, and some never saw them again. Those who left on their own or who were induced to flee are never going to forgive and forget. In the past few decades the people leaving had been given visas by us under the Migration Accords. They spent most of their life under

Communism. That gave them a radically different perspective; these exiles were more interested in just getting ahead economically.

Q: Whom were you replacing?

CASON: I was replacing Vicki Huddleston who went on to become Ambassador to Niger, I think. She was an Africanist really.

Q: Well now, what was our Interests Section like there?

CASON: Well, by agreement with the Cubans we had a limit of 51 Americans. We had three hundred Cuban employees, all of whom were rented to us by the Cuban Government. The GOC only allowed trusted people to work for us. They had to be ideological sound and good revolutionaries to get a lucrative job with a foreign government. Foreigners were not allowed to hire anyone except those offered by CUBALSE—Cuba at the Service of Foreigners. Cooks, clerks and drivers were rented to us. All of them had to report to the Cuban government on what we did. The telephone operators, security guards and alarm technicians were Cuban agents. You get the picture. We had no privacy. The GOC and our employees kept constant watch on all we did and said. They tried to recruit us if they found a vulnerability to exploit. They had bugs in all our offices and homes and cars. We never allowed any Cuban to venture higher than the third floor. The top three floors held our classified facilities.

We worked out of a six-story building on the Malecon. Every 10 feet outside our perimeter fence stood a Cuban armed guard to keep people from jumping the fence and to keep an eye on who was coming in and checking everybody's papers. We were right on the water in front of the revolutionary park. There were frequent anti-American demonstrations along the Malecon. While I was there we had four or five marches of two to four million people coming by, bused and trucked in by the Cuban government to protest one thing or another. These rallies kept their minds off their own miserable reality. We were limited in the number of TDYs that we could bring in. They wanted to make it as difficult for us to function as possible, but never threatened me, any rate. They did threaten and harass some of our other employees.

Q: Well, when you went out there, what were some of the top issues that concerned us regarding Cuba?

CASON: Well, obviously migration, illegal massive migration like the Marielle exodus. We had negotiated the Migration Accords to handle rafters in a way that satisfied both countries' interests. We discussed problems every six months. These talks were never particularly fruitful, but we were obligated to hold then while granting at least 20,000 immigrant visas a year of various types. We had to intercept Cubans on the ocean, bring them back, and make sure that they were not harassed or discriminated against for having attempted to leave. In return the GOC agreed not to permit people to leave by sea. I could meet the Coast Guard cutters bringing back intercepted refugees under the Accords, and did so often. Enforcing the Migration Accords was the formal, ostensible reason for our

presence there. But the other major reason was to work with them on common border issues like third country illegal immigration, drug trafficking, hurricanes, weather plane over-flights and other related issues. And politically it was to report on what was going on and, most importantly, to work with the dissidents, the opposition who were growing in strength and were all over the island fighting for the future of their country. So that's basically what we did other than the normal housekeeping operations common to any diplomatic post.

Q: Well, did the Swiss play any role?

CASON: No. They're our protecting power, just as they are for the Cubans in Washington. While I was friends with the Swiss ambassador, they played no role whatsoever. Under the Accords we were not allowed to fly the American flag or have our symbol on the building, our cars or on our letterhead. That's why it's called the U.S. Interests Section of the Swiss Embassy—a fiction really.

Q: Was there a designated United States desk officer at the Cuban Ministry?

CASON: Yes. In fact, they made it clear when I arrived that Rafael Dausa was our only permitted contact. Ostensibly a diplomat, he really was a colonel in state security. His title was head of the Office of North American Affairs. He and his number two were the only people with whom we were allowed to speak. I tested that early on. I asked to meet with Eusebio Leal, a government historian who was restoring the old part of Havana. I also asked to meet with their HIV expert, people like that, and they always responded, "No se concede," which means, "No way, Jose." It was clear from the get go that we could only talk to Dausa and that nobody in the Cuban Government would talk with us, even at a party or national day celebration. They made it very clear that they did not want to engage with us.

Q: On reciprocity--did we freeze the Cubans back in Washington?

CASON: Yes. We had a travel agreement with the Cubans. We could not leave the city of Havana without giving them advance notion, and they couldn't leave Washington without advance notice. If they didn't hear from us in three days –or if we didn't hear from them in three days-- we could travel by giving them the route, where we planned to go. I traveled about 7,000 miles in the first three months under these rules. Then just before Christmas 2002 I tried to visit Varadero with my son. We had received no negative reply. But as I approached the city limits a Foreign Ministry official phoned that I could not leave Havana. I turned around and went home. They never let us travel outside Havana again except on consular trips to visit US prisoners. They felt I was too subversive, as I used my trip to visit dissidents and give them books, shortwave radios and humanitarian aid.

The playing field was never level. I couldn't meet anybody in their legislature or in their courts or talk to professors or their journalists. Yet in Washington they could go up and lobby Congress, visit universities and get their articles published. So it was not a level

playing field. They had a much freer range under our democratic system than we did in a totalitarian country.

Q: Well, did we try to make the Cubans play by the same rules?

CASON: Not really. Washington was too timid in enforcing reciprocity. They didn't want to bother. We had a system during the Cold War that made the communist diplomats get all their support via the State Department. That had been dismantled and our bureaucrats didn't want to go to the trouble of reestablishing it. For example, the Cubans had cards that exempted them from taxes. We didn't. They could choose where to live. CUBALSE showed us only certain homes and told us what we had to pay. The Cubans could get services at will whereas we had a strict limit on how many technicians could come to Havana to fix elevators, copy machines, etc.

The Cubans used their offices in DC to issue visas to tourists and make a lot of money for the government, and as a base for their extensive spying networks. They had very large spy networks running out of there and from their UN offices in New York. They were eager to keep their Interests Section open. I told Dausa that if they ever crossed the line in harassing us, or if they PNGed any of our officers for their support of dissidents, that they would suffer the consequences in terms of their operation in Washington. That threat gave me a lot of freedom to operate. If their conduct towards us ever got really egregious, we would throw out their spies. And we did that after discovery of the Ana Montes spy operation. She was the head of the Cuba desk at the Defense Intelligence Agency and had been a long time Cuban agent. Right before our invasion of Iraq the FBI arrested her and disrupted her operations. She was trying to get information on what was going to happen in Iraq and elsewhere, our plans for invasion. We booted out quite a few Cuban intelligence agents in reprisal but they didn't expel any of our officials in retaliation.

Q: Well, the Cuba thing is a fascinating subject and I don't mind going into considerable detail. But should we talk about migration first or?

CASON: Let's talk about the dissidents.

Q: OK, just talk about the dissidents.

CASON: After I finally got my visa after waiting some 50 days I arrived in Havana and went straight to the Interests Section where I addressed everybody on the front steps. I told them what I planned to do, what our policy was, and that I was going to be very vigorous in carrying it out. And then I asked our human rights people to invite all the leaders of the Cuban opposition to the residence about a week after I got there. I said "You're the experts on Cuba, I'm here to learn and I'm here to support you, I can't give you any money because the Cuban Government would then say you were mercenaries." They said it any way, but it wasn't true. I asked them to tell me how best I could support them? I would be willing to help them get information about what was going on in the rest of the world and help them get information out about what they were doing. I would help them communicate. I would give them books. If they were independent journalists I

would give them training on how to be a journalist. I could give them short way radios and cameras so they could take pictures -- as journalists. "Tell me what it is I can do to help."
And they said, "Come visit us in our homes and give us internet access," because it was blocked by the Cuban Government.

Ironically there was opposition in the Department and in the exile community to my selection as USINT Chief of Mission. Some people thought that I wasn't going to be strong enough in standing up to Fidel or in supporting the dissidents. So there was opposition to me going. Someone concocted a story that I had a giant sailboat and I was going to spend all my time sailing. That opposition disappeared when I had a chance to tell people what I planned to do once in Havana.

Before I went to Cuba I had come up with a list of things that I was going to do there. I planned to bring in trailers as platforms for 24 internet stations for the dissidents to use in the compound. As we could not speak directly with the Cuban people, I decided to bring in a moving billboard, like in Times Square, to communicate –as it were—over the heads of the authorities to the people to level somewhat the playing field in this area.

I planned to try to respond positively to all legitimate requests for help from the dissidents. The top priority was for me to visit them in their homes around the island, I did. And for the first three months while I was permitted I traveled all over the island-- about 7,000 miles-- visiting the homes of almost all the dissidents. I took carloads of shortwave radios and thousands of books, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including books on Cuban history. Fidel tried to pretend that there was no history before the revolution. I provided them copies of their old constitutions, former civil codes, books from Eastern Europe on how to rebuild civil society and tomes on what they really needed to know about their own history. I took baseball equipment too. The National Baseball Association gave me baseball cards on all Cuban exile players, which I distributed. The Center for a Free Cuba gave me calendars with Cuban major league players featured. Whatever they told me that they needed, I got shipped in via the diplomatic pouch or hand carried and delivered to them.

Since Cuba made me wait 50 days, I did not call on the Foreign Ministry for 50 days. I just met with the opposition during that time and got a handle on USINT problems.

Q: Well, you know it seems in a way remarkable that the Cubans were freezing you out from official contacts, yet you were able to go out and travel all over the place and distribute radios and everything else.

CASON: Well, the Cubans never expected I would be so active and creative in supporting the opposition. After three months and 7,000 miles of travel, I got to be too much of a problem for them. No other Embassy was doing anything like we were and USINT had never been so active in the past. I was too subversive. They stopped us from traveling. Our family members and visiting friends also could not leave Havana. So we reciprocated. We locked them down in Washington, said they couldn't go outside the

Beltway, which didn't really hinder them too much in their work. But it didn't really hinder me either because I said, "Well, I want to go visit our prisoners." And they said, "You can't." And I said, "Well, then you can't go visit your five heroes, your five spies that are in prison in the United States that are convicted of espionage."
And then they said, "OK, well you can."

I would go out on prison visits and get to see the country and pick up hitchhikers, of which there were thousands because there was no public transportation in the interior to speak of. And I would get to chat with ordinary Cubans and visit our guys in prison. But really it was just to get out and see the countryside and talk with people and so I was still able to make observations about conditions around Cuba. They tried to lock us down because at that time the independent movement of journalists and doctors and labor leaders was really growing, and that was too much for a totalitarian system. Opposition to the regime was growing; people were beginning to speak out in protest, to organize and share information. Eventually the Castro regime decided simply to arrest the key opposition leaders and give them long jail sentences in the hope and expectation that the opposition would dry up and wither away, which did not happen. They arrested 75 of the leading dissidents.

I continued to provide help even after the arrests. We took care of their families, held Christmas and Easter parties for their families, brought them medicine and let them use our internet stations to tell the world what had happened. They were very grateful for this help. I invited independent journalists to my house from which I ran journalist training programs for them. I brought in what we called beamer technology. Using the phone lines I could "beam" the participants out to, for example, Argentina where there would be a professor of journalism who would give classes on how to be a journalist, journalistic ethics, how to write a persuasive story, etc.

The GOC refused to let winners of international human rights prizes travel. I would beam them into Paris so they could be present at their award ceremony. Some used this technology to testify before US Congressional committees. I used the residence for many events helping the opposition. We had a huge library in the residence and at USINT of valuable books for distribution free. I gave out a quarter of a million books and about 35,000 shortwave radios, innumerable laptops and printers and print cartridges. Visitors to my residence could select as many books and radios as they wanted. "Take whatever you want here. Here's bags, take whatever books you want and distribute them around." So even though I couldn't leave the city after December 25, 2002, nevertheless we converted USINT and particularly the consular section into a kind of megaphone from which we communicated with ordinary Cubans.

Every year some 50,000 Cubans seeking visas came to the Consular section. So did lottery winners from the big lottery that we did a number of years before when some 500,000 Cubans sent in a postcard to be eligible to leave the island in what became known as the Bombo Lottery. In the consular section we would show movies while they waited on anything that was banned in Cuba. We showed CNN in Spanish, TV Marti, and would give out the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, children's books, all of the

human rights reports by Amnesty. On one wall we hung pictures of all the fugitives that were residing, unbeknownst to most citizens, in Cuba. On another wall we displayed photos of the 75 recently arrested political prisoners. We imported a trailer into which we set up 25 internet stations that connected users with the worldwide web via a satellite which the Cubans couldn't block. Cubans could come in for two-hour blocks of time and surf the web, which they couldn't do in Cuba. They would send out stories about their relatives if they were prisoners and do research for articles and could thus circumvent the internet blockade.

Q: Well Jim, the Cubans authorities have these strict controls and yet you created a massive leak.

CASON: Yes. That's the kind of work we did in Eastern Europe during the Soviet days. We no longer did this sort of thing in most embassies. I was very bold about it, very committed to it. There was not much the GOC could do about it. They would threaten to throw me out and I'd say well, go ahead and do it, but I'm going to continue to do what I'm doing and we will expel five persons you have spying in the US for every one of us you kick out. They never followed through on their threats.

Q: What about the Cubans who were coming in? Weren't they being threatened, imprisoned? What was happening to them?

CASON: No. Under the Migration Accords we had to visa at least 20,000 Cubans annually and so we had to interview them. There were just too many coming in to monitor. All those who came to USINT sought to leave the island. If they didn't qualify for a visa, we'd give them a shortwave radio. "Well, you're going to be here a while, we're not going to give you a visa, but here's a shortwave radio so you can find out what's going on in the world." They loved it. And we gave them books in miniature. They would stuff their shirts with books and literature and radios and head back all over the island. We had a giant ant army delivering "subversive" material all over Cuba.

Now in regards to dissidents visiting USINT and my residence, they came freely, knowing the GOC could persecute them. They came because the visibility gave them some protection. The fact that they were known to the diplomatic community shielded them somewhat from the worst harassment. They were aware of the risks from what they were doing but persisted. These brave people were willing to risk their lives and freedom for what they believed in. In most cases they had been in prison already or had relatives in prison. They were very determined. Our engagement was their only source of succor. So they were very eager to come to the residence and had no fear about it.

Q: Well, I mean was there a follow up with these people? Did many of them get into trouble? They obviously knew the risks they were taking, but what happened to them?

CASON: Fidel took a trip to China, Japan, Malaysia, and Vietnam about February of 2003. When he came back he told the Central Committee that he'd seen the great economic progress in places like China and Vietnam. But they "didn't get it." They didn't

realize that granting economic freedoms would eventually undermine their ability to maintain one party control over the populace. He very much intended to maintain strict political control. “They’re going to lose it. They’re giving an inch economically and they’re going to lose their ability to keep political control over the population. And we’re not going to do that.” And then he passed something called Operation Shield which was supposedly designed to fight illegal drug trafficking, but at the end of the act it said “and other illicit activities.” And he used that operation to begin cracking down on the small private sector that existed in Cuba that he was forced to create after the special period when people were starving to death in Cuba after the Soviet Union collapsed and its subsidies disappeared. He was forced then to open up a little bit. But now he had economic subsidies again from Chavez and could afford to eliminate the private sector that he loathed. He decided to crack down on all of that and eliminate any vestiges of private enterprise. He used that occasion to round up the 75 most prominent dissidents, sentenced most of them within one or two days to 25 years in prison. And he thought that that would be the end of opposition, and it wasn’t. It continued to operate. The Ladies in White formed an organization of wives and mothers to lobby for the release of their husbands and sons and informed the world about ongoing human rights abuses in Cuba.

The arrest of the 75 forced the European Union to reassess relations with Cuba. The EU stopped its on-again, off-again baby steps towards normalization of relations. They had traditionally overlooked Cuban human rights problems in their zest to have trade with Cuba. European investors liked working in an environment where workers were docile, particularly when there were no labor unions and strikes. They were happy to make a buck off the backs of the Cubans.

The Black Spring of 2003 didn’t work the way Fidel thought. He hoped that it would end the opposition, and as you’ve seen recently, it’s still there and thriving and the security forces are still arresting people. The opposition still has its independent libraries and are still meeting and protesting. Fidel was probably acting out of fear and desperation because the economic situation was deteriorating. Even though this was the time that Chavez started giving oil subsidies to Cuba. He thought that with the new sugar daddy on the scene he could roll back economic reforms that he felt would lead to more political freedom if not checked soon.

It was a very heady time. I continued to support the dissidents, their families and their kids. At Christmas and throughout the year we gave them support morally and logistically as best we could. They appreciated our support.

Q: Well, did you smuggle in a Statue of Liberty for the 4th of July? --

CASON: Yes. The purpose was to get the international press to report on the atrocious human rights situation and the plight of the 75 arrested dissidents. I had the number 75 placed in neon light in the flame of the Statue, which was 30 feet tall and had some 500 lights on it. There were dozens of newspapers with correspondents in Havana, all waiting for the day when the Castros died so they could be there for the story. They were very restricted on what they could cover. They had to be very careful on what they reported on

otherwise they wouldn't get their visas renewed. I would ask "Well, how come you aren't reporting on these terrible human rights conditions here and the thousands of people in prison, some of whom are mere skeletons. Why aren't you guys reporting on this?" And they inevitably replied "because it's old news. Our editors won't write anything about it unless there's something new." They said, "You need to give us a hook if you want us to report."

I Said, "OK. What I will do is look for audio/visual things that will highlight the risk and the heroism of these dissidents." And so after the crackdown on the 75 I used the symbol 75 for just about everything. For example, under the Migration Accords we were supposed to produce 20,000 visas a year. That was always difficult, but I always added 75 more visas to the total. I informed the GOC that we had fulfilled the Accords, and had granted 20,075 visas. The extra 75 symbolized that the prisoners should be free too.

Christmas was not celebrated in Cuba, it was discouraged. You couldn't buy anything for Christmas. I bought 5,000 meters of rope lights and turned the whole USINT building into a giant Christmas decoration. A donor provided 30-foot Santa and snowman. I got outside funds for a Rudolf the Red nose Reindeer for the side of our building pulling a sleigh. We filled the grounds with giant candy canes, bells and other Christmas ornaments, and put in a manger and menorah to boot. It was very colorful, bright and beautiful and could be seen for a mile away. People started coming from all over Havana to look at it, whispering to their kids that this was what it was like before the revolution. And in the midst of it all I put a giant 75, which really pissed off the Cuban government. "Take it down" they demanded. I told Dausa that "I don't know what you're talking about." He couldn't bring himself to specify what the GOC wanted taken down. He never mentioned the 75. Playing with them, I said, "Which of these Christmas decorations don't you like?" He said, "You know." And I said, "I don't." And I did, obviously.

The Foreign Ministry kept calling me back every other day, "You got to take it down or you'll be sorry." I retorted "Well, throw me out, but I'm not taking down anything. And in fact, I'm going to keep it up even longer now." And they would not say the 75 bothers us. After several such sessions I said, "I know what it is. You want me to defenestrate Santa Claus" and I'd never take Santa out of Christmas. I called a press conference and said the GOC threatened to throw me out of the country if I didn't defenestrate Santa Claus, which I was not about to do.

Next the Cubans put up enormous loud speakers in front of USINT and put up a 100 foot high banner on an adjacent apartment house that depicted me as Santa, on a sleigh pulled by 12 marines, dropping bombs on Iraqi kids. They played the same song at a thousand decimals, from eight to nine, 12 to one, and four to five. Our windows shook, but so did those in the populous neighborhood. We did not protest. I told staff to tell their spouses by phone that they loved the music and to go buy the record. After several days, the neighbors protested and the GOC desisted. We won.

Q: Yes the -- I don't know why we keep getting this beeping noise, but it's probably the Cuban influence, you know --

CASON: They're listening to me. Next project was to buy and smuggle in a Times Square type moving billboard by which we could speak directly to the Cuban people. It cost some $200,000, paid for by one of our bureaus. It consisted of twenty six eight foot high letters made by Goodyear. One letter went inside each window in the top floor. The whole thing was computerized. We would scroll messages that could be seen for five miles over Havana. We started running each of the articles of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, followed by news, baseball scores, and questions like, "People of Cuba, how come we can go in your hotels and you can't?" Fidel got livid. He spent millions of dollars putting up massive flagpoles flying black flags in front of USINT trying to block viewing of the moving billboard.

I reproduced exactly the jail cell of the most prominent black dissident Oscar Biscet who later got the Medal of Freedom from our President. He was in prison for opposing abortion and for being an activist in the black community. Fidel feared black activists. Afro-Cubans were the group that had least benefited from the revolution. He had been jailed before I arrived and released a month or so after I got to Cuba. The Cubans arrested him as part of the group of the 75. To highlight his plight, I made an exact replica of his jail cell and put it at the entrance of the consular section so that everybody coming in could see for the first time what a political prisoner cell looked like. It was six-feet-high, and about three-feet-wide and about six-feet-deep. It was metal. Elsa Morejon, Oscar's wife, put some of his effects in the cell and told the press what terrible conditions her husband lived in.

Next I put a monument recognizing the dissidents at my residence. Made of bronze, it read "Dedicated to all those Cubans who have suffered and fought in the darkest of nights for the restitution of liberty and democracy in Cuba." At its base I put a time capsule where dissidents put their thoughts and certain objects. I asked them to imagine the capsule would be opened on the eve of the first free elections in Cuba and they could tell the voters of their sufferings and expectations of the people at that future glad moment.

At Christmas we erected a large Christmas tree at the residence and invited political prisoner families and dissidents. I got large badge-like pins with photos of each political prisoner and invited their children to find their father's image from among a table of such pins and put the picture of their father on the tree. We gave the children toys and treats and moved the tree later to the entrance of USINT for all to see. Our desire in all this was to focus the world, and particularly the Europeans, on real conditions in Cuba. Fidel hated me, but they couldn't intimidate us. "Throw me out any time you want. You know what the consequences will be." And they didn't dare do that and therefore I could do whatever I felt like.

And I never had any instructions from Washington. Their attitude was "Do what you think is correct. Remember you're on a mission, but we're not going to tell you what to do. But don't tell us beforehand because inevitably the lawyers won't like it. After you do what's necessary, we'll applaud or not." And they generally applauded.

Q: Well, what about both the European press and the European embassies? We were alone in our complete opposition to Castro. How did you feel about them and how were they acting, both the embassies and the press?

CASON: There were some 120 Ambassadors and Charges in Havana. The ambassadors in Havana were of various types. There were those that wanted to be there because they were leftists-- for example, the Spanish ambassador, after the PP was ousted in Spain, was a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Spain. Those leftist Ambassadors wanted to be in Cuba and probably fought to be there; they were committed. They wanted to be close to their God, Fidel. Some others sent career Ambassadors who looked at this as just another assignment. African countries in particular had an Embassy there out of gratitude for Cuba's support to their anti-colonialist struggles; Cuba had sent soldiers. Other countries were there just because they wanted to stick it in the eye of the United States by being there. Almost all of the former Eastern Europeans were present as well. They were very much with us, supportive.

I always invited dissidents to our National Day. No Cuban official ever showed up. I invited all of the independent journalists and the dissidents and the business community and other diplomats. The Eastern Europeans started inviting dissidents to their National Days. After the crackdown on the 75, Europe changed its common position viz-a-viz Cuba. Before the Black Spring they were about to let Cuba into the Cotonou Agreement where they would get assistance unconditioned on human rights performance. I thought this was outrageous given what was going on. I never was particularly enamored with the European approach to human rights, particularly in Latin America. At any rate, the Europeans changed their policy and began inviting dissidents to their National Days, at which point they were "frozen" by the Cuban Government. That meant the GOC took a standoffish stance henceforth. They would not return calls or grant meetings with officials. No longer would their Ambassadors receive Christmas baskets with turkeys. They made it hard to do business and wouldn't attend European parties. None of that bothered me because they didn't come to ours at any rate. So they paid a price and the Ambassadors were uncomfortable being in my shoes. As time passed they tried to soften their positions. They were always looking for ways to get out of their box. The Spanish lobbied for normalization.

Most of the ambassadors after a while became fed up with life in Cuba and with the regime on a personal level. If they once revered Fidel, now they had a more balanced view of him and the revolution. Most were smart enough to recognize the nature of the regime. It was a totalitarian system. There was nothing laudable about it now. The regime propaganda touted the wonderful accomplishments of the revolution. The Ambassadors saw reality at close hand, like we did. They interacted with ordinary Cubans and realized how dissatisfied they were about the system, but that there was not much a Cuban could do unless the person was willing to go to prison or escape the island.

The Cubans, as time went on, decided to give me the rank of corporal. Every year the GOC held country-wide exercises where the people and the army prepared for an American invasion. The international press would call and ask for my opinion. I said

"This is ridiculous. Our policy is one that calls for a rapid, peaceful change to a more democratic and free Cuba. We don't advocate or support the overthrow of the regime. We hope it falls, but that depends on the Cuban people, not us. We will never support the revolution or take steps to prolong its life. And we're not about to invade." And then Fidel started attacking me personally; it became an obsession. In a radio address he said General Powell said the US had no plans to invade "for the moment," therefore how can we believe a "mere corporal" like Cason. So from that moment on I became Corporal Cason.

I'm probably the only diplomat in the history of the world where the host government ran attack cartoons on TV against him. The Cuban propagandists produced a series of nine cartoons, animated cartoons, ridiculing me that they aired for almost three years. I think they're still shown. You can find them on YouTube. The series is called "Cosas y Casos del Cabo Cason." It means "Things and Events about Corporal Cason." The nine cartoons appeared on television every night and on the baseball outfield screens between innings. I'm seen flanked by two Cuban worms (slang for exiles) talking about democracy and human rights. The purpose of the cartoons was to tell Cubans that they should fear change. They should support a transition rather than a succession after Fidel goes otherwise terrible things will happen to them. The American views of democracy, human rights, housing and social security, and so on will make life worse for you. The cartoons deal with housing, education, human rights, elections, etc. I am the evil character in the film. The US tries to impose its will on the Cubans who react, beat me up and then I'm converted into a rat that scurries back into USINT pursued by an enraged Cuban mob.

I adopted the corporal as my symbol. The Cubans can't stand humor and I refused to be cowed by the cartoons. I told people I liked them, they were funny. I began going to all the national day parties with corporal stripes on my guayabera shirt and put my cartoon persona on a flag which I flew on the front of my car to show that it didn't bother. I'd turn the cartoons against them. People would wave and give the thumbs up when my car passed. Soon everyone was talking about the Cabo. The Center for a Free Cuba sent me 2000 Cabo Cason dolls. If you pushed my belly button I would say—Cachan, Cachan, dias mejores pronto vendran." We gave these out to dissidents and they were sent all over the island. I was trying to say nothing you Cubans do or say against USINT personnel is going to stop us from doing what we think is right and that is supportive of a people who don't have a say in their own future.

Normally I spoke infrequently with Dausa. No official ever asked to meet with us on any issue, from day one. However, that changed one night, for one moment. Cubans had begun to hijack airplanes and boats to try to leave Cuba. There was a whole string of these incidents one month. One night I got a call around midnight. Rafael Dausa asked "Will you come help us with a hijacking at the airport?" And I said, "Me? Why?" "Because he wants to go to the United States and we want you to try to talk him out of it." So I agreed.

I got my security chief, picked up Dausa at the Foreign Ministry at 2:00am in the morning, and drove to the airport. Many generals and other high-ranking people were

there. It was the first time I'd ever met any of them. They were very cordial, took me up to the tower, and asked me to speak to the hijacker over the tower radio. The hijacker said, "You're not Cabo Cason. You're not Corporal Cason because I know government doesn't have any relations with you. What would you be doing in the tower?" The guy didn't believe me. And I told him "Bad things are going to happen if you go through with this hijacking."

The Cubans thanked me, thinking that was that. But I said, "No, let me go down to the airplane and talk to him and I'll show him my diplomatic card and prove who I am." They were very surprised and said, "Well, the guy's got a hand grenade." I said, "It's all right, I'll go down." They drove me about 100 meters from the plane and I walked by myself to the plane and tapped on the window. The pilot handed me his headphones. I went up to one of the windows, showed the guy my diplomatic carnet which I then passed via the pilot to him. Again I reiterated "Don't do this. You're going to get 20 some years in prison and death if anything happens to anybody on this plane."

And he responded, "You know, I've got my family here on the plane. I've been living in prison -- this island-- my whole life. I'm not going to live in this prison anymore. I'd rather be in prison for 20 years in the United States and have my family free than stay here. So I'm going to go forward with it."

I replied "Well, you know the consequences. Don't hurt anybody." And he said he wouldn't. So I went back and told the Cubans that he was determined to go on. He flew to Key West and was arrested, tried and sentenced to 22 years in prison. His family went free, which was what he wanted, and promptly the wife married someone else; he's still in prison. I got my ID back about three or four months later.

The next day the press related the incident. For the first time ever –remarkably-- Fidel in the Cuban media praised me for going out there and trying to dissuade the hijacker. (I put that quote in my efficiency report). And then there were a couple more hijackings. I told Dausa "Look, let me do something. We have a refugee center here in Havana, one of only three we have in the world, where people with a well-founded fear can join the 20,000 and leave the island under the Migration Accord provisions." I said, "I don't think enough Cubans know about this peaceful option to leave." I said, "If you will let me write a letter to the Cuban people and you will not touch what I write, I'll end the hijackings." And so I wrote the letter and to my surprise they published it entirely on the front page of Granma and Juventud Rebelde and read it on all the radio and TV. Never before had an American diplomat been able to address the Cuban people directly. I told them about the refugee center and the hijackings started to end. This gesture was a positive thing because people were getting killed and we didn't want a wave of hijackings to start again.

Q: Well, that's pretty remarkable. What about international relations--the Canadians. It struck me that from a distance the Canadians have always used their relations with Cuba as a way to stick it to the Americans. They're mostly with us on everything. But I was wondering how you saw it.

CASON: I agree with you 100%. It was to stick it to us. It was a low cost way to show they weren't subservient to us, that they were different. At the same time they were making big bucks off the Cubans. They had taken without compensation the Moa aluminum and nickel facilities from a United States corporation, and for decades have been extracting ore profitably. The Sherrit Corporation top executives are banned from entering the United States under Helms-Burton. The Canadians flocked in the winter to Cuban all-inclusive resorts on remote islands, away from ordinary Cubans. The Cuban people could not visit hotels that catered to foreigners. These resorts were cheap Potemkin villages. The GOC tried to convince foreigners that the resorts were typical places Cubans could visit. This is the real Cuba, which of course it wasn't. They were totally Potemkin villages. Canadian dollars helped keep the Cuban economy afloat. I lost a lot of respect for Canada because of their Cuban relations. The Canadians wouldn't admit that what they did helped perpetuate one of the world's harshest and longest dictatorships. They retorted, like Obama now, "Engagement will lead to change."

Europeans would invariably state you Americans should end your attempts to isolate Cuba and engage like we do. That will bring change. My response was and is "Well, you are asking us to do what all the rest of the world has been doing now for 50 years—trading, loaning money, investing and sending bathing suited tourists. Where's the change? You all are democracies. How come what you have been doing has not made an iota of difference in Cuba's policies, yet if we do it, will bring positive results. Do we possess some democratic pixie dust that will sow democracy?"

You are all hypocrites. You're making money off the backs of former owners or sunning yourselves at hotels where hotel workers get 5% of the money that's paid for their services and the Cuban military keeps the rest. "You guys are sustaining the totalitarian regime with your trade and aid, and you're trying to make it look like you are just humanitarians." I was friendly with the Canadians and the others that held different views, but they could never persuade me or make a solid case as to how their policies made any difference whatsoever.

Q: Yes --

CASON: So Canada, as far as I was concerned, was not helpful and was on the wrong side of the issue.

Q: Well, I guess it wasn't during your time, but there was a highly publicized visit of, was it Chrétien? The prime minister at that time of Canada, who went over to try to get the Cubans to be a little nicer. And they stuck their thumb in his eye.

CASON: Well, that's what always happens. All these people go and promise to talk about human rights in private—"it's more effective that way" they would also state. "Wouldn't want to tick off the regime by meeting dissidents you know. Besides, Fidel won't see us if we do that. We want a picture next to Fidel." None of that private human rights talk—if it in fact took place-- ever resulted in anything.

If a visit resulted in one dissident eventually released, the GOC would arrest five more the next week. There is this curious European love affair with Fidel. American leftists, movie starts and some TV journalists were enamored with him, mesmerized. American tourists couldn't legally visit Cuba. So they would sneak in there via Mexico, Jamaica or the Bahamas. Everyone wanted to be seen with Fidel, they want to get their picture taken. Steven Spielberg came when I was there and he told me that the greatest six or seven hours of his life was the time he spent talking with Fidel. They were all mesmerized by the guy. They didn't realize that he did tremendous homework on them. Fidel knew everything about them. If he was told a visitor liked certain types of paintings, he would put it on the wall. The visitor would admire it and Fidel would say, "Oh, I'll give it to you," and then he would sign it and give a box of cigars. Admirers just ate that up. That's what they were interested in, a picture next to Fidel. But they didn't always realize that the price was they had to listen to him blather on for eight or 10 hours in his monologue all through the night. And then they would go back and say wonderful, what a wonderful country. How content the people are. Of course few ever met a dissident or could talk freely with an ordinary Cuban to hear the other side of it. And even American congressman and senators would visit without coming to USINT to hear our view of what was going on. They would "behave themselves" by avoiding USINT and the dissidents and be rewarded toward the end of their visit by a meeting with Fidel. Disgraceful conduct as far as I was concerned.

Q: How about sort of the major European powers, the Brits, Germans, French?

CASON: Their stance to Cuba depended on whether the Socialists were in power or not, whether the ruling party was Conservative or Socialist. Spain tried to grab from the Czechs and the Poles the leadership on the Cuban issue in Havana. The Eastern Europeans, having lived through communism, were natural allies with us, especially the Poles, the Czechs, the Romanians, and the Slovaks. The Spanish under the Socialists played hardball. They told the other Europeans that Cuba was of special interest to them and others should defer to them. They would use blackmail. The Czech ambassador told me that the Spanish in Brussels told the Czechs that if they resisted Spanish leadership on Cuba, if they didn't give in on the common European position Spain was advocating, they'd cut Czech EU agricultural subsidies. So they played hardball.

When the conservatives ruled in Spain, the Spanish were very much on our side. We used to meet with them and discuss programs and developments. Sometimes they emulated some of our activities. They would, for example, support the dissidents by setting up internet terminals at their embassy and give prizes to human rights activists. When a more leftist government took power in Europe, support for dissidents waned. They became more romantic with the GOC.

European views oscillated every few years. For most of my tour, because of the arrests of the 75, Europe's common policy required working with the dissidents. Each government had flexibility in what to do or not to do. Most governments held national days and invited dissidents, but some simply cancelled their national day to avoid offending the Cubans by inviting dissidents. The Belgians were the most pro-Cuba and anti-dissident.

The Germans, the Norwegians, the Eastern Europeans, and from time to time, France and the UK were sympathetic to the opposition. Most of the European ambassadors were constrained by their official policy on what they could do, and they were always very apologetic when they couldn't join us. A lot of them arrived thinking they would find paradise. As time went by they realized how bad the situation was and the enchantment faded.

Africans kept a low profile. The Cubans supported liberation movements in South Africa, Namibia and Angola. Cuba sent them a lot of Cuban doctors. They needed to maintain an embassy there to watch out for their medical students studying outside Havana on scholarships. Some Embassies were trying to collect debts owed by Cuba.

Q: I was wondering, what was the attitude towards -- in Colombia at this time you had all these kidnappings going on. And in Colombia, I guess Isabelle Allende -- Betancourt, was she kidnapped while you were there or?

CASON: I'm not sure she was kidnapped, but you know, at the time, but Colombia had a special relationship because Colombia kept their distance from us because Cuba was at least ostensibly acting as an intermediary between the Colombians and the FARCs (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia)). And so they were doing some negotiations that went on for years and years. And so they had that special relationship and so they sort of stayed away from what normally you would have expected from Colombia in terms of the issues. So they had good relations, but they didn't want to have anything to do with human rights because of Cuba's role.

Foreign diplomats could never invite us to an event with Cubans since the Cubans then would refuse to go. So they would say we can't invite you to our party when our foreign minister comes because the Cubans would object.

Q: Well OK, how about Chavez?

CASON: He agreed to send about 100,000 barrels of oil to Cuba which Cuba could use for its own domestic needs or sell on the spot market. This subsidy greatly helped Fidel. This aid came at a time of tremendous food shortages and electrical blackouts. People despaired at the downward spiral of the sugar industry and the general economy. With Chavez' growing support Fidel felt that he could turn the economy around and then begin to dismantle the small private sector he had to allow in the Special Period. It's a perennial pattern. In bad times he's forced to liberalize a bit, on the margins of the economy, opening up to private enterprise a bit. But as soon as he gets a windfall from a new Sugar Daddy, he undoes it.

Chavez' help allowed him to begin cracking down on illicit private enterprise. He raked in millions from oil sales on the spot market and from Venezuelan cash payments for rental of his doctors and trainers. Fidel would rent them to Venezuela and then Venezuela

would pay Fidel and Fidel would give the workers $25 or $50 out of the $500 to $1,000 a month that he got. Soon one saw a tremendous movement of Venezuelans into towns all over Cuba to be trained. And Cuba became sending intelligence officers and police and other advisors to help Chavez control his people and perfect his socialist system; the two countries grew closer and closer together while I was there.

Q: How about the countries such as Brazil?

CASON: Brazil was totally uninterested in dissidents or Cuba's internal human rights' situation. Brazil doesn't care at all about human rights in other countries. They've made it very clear that that's an internal matter. They weren't going to have anything but good things to say about Cuba because they wanted to increase their influence in Latin America, particularly at the expense of Venezuela. They wanted to have good relations with Cuba and they were not about to discuss human rights. Their goal was to increase export opportunities for Brazilian firms. Ideologically some of President Lula's advisors and members of his party were once guerillas that had been supported, trained in, or given refuge in Cuba.

Q: Did Argentina, was it a factor at all there or?

CASON: No. Argentina was not. Most Latin American governments had no interest in or programs to support human rights in Cuba. Democratic governments like Costa Rica's and Uruguay's did not have resident ambassadors; they had been withdrawn usually after some Cuban official or Castro personally insulted their Presidents.

Q: Well did a country like China get involved?

CASON: China got involved in the sense that they began buying up resources, aluminum and nickel, helping Cuba look for oil. They wanted access to Cuba's natural resources. They were also interested in taking over the Lourdes intercept facilities from the Russians, who had closed them down. The Chinese moved in and with the Cubans listened to all of our telephone and internet traffic up and down the East Coast. The Chinese were not interested ideologically in Cuba, nor were the Russians. The Russians were interested in getting paid for the 20 billion dollars Cuba owed the Soviet Union, and for establishing new trading opportunities, but not much in ideology.

Q: Yes. Well, I'm looking at the time, Jim, and I know you're busy. How's the race coming for mayor?

CASON: Real good. In fact, if I win it's going to be because of the Cuban-Americans. I can't tell you how thankful they are for what I did in those days and it's going really, really well. I'm in the fundraising part right now. The Election is in April. If I win it's going to be because the voters value my 40 years of experience and because I take most of the Latin vote.

Q: Well, next time what I'd like to do is talk about the Cuban government and your

estimate of Castro at that period of time. This was 2002, 2005 about?

CASON: I stayed exactly three years, September 10th to September 10th. And we could talk about the Migration Accords. We can talk about how the Iranians were blocking their citizens from receiving communications from abroad by interfering with satellite communications from Cuba.

Q: Yes. And I'd like to talk about Radio Marti and TV Marti and also about your staff, I mean how they operated and public affairs officer and all that.

CASON: Many of my great staff went on to high-level jobs in the Department and the NSC. I had a wonderful team. We were all united in what we were trying to do. Then we can move on to Paraguay which was a totally different kind of experience.

Q: Yes. And then I'd also like to talk about congressional people and staff people who came through maybe to get the pictures with the Castros, but also your impressions of what their impressions were.

Today is the 8th of December, 2010 with Jim Cason. And Jim, we were still talking about Cuba. And I had a couple questions and then you said you might want to expand on some of the other things we're talking about. And part of my question is what about Radio Marti and TV Marti and all?

CASON: I used to give telephone interviews with Radio Marti and they would broadcast back to Cuba. Radio Marti was heard all over the island. It was actively jammed, as was TV Marti. But radio waves were easier to get than TV signals, depending on where you were on the island. I showed TV Marti programs in the consular section waiting room. The Cubans generally successfully blocked TV Marti signals. It was harder to see because of that and climatic factors. Cubans had a great deal of interest in both and lots and lots of people listen to Radio Marti.

Q: Well, Radio Marti was paid for by American Government money, wasn't it?

CASON: Yes --

Q: Was it pretty much adhering to, you might say the government line or was it the Cuban exile line?

CASON: Radio Marti people had their guidelines. They had many different reporters and shows. People would call in, ask questions or provide information to Radio Marti and these exchanges would be broadcast. It was a mixed bag. The overall objective was to get news about what was going on in the United States and the rest of the world to the island, and also to fill the role of a missing free press in Cuba by passing information selected by independent people on the island back to the rest of the island through Radio Marti.

Q: In a way was there any sort of recommendation that TV Marti was a loser and forget

it?

CASON: Well, a lot of the congressional people have tried over the years to eliminate it. General these people did not like our Cuba policy. They questioned its effectiveness and listenership. Yes, the signals were often blocked but just as often got through. The real solution is to broadcast from a C-130 platform rather than from a stationary platform in Miami. The C-130 was very effective in other countries like during the Kosovo war in Yugoslavia and elsewhere. We wanted to get them to fly a regular route closer to Cuba so that it would overcome the jamming and won't be so predictable. We needed to be more aggressive to get past the jammers. The Pennsylvania National Guard, if I'm not mistaken, flew the planes and they were under orders not to fly outside of U.S. airspace which made it easier for the Cubans to know where they were and activate the jammers. Our broadcasts were valued by Cuban citizens and sometimes signals would get through, but the Cubans were very good at keeping outside information out.

Q: Well, did the Cuban authorities ever raise the issue with you on it, one way or another?

CASON: No, they knew that it was going to continue. It would have been a waste of their time. Nothing they said to me would have made any difference as to whether or not the efforts would continue. We were not about to end them because of Cuban wishes.

Q: You mentioned decades of American political types, American intellectuals, congressional staff all going and having these long session with Fidel Castro. I take it this was going on during your time too.

CASON: Oh yes. CUBINT in Washington recruited people whom they thought they could influence to visit the island officially. They would look particularly for sympathetic people or people on the fence. They would schmooze them, wine them and dine them, bring them in, give them meetings with Fidel. As I noted before, Fidel would be thoroughly briefed on their likes and dislikes and pander to the visitors. Many fell instantly in love with the man, it seemed. Normally bright people would suspend judgment, fail to ask hard questions, let Fidel dominate the conversation or better the monologue.

The Cubans put visitors up in luxurious, confiscated protocol houses and catered to their every wish and whim--whatever they wanted—boys or girls, didn't matter. There was a lot of that, especially with movie stars, Sean Penn and Danny Glover, Oliver Stone, people of that sort that would come over from time to time. Generally our Congressional fact finders opposed our policy. They were a shameful lot. They didn't come to get a balanced look at the regime or the situation. They actually avoided us for the reasons I mentioned earlier, or because they thought we would try to brainwash them. They were generally not interested in the reality on the ground. Some even insulted us by getting briefs from the Brits or Germans, but not from USINT.

I remember one time when I did have a few congressmen at the residence for dinner. Cleverly, the Cubans had not told them whether Fidel would meet them. So as they sat down to dinner and our brief, their liaison military officer got a phone call that Fidel will see you now *(laughs)*. So whoops, sorry, we can't stay, you understand of course, we have to go see Fidel. So the message was stay away from dissidents, stay away from USINT if you want to see the supreme leader.

Q: Well, if you could talk to these people before would you tell them about the technique and what was being done to them?

CASON: Yes, but they wanted so badly to get that picture taken, to have those memories to share with others. I mean *(laughs)* they wanted to see the mystery man. They wanted to be in the presence of greatness. We offered always to give them a brief of our perspective if we were asked. We wanted to alert them that to what was going on in the island and to the Potemkin village nature of what they were going to see. Occasionally some were more eager to see dissidents and we would arrange that, either at my place or in their homes or hotel room. It depended on the person and their reason for visiting. If they were businessmen or state officials coming to sell food products they would tend to stay away from us, saying that would interfere with business. These folks were not interested in hearing about dissidents or human rights. They were interested in selling beans from Idaho. We had a lot of that.

Q: Well, then what about your staff? Did the Cuban staff, I mean I assume all of them were reporting --

CASON: Right.

Q: -- but was there any, you might say, rapport or were they --

CASON: Oh yes, tremendous rapport. Both governments paid them. We had to rent them all through CUBALSE, which means "Cuba at the service of the foreigners," a government agency. If we needed a maid, telephone operator or a visa clerk, they would find you one. And they would say here's how much it costs. You pay us and we'll give them their salary. We paid, say, $500 for an employee who would get from that amount perhaps$25 monthly. That was still a lot of money in a country where the average salary was $15 a month. Then we had to pay them again, in dollars, so we were both paying them. We paid much more. That bought us some loyalty. And with time many, perhaps most, became loyal employees. We could fire them, but then CUBALSE wouldn't give us a replacement necessarily. All our Cuban staff had to inform on us, we all knew that. We were just careful what we said and as I mentioned they couldn't go above the third floor of the building. We had a great deal of rapport with our staff; some really sympathized with us. I would say perhaps ten were the real spies who kept an eye on the others as well as us. When we gave an employee a visa to go to the States for training or vacation they never came back. Employment with USINT was a vehicle to get out of the island. In time our FSNs understood we are not the villains portrayed in their propaganda. And we knew who was who.

Q: What about the other countries? Would you say were most other countries were playing a much milder game than we were?

CASON: By and large. Europe was pondering what to do about their common policy toward Cuba. The arrest of the 75 dissidents put a stop to the normalization process. We were the most active in supporting dissidents and improving human rights. I was able to get a number of people to do the same thing in a different way. A lot depended on the personalities and the government policy, of course. If the government was a conservative government they tended to allow their ambassadors to be more helpful to dissidents. If they were socialists, like Spain, they cut all ties. Individual ambassadors like Paul Hare of the British Embassy, who I'm going to have lunch with tomorrow, were very sympathetic and invited dissidents to their national days.

Q: Did the Colombians have a presence in Cuba?

CASON: Colombia was our ally and we worked hard to help them defeat the FARC insurgents. Colombia had an Ambassador in Havana who was one of their top negotiators with the FARC. Cuba said they wanted to help the Colombians. I don't know how they helped. The Colombians stayed away from us so as not to jeopardize Cuban help. I do know that Cuba let FARC members take R and R in Cuba, and trained them as well. I suppose Colombians wanted Cuba to butt out and stay away from the FARC. Cuba was offering to be helpful, probably in individual cases or by passing messages as the two Colombian sides negotiated. That was the particular Colombian angle on their presence in Cuba.

Q: I know Cuba was inserting doctors and teachers into particularly Venezuela. How good were the doctors and teachers?

CASON: The first wave was pretty good. Of course they were going because they were getting $50 a month, something like that, versus $25 in Cuba. So they went for the money. But at first opportunity, many of them defected, thousands over the years. The Cubans made them keep their families back in Cuba and kept most of their money as an incentive for them to come back. But a lot of them just abandoned the families and the money and took off. The first wave was pretty good but over time the best medical professionals had all gone abroad and later waves were less professional. They hollowed out the medical profession. Cuban medical care at home deteriorated. The best doctors in Cuba were reserved for foreigners who would pay in dollars. The medical school training foreign medical students was very bad -- in fact when I was in Paraguay later, the first wave of 139 Cuban trained so-called Paraguayan doctors came home. They tried to get licensed to practice medicine in Paraguay. None of them passed the medical boards. They got a score of something like five out of 100 on their tests.

Cuban teaching was bad because the best doctors were abroad. Also Cuba just took poor kids willy-nilly regardless of their aptitude for medicine. The goal was to proselytize

them. It was a political program and so nobody ever failed. The students weren't prepared. They came from large families or from strategic areas in the country and they stayed six years outside Havana in Spartan conditions, with poor teachers and poor living conditions. Unfortunately many wasted six years. They did not come back as doctors.

My impression from talking to lots of nurses and others is there's a tremendous decline in the quality of Cuban medical care. I know my own driver, for example, asked me to bring back from Brazil when I went there on vacation dentistry material for fillings because local dentists didn't have any. So if you wanted your teeth filled, you better find somebody that had the filling materials. Nurses that I would pick up hitchhiking said they had no gauze, hot water, or anything to do their jobs. Doctors were primarily practicing preventative medicine. They would say hey, you got high blood pressure, you need to eat well or you need to get some medicine. We don't have any medicine. If you have access to dollars, go to your local pharmacy. Your local pharmacy might have the medicine. If you've got dollars, you can buy it, and if not, tough luck. You couldn't even visit another pharmacy, only your assigned one.

Q: Well, I've sort of run out of questions but I'm sure there are a lot of subjects we can talk about. Can you think of any other themes we might --

CASON: I knew for a number of months before my tour ended that I was going to Paraguay. The Vatican's Vice Nuncio was Paraguayan. He said, "Well, you know, we speak Guarani in Paraguay." I asked "Well, how many people speak it?" He said, "About 94%." So I said, "I got to learn the language." He said, "Well I have a student at the medical school here who needs some money. He could tutor you." And I said, "Great, bring him in."

So I started learning Guarani in Cuba. I told the kid I needed to learn 500 words and the basic grammar in just a couple weeks. He didn't have any books so I started learning orally. When I returned to Washington I told FSI (Foreign Service Institute) that I wanted to learn Guarani. They were puzzled. What's that, we don't teach it. And I said, "Well, I need to learn it so find me somebody," which they did. I was waiting to be confirmed as Ambassador but Senator Dodd staffers put a hold on me because they didn't like our Cuba policy. So I had to wait some four months for this to get straightened out. I used the time to learn Guarani at FSI. I didn't get to Asuncion until January.

Q: Well, had you been able to sort of make friends with the people who opposed our Cuba policy?

CASON: I talked to everybody. When I was in Cuba I talked to anybody who came in, I gave all kinds of briefing. In DC or Miami I'd go see anybody who wanted a brief or had any questions. I was always open to all groups, in Miami and Washington. In the end the Senate didn't have any objection. This was Janice O'Connell trying to stick it to the administration because Dodd was a critic of our Cuba policy. They wanted to hold me up ostensibly to study my file. That gave me time, the unique opportunity, to learn Guarani.

I didn't tell anybody at post that I'd learned it. I arrived at the airport with my wife. We were both wearing Ao Poi embroidered shirts, traditional Paraguayan shirts. The press was waiting. I gave my entire speech in Guarani. The press and our staff were just flabbergasted. All the press started clapping. And that set the tone for my almost three years in Paraguay. I was the only diplomat that had taken the time to really learn Guarani. I kept learning the language in Paraguay. Every day for the three years I was there I spent with a tutor-- a couple hours at lunchtime-- perfecting the language.

Q: Well, where did the language come from? I think obviously it's an Indian language, but was it sort of --

CASON: Paraguay.

Q: -- Central South America or?

CASON: Just from Paraguay. It was an indigenous language only spoken in Paraguay and originally spoken in neighboring areas that are now part of Brazil, Bolivia, and Argentina. It is a beautiful language, very difficult to master. It's almost like Chinese, tonal, very hard to learn, which is why nobody else took the time. But I took the time to learn it, which paid tremendous dividends, because I would use it in every speech. When I departed I gave my departure speech totally in Guarani. I learned it so well that I even wrote a patriotic Paraguayan folk song in Guarani. My tutor was using Paraguayan music as a vehicle to learn new vocabulary. I learned the lyrics to a lot of their songs. One day a friend of mine who was a soprano in the Paraguayan opera called me up and said, "Jim, will you do me a favor?" And I said "Sure." She said, "Will you come sing with me at my hometown music fair on Thursday," and this was a Monday.

And I said, "Me?" And she said, "Yes, I have some sources that say you've been learning our songs." And now I had never sung in my life -- in any language. My wife's piano teacher was a colleague of Rebecca Arramendi, the soprano. They were in operas together. My wife told Benito Roman, the pianist, that I was learning their folksongs. He asked me to sing one accompanied by him on piano. He liked it and told Rebecca. That's why she called me. I asked her "All right, how many people are going to be there?" She said, "10,000." And I said, "Oh my God. How many songs are we going to have to sing?" She said, "Four. "And I said, "In Guarani?" And she said, "Yes."

So reluctantly, very reluctantly, I agreed to perform with her. I picked four songs I really liked. We practiced for a couple hours. I went, sang, and it was a big success. I got five encores and then I decided after that experience to make an album. I learned 16 songs, got together the best singers in Paraguay, including Rebecca Arramendi, and began making an album. Then in the midst of this I woke up one night. A song came to me in Guarani. I got up, wrote the lyrics and called it "Campo Jurado", which is also the name of the album. And so I ended up producing an album. It sold 2,000 copies. I gave all the rights to poor kids in Paraguay to learn English. So far about 700 kids are studying English based in part on the proceeds from my album.

Q: OK --

CASON: So that was how I learned and used the language. Guarani was a tremendous vehicle for getting together with the people. They really loved it.

Q: Well, it certainly is. Well, you were in Paraguay from when to when?

CASON: From January of 2006 until the summer of 2008.

Q: All right, what was the situation in Paraguay when you got there?

CASON: Well, the Colorado Party had been in power for 50 some years. Elections were coming up. The dictatorship ended 10 years prior to my arrival. We focused on having free and fair elections.

Q: And role did Paraguay play in Central -- in Latin America?

CASON: Paraguay was not an international player. It was a very junior partner in Mercosur (Mercado Comun del Sur (Southern Common Market)) along with Uruguay, Brazil and Argentina. Paraguay is the largest exporter of electricity in the world. It's a joint owner of the Itaipu Dam. It is still largely an agricultural economy. It exports beef, timber, soy and rice. It's one of the largest soybean exporters in the world. A great deal of contraband comes into Paraguay, which has low taxes, and goes into Brazil, which has high taxes. It's most well known smuggling center is Ciudad del Este, at the triple frontier of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. Again, our issues were thugs and drugs, protecting intellectual property rights, supporting the democratic process, and working on cultural diplomacy.

Q: Well, did you have full access to the country?

CASON: Oh yes. I traveled everywhere. With my Guarani I could go to little towns, to music festivals, and chat with everybody. I traveled everywhere in the country, and frequently, as I did in Cuba. Paraguayans are very friendly people. The United States played very important roles in Paraguay's history, principally by saving the Chaco for them after they lost the War of the Triple Alliance. Argentina asked Rutherford B. Hayes to be an arbiter of the future of the Chaco, which Argentina coveted as spoils of war. But President Hayes awarded it to Paraguay. He's a national hero. Over the Foreign Minister's desk is a picture of Rutherford B. Hayes. After the war with Bolivia, which they were winning, we allowed them in another arbitration to keep much of the upper Chaco that they won in the war. Their history books taught that the United States was the country that had been the guarantor of its territorial integrity against neighbors.

While I was there we worked hard on anti-corruption and institution building. We did a lot of poverty work through AID (Agency for International Development). We helped with natural disasters, fighting forest fires and equipping local fire services.

SOUTHCOM (U.S. Southern Command) sent me fire engines for interior towns. I brought in the National Cancer Coalition. Together we gave about 50 million dollars a year of cancer medicine to poor people. We ran our own cataract surgery program with American companies donating lenses and Paraguayan doctors providing the surgeries. This work countered Venezuelans and Cubans who were doing cataract surgeries in their countries. But we did them in Paraguay. Our patients the next day could go home and didn't need to fly off to Havana and Caracas. Our programs in support of the poor demonstrated our concern and that of our companies and private enterprise for the poor Paraguayan majority. Paraguay was a recipient of our Millennium Challenge program funds.

Q: Well, with this cataract surgery and other things, who was paying for this?

CASON: Paraguayan doctors performed the surgery for free and I got the American company Alcon, which makes the best lenses, to provide complete eye surgery kits free. I would go up to the States and bring back whole suitcases full of scalpels and lenses. The Lion's Club helped find indigent patients. The Paraguayan Ophthalmological Society agreed to "eat" any expenses of the cataract surgeries. There was no cost to the patients. The National Cancer Coalition provided very expensive medicine unavailable in Paraguay, The Embassy handled customs clearance and publicity and made sure the medicines reached the poor patients.

Marijuana was grown in Paraguay and the country was a transit point for cocaine shipments to Brazil. Our DEA supported their "DEA" (Drug Enforcement Agency). A small, indigenous insurgency sprang up while I was in Paraguay. Our intelligence and defense agencies helped specialized, vetted Paraguay elite police and military forces detect these people. The group called itself the EPP (Paraguayan People Army). They received support from the FARC and Venezuela. We tried to help their security forces nip their insurgency in the bud. We also provided the Paraguayan military pro-democracy courses and an understanding of the importance of protecting human rights. We helped professionalize their units. Environmental issues were of concern to us. Paraguay is a beautiful country with a fragile environment. Paraguay was once covered in forests but illegal logging has decimated the forests. Huge wildfires burned tens of thousands of hectares of farmland while I was there. We provided assistance in fighting them. I created an English language program for bright, poor students. Hundred of kids learned English and could escape poverty via jobs that required mastery of English. I also used the Ambassador's Cultural Fund to rescue their country's collection of 52 old newspapers from the 1800s that were endanger of being ruined in the basement of the library, because of water dripping on them. Over a three-year period we digitalized and microfilmed all of their 52 newspapers, 100,000 pages, rescuing them from certain destruction. We put the collection on CDs and gave the copies to the government; they're now available to the public for about $5. So we saved their history.

Q: Well, that's great. Was there a movement to restore the dictatorship? Or was this pretty much --

CASON: No. Nobody wanted that. In fact, 2008 was the first time that voters had a real choice. We worked very closely with the OAS (Organization of American States) and the Inter-American Institute of Free Elections to ensure they had clean and fair elections. The Colorados had been in power for 50 years. Challenging them was a coalition of disaffected voters who wanted a new leader, one free from corruption and focused on the poor. Fernando Lugo, a Catholic Bishop, defied the Catholic Church and ran for president against the Vatican's wishes. He won. They lost fair and square, big time. The Colorado Party turned the reins over to him. Now he hasn't exactly done a very good job since then, but nevertheless people wanted a change and he came out of nowhere and won.

Q: Well, how stood things with Bolivia? Morales was well in power by that time, wasn't - -

CASON: Yes, my Foreign Ministry handler in Cuba, Raphael Dausa, who I mentioned was a lieutenant colonel in State Security, was chosen as Cuba's Ambassador to Bolivia. He had Morales' ear. Dausa convinced Morales that we Americans were evildoers and that Paraguay had designs on Bolivia. He fed Morales' paranoia and ignorance. Cuban intelligence services controlled the flow of intelligence to Morales. Morales was convinced the US planned to build a secret base in Paraguay from which to attack Bolivia. Of course Paraguay had no designs whatsoever on Bolivia. Their army was very weak and they had almost no troops on the Bolivian frontier. Lugo had been a liberation theology guy. He got along with Morales. There was no friction on the border despite the best efforts of the Cubans to create problems for us in the region. In general, Paraguay and Bolivia have little bilateral trade. Few roads connect the two countries. They generally ignore each other. Paraguayan exports go principally to China and to Brazil.

Brazil was a big player in Paraguay. We and Brazil had the most influence and were the biggest players. Argentina used to have influence in Paraguay, but their position has slipped significantly. Nowadays Brazil has a big presence. It views Paraguay as a source of many of its problems. Much of the contraband entering Brazil by land comes in from Ciudad del Este, a border town. Billions of dollars of merchandise enters Brazil from that city. Brazilian tourists cross a bridge, but cheaply in Paraguay, and sneak their goods back over past or around Brazilian Customs. Brazil blames Paraguay for the contraband flow. Paraguay responds that contraband only occurs because Brazil has very high customs duties to protect its industry at the expense of higher costs and inferior goods available for its consumers. Because of your economic policies and your protectionism your citizens come across and buy from us. We just provide world-class goods at very low prices. It's your problem, not ours. Paraguayan generally are not the smugglers, just the sellers.

Q: Well, going back to the Brazil-Paraguayan relationship that you were alluding to, this could be the one place that Lugo could really demonstrate his stuff.

CASON: Well, Lugo did make good relations with Brazil a high priority. He wanted Brazil to pay much more for the electricity Paraguay sold it. Decades ago both countries' dictators made a deal to build the Itaipu dam, share electricity 50-50 and Paraguay agreed

to sell any electricity it didn't use to Brazil at low rates. Paraguay feels it got a raw deal because it was forced to sell any electricity it didn't use at below market prices to Brazil. Paraguay has no industry so it only uses about 10% of the power produced in this, the world's largest dam. Most of the output goes to fuel industry in Sao Paolo and Rio de Janeiro. Brazilian politicians don't want to raise local electric prices by giving Paraguay any more money. This issue is a thorny one that is an obstacle to better bilateral relations. Lugo is friendly with President Lula because they're kindred souls. The two try to find a politically palatable formula to get Brazil to increase its prices. Brazil offered a little bit more money for new Paraguayan transmission lines, and a small increase in kilowatt prices, but the two sides remain far apart.

Paraguay's the only country in Mercosur that has refused to let Venezuela join. It's a very conservative country and the senators refuse to allow Chavez into the organization. Admission requires a unanimous vote of all four Mercosur members. Lula has been trying to convince the Paraguayan congress to admit Venezuela. Venezuela's been trying to buy influence through offering its oil at subsidized prices. But so far the congress has refused to let Venezuela in. So it can't join Mercosur.

There are few countries that maintain diplomatic missions in Asuncion. Most can't justify the expense. Paraguay is inward looking. They are conservative and agrarian. Paraguayans are really nice people. They have a tragic, tragic history and no country's lost a greater percentage of its people in a war than they.

Q: The Chaco War was just awful.

CASON: The War of the Triple Alliance was terrible. Almost every man in the country died in that six year long war. Only 32,000 boys were left in the country afterwards.

Q: Good God.

CASON: Something like 60% of the population was killed. At the end the kids were fighting with pieces of glass and sticks against the cavalry of Argentina and Brazil and Uruguay. They were devastated, occupied for ten years and left without men to rebuild. They were the only country in Latin America occupied by other Latins. To rebuild, the GOP invited immigrants to settle the empty interior—that's why the country's got so many immigrants from around the world. They had to repopulate. It took the next 100 years to rebuild the country. The immigrants are now the country's entrepreneurs. There are immigrant ethnic enclaves all over Paraguay. Mennonites from Canada and Russia, Ukrainians, Koreans, Japanese, and Germans have built communities that are the economic motors of the country.

What holds Paraguay back is corruption and elites that do not share wealth with the Guarani-speaking majority. The country's growing now by about 9% a year. Still corruption's a major problem and the fact that the country is landlocked. They're very rich in natural resources' If they can get their politics right, they can become a modern, prosperous country some day. They have oil and gas reserves in the Chaco region. I think

it has a bright future for its small population of six million. If they can educate the people, penetrate the nearby big markets, they should have a great future. But bad politics and their wars have really devastated the country. I would say Paraguay was my favorite posting.

Q: Really?

CASON: Yes, I loved it. There are really nice people there. The fact that I learned their language made a big difference in that they really opened up to me.

Q: Were tribal organizations in a way more powerful than the government?

CASON: No, it's not tribal at all. It's the only bilingual country in Latin America. As I said, 94% of the people speak Guarani and Spanish. Only 6% speak only Spanish. It's totally integrated. The Indians are all mixed in. Everybody's got some Guarani in them, even the Asian immigrants when they arrive learn Guarani first. And in the interior almost everyone uses Guarani. In Paraguay today there are about 50 different small tribes, each with their own language. Guarani is like Italian was to the Italians, the one among many languages chosen to be the official one to unify the country. The Jesuits back in the 1700s brought all the Guarani speaking Indians into reductos-- remember Robert De Niro's movie The Mission?

Q: Yes, I remember that. John Gorman's movie, I --

CASON: Right, the Jesuits brought together all of the Guarani into these towns, into communities where they taught them music and skills, and kept away the slave traders from Brazil. So Guarani became the language that unified all these various groups.

Q: Was there an affinity between the Paraguayans and the Bolivians and others?

CASON: No. There are a few Guarani in parts of Bolivia, Argentina and Brazil. Each countries' Indians are different, speak different languages and have a different look. The Guarani are tall and handsome. The Aymara and Quechua-speaking Indians of the Andes are short, squat and not particularly handsome to my eyes.

Paraguay lost much of its territories to its neighbors. In the 1935 Paraguayan-Bolivian Chaco war each side lost thousands and thousands of people. The Bolivian Army in '35 and'36 had Nazi officers, who employed airplanes against the Paraguayans. Many people living today lost their parents in that war. At the level of the people, there is no love for Bolivians, Argentines or Brazilians, no affinity whatsoever.

Q: Now is the Chaco in Paraguay?

CASON: Yes, it's a huge region. I would say 95% of the people live outside the Chaco. The Chaco encompasses most of the country. It's hot, arid, and full of thorny scrubs and bushes. The Chaco contains a few small tribes that have had no interaction with white

people. They live naked, as nomads in small groups in a very inhospitable environment. Some tribes practiced cannibalism in the 1600s and 1700s. Today the Chaco is attracting foreigners and cattle farmers who are clearing out the brush. The land is good for cattle. Land prices are cheap. But it's desolate, dry most of the time and then it's totally wet the rest of the time.

Q: What are the prospects for oil in the Chaco?

CASON: I think there's more oil and gas in Paraguay than in Bolivia. I am a Director of Quincy Oil and Gas which is prospecting in the Chaco. We are in the process of raising money to drill for gas. If we discover commercial deposits there are nearby markets and pipelines. Energy will transform Paraguay.

Q: Well if you do find oil, oil's a curse too.

CASON: I know. Well, Yes, and again, is there any expectation they'll manage any better than Equatorial Guinea has? I don't know. Oil could well be a curse, but right now Paraguay is one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere and under good leadership oil and gas could bring the money to get them out of poverty.

Q: Well, with the leadership, is there much contact with other countries? In other words, where do the young people of Paraguay go to get a higher education?

CASON: Paraguay has a public and many private universities, maybe 20 private universities. The better students go to Argentina and Spain as immigrants, where they didn't need visas. There are several million Paraguayans in Argentina and Spain. Very few Paraguayan students come to the United States because they don't speak English. That's one reason I was providing bright kids with straight "A"s English language scholarships so they could compete and get into US universities with scholarships. But right now students go to the neighboring countries or to private universities and the state universities within Paraguay.

Q: Well, what's the role of the Church?

CASON: Paraguayans tend to be Catholic. Like everywhere in Latin America, Evangelicals are making inroads. But they're not a particularly religious people -- not like in Spain. The slightly older people go to church but the young people are too busy trying to eke out a living and get out of poverty. They just don't attend church regularly-- they're not that religious.

Q: Did we have any real interests there?

CASON: Yes. I think we have an interest in the development of the area so it won't be fertile grounds for the narco traffickers, who are in danger of taking over parts of Paraguay. We don't want Paraguay to fall into the Venezuelan and Cuban camp. Paraguay's democratization and development are good for us. We don't have any

strategic interest. We don't trade much. We have a lot of historical and emotional interest in Paraguay that stems from our historical engagement there. But no, it's not a strategic place. But it's a country that's small enough that you can do something good with well-targeted programs. And they qualify for the Millennium Challenge program. Things are slowly improving, the country's growing, and the people are becoming less provincial. They've suffered through 50 years of one-party rule and they've been through dozens of civil wars and many dictators. They really want democracy. They want a less corrupt government. They want to have good government. They want to live better lives and have hope for the future. That's where we can help them. That's our natural role and we can help with a little money.

Q: Well, did Uruguay play any particular role there?

CASON: Only in that they were one of the winners of the War of the Triple Alliance and they are one of the two junior parties in Mercosur. But Uruguay is much more middle class than Paraguay. It is much more developed, has had better governments and faces the ocean. Paraguay has no natural window on the wider world. Paraguay's economy represents less than 1% of the GDP of Mercosur. So it's more like a Nicaragua or a Bolivia.

Q: Well, was Uruguay the gateway to Paraguay?

CASON: Buenos Aires and Montevideo were the ports that Paraguay uses for its exports and imports. Ships come up the River Plate and all the way up the rivers for thousands of miles up into Paraguay. These rivers are the economic lifeline of Paraguay. Freedom of the rivers is what many of Paraguay's wars were fought over. Paraguay feared Argentina and Brazil planned to restrict their shipping, to control free commerce on the river. The US in the mid-1800s also sought freedom of maritime commerce. That's why we got involved in supporting Paraguay in the War of the Triple Alliance. We supported freedom of the oceans and freedom of the navigation.

Q: Where did the army, while you were there, stand? The military?

CASON: They were getting professionalized, but were very small, very weak. They had bad experiences stemming from their years of involvement in politics. They supported their new constitutional role on the sidelines of politics. We were the main trainers. We've been training them for years.

Q: Well, was there any residue of Stroessnerism or anything like this?

CASON: Yes, there are a few generals and a few people nostalgic for the old days. They are mainly retired. But that era's over. The military today is very small, 15,000-20,000. Almost none of their equipment works. Their budgets are bare bone.

Q: How about our public diplomacy by this time?

CASON: We emphasized public diplomacy, as in Cuba. We tried to combat the myths that the Cubans and Venezuelans spread about our intentions. We tried cultural diplomacy. We wanted to show that we respected Paraguayans by learning their language, appreciating their music and attending their festivals. We reminded them how historically we were their best friends and we continue to be. We support their right to free elections. We were properly focused on public diplomacy, using the tools that we had, the scholarships, the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Diplomacy and things like that. Even if you don't have the resources now to do much to protect your history, we care and are interested in it.

Q: Well, did the FSI pick up on the language?

CASON: Excuse me?

Q: Did the FSI pick up on the language? In other words, the new officers coming out?

CASON: I urged my staff and successor to study Guarani. Nobody else wanted to put the time in. I made the effort and pioneered musical diplomacy. My staff nominated me for the best foreign linguist of the year; I got third prize for creative use of language in musical diplomacy. The Miami Herald ran a story on the singing ambassador and National Public Radio interviewed me on the subject. What I did was something unusual. Nobody had ever done cultural diplomacy like that. Paraguay is very much a musical country. It is the glue that helps hold them together and that sets them apart. I sing their best songs on my album, and they're sung with the best Paraguayan musicians. It was a unique way to use cultural diplomacy, which I very much believe we should do more of around the world.

Q: Well Jim, you retired in 2008?

CASON: Right, October 1st.

Q: And then what? You might just briefly say what you've been up to.

CASON: Right now I'm the President of the Center for a Free Cuba. I'm a director of Quincy Oil and Gas in Paraguay. I have a consulting firm called Cabo Cason Consulting. I'm a Senior Inspector at the State Department. I inspected Embassy Jordan and then more recently Baghdad. I focused there on the withdrawal of our military and hand over to the State Department of the mission. Our report just came out last. And I'm running for Mayor of Coral Gables in Florida where I live.

Q: Well, that's quite a bit.

CASON: The election is April 12th and I'm the frontrunner. I'm probably one of the only diplomats to go right from Foreign Service into municipal government as mayor of a city. So hopefully I will win and that's where I'm going right after this, to meet with the former mayor.

Q: Well, what's Coral Gables? I mean as a city?

CASON: Miami s to the north of us. We have 47,500 residents and another 45,000 commuters who work down town. Our average income is $136,000. It's a city. Some 70% of the people over the age of 25 have a university degree and 58% of the people are Hispanic. We were one of the first planned cities in the United States. We are called the City Beautiful and USA Today and Rand McNally chose us as one of the most beautiful small towns in America. We have thousands of trees and tropical landscaping. We maintain strict building codes. We control the colors you can use to paint your house. Ours is a beautiful quality city. It is a gateway to Latin America. And I'll be running as the mayor that will re-internationalize the city.

Q: Was there concern that you could become a haven for the not-so-nice people in Latin America?

CASON: No. This is a very high standards city. We are all professionals. Many Cuban-Americans live here; they made it big. We are unique in Southern Florida. This really is a beautiful, special place where I'll live the rest of my life. Hopefully when we talk next I'll be the mayor *(laughs).*

Q: Good luck on the election and happy holidays!

CASON: I really appreciate it. You too.

Q: OK, just one final question. It's now late April 2011. Your election is over. What happened?. Did you win, and if so, how?

CASON: Let's back up to Paraguay. I left not knowing what I would do in retirement. Little did I imagine as I boarded the plane in Asuncion, Paraguay, at the conclusion of my three-years as Ambassador that I would end up mayor of one of America's most beautiful small cities. I was headed then to a retirement seminar, and afterward to a Florida retirement that would cap 38 years with the Department of State.

The seminar suggested many ways to keep busy – it didn't mention running for local office – and I thought I'd do some part-time consulting after getting settled in my new home.

My wife and I had long considered Coral Gables an ideal retirement community. Located just south of Miami, the "City Beautiful" of 47,000 residents is home to the University of Miami, many consulates and trade offices, and some 135 Latin American corporate headquarters. It was planned in the 1920s by George Merrick, who envisioned creating an international theme city from 3,000 acres of pine trees and fruit orchards. As Merrick laid out his city, he named its streets after Spanish and Italian locations and brought home buyers from all over the United States to build homes with strict architectural controls.

Today, the city is renowned for tropical foliage, well kept homes, cultural attractions and the linguistic and ethnic diversity of its residents, most of whom have university degrees. *USA Today* and *Rand McNally* have both named Coral Gables the second most beautiful small town in America.

This is the kind of community where we wanted to settle down.

Coral Gables is 58 percent Hispanic, a large percent of which are Cuban-Americans. I spent most of my career in Latin America and was chief of mission in Havana from 2002-2005. Once I moved to South Florida, I realized that many people knew of me from my Havana days, where I had a reputation of creatively working with the opposition movement. Many Cuban Americans began urging me to run for state or county office, saying I could win due to my name recognition in the Hispanic community.

At the time, however, I was more interested in getting settled and making a circle of new friends.

Then, in mid-2009, some 18 months after arrival, I began to grow restless. The Department's Office of the Inspector General (OIG) invited me to become a Senior Inspector, and I accepted assignments in Amman and Baghdad.

I also began to realize that city voters wanted new government leadership, but the incumbent mayor, who had been in office 10 years, was seeking yet another term. City finances were in very poor shape, and a new city manager was trying to rebuild and reorganize.

My wife, friends and neighbors suggested my Foreign Service and OIG backgrounds were relevant to reorienting the city. I spent months delving into city records, talked with the city manager and decided to run for mayor. The odds were against me: I'd only been a city resident for 18 months, and the five members of the City Commission had served a total of 70 years collectively. No outsider had ever been admitted to that fraternity.

But people wanted change, and I spoke Spanish fluently and had no "baggage." I believed if I could carry a majority of the Hispanic vote, I might win. I found an experienced campaign manager, and we decided on a grassroots campaign where we'd knock on the doors of every registered voter.

With my wife and a small circle of Cuban-American friends, we set out door-knocking and soon discovering that we were recognized and had a fervent group of supporters. I faced one opponent besides the mayor, an Anglo lawyer with a sizeable war chest and municipal experience. When the mayor decided not to run, it became just a two-man race and that divided the Anglo vote.

Coming into the home stretch to the April 2011 election, we visited 8,000 homes, and our opponents, who had outspent us by a ratio of five to one, had no money left to run ads and had lost the endorsement of the *Miami Herald.*

Although one of my opponents had an endorsement from former President Bill Clinton – at least on a tape recording used to make automated calls – I was still the only candidate who could speak Spanish and I worked with the local Spanish-language media effectively. As we waited nervously for the vote count, it became apparent that we were ahead in the absentee ballot count and winning heavily in the Hispanic precincts.

I won by taking 80 percent of the Hispanic vote and a third of the Anglo vote, garnering 4 percent of the overall total - an unprecedented upset. I was now perhaps the only U.S. Ambassador to become mayor of a city, at least in recent years.

I've come to find there is a roll for diplomacy in municipal government. Being mayor requires empathy and good listening skills, as citizens bring me their problems for resolution. Having had Foreign Service 19 assignments, I could see options for solutions that others may not have considered. My role in running the Coral Gables City Commission requires tact and courtesy, compromise and at times firmness, qualities I developed in the Foreign Service.

As the city's public face – its "ambassador," as it were – I get out to meet my constituents, explain our objectives and seek support and understanding of the city's financial constraints facing the municipality. Above all, I am accessible and available to all who want to see me. On taking office, I promised to be a full-time mayor with no outside business interests, and that I'd tackle pension reform, lower the tax millage rate and to stay four years only.

Now halfway through my two-year term, I have cut taxes, maintained our high-quality services and found the funds to invest in neighborhoods (by refinancing our city debt) and to support much needed pension reform. (The city's growing pension costs have eroded its finances, and getting those costs under control is key to keeping taxes reasonable and freeing funds for quality of life initiatives.) Now, the city's depleted reserves are growing as we restructure, cut staff and find greater efficiencies. I have also helped attract new businesses and am working with the city on a complete makeover of the downtown.

I plan to run one more time to see our initiatives through to completion, and then really retire. The work of a mayor is satisfying and requires a commitment to service and a desire to help others. Te work is also exhausting I have attended 454 events over the past year, regularly speaking off the cuff, cutting a lot of ribbons and enduring complaints, some of them not resolve-able.

But there is no better way to meet your neighbors and know your retirement city thoroughly. The pay is low and the perks are nil, but helping your neighbors enjoying their community and maintaining their property values is rewarding.

While most FSOs won't have the advantage of the support base that I had, they too can win local elections, if they wish. Many smaller communities would welcome a retired FSO's fresh perspective, linguistic and public speaking skills, flexibility, management

experience and his or her ability to understand others' views.

To those so inclined, I say: Find an experienced campaign manager, walk the walk and run for office as the agent of change and new perspectives. Reinvent yourself.

Q: That's wonderful, I would like to thank you for your time, and take care.

CASON: Thanks. Good bye.

End of interview