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

AMBASSADOR PETER ROMERO

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INTERVIEW

Q: Can you explain when and where were you born?

ROMERO: I was born in New York City, but raised in South Florida.

Q: When were you born?

ROMERO: 1949, in Manhattan, to a teenaged mother and a teenaged father and that marriage didn't last very long.

Q: You know where the family came from, on both sides?

ROMERO: Yes, my mother's family came from Poland and Lithuania.

My father's family was from Spain, from Galicia. My grandmother's family came from Valencia in the south of Spain, afterward, by way of Venezuela and Puerto Rico. The family patriarch (other side) was the Spanish King's treasurer in the New World. My grandparents were both born in Puerto Rico and my father was born in Manhattan.

Q: On your father's side, what sort of work were they doing?

ROMERO: Well, on my father's side they were shopkeepers. A distant relative, an uncle of mine, was a leader of the independence movement in Puerto Rico and I was kind of regaled with stories about him through my youth.

His name was Julio César Gonzáles and is considered the co-founder of the independence movement in Puerto Rico, which is not a very strong now, but at the time there was a great movement towards independence, from Spain and then the United States.

Q: You were born about the time when there was an attack on Congress and the White House.

ROMERO: Right, and from my father's side of the family they held the position that this was really regrettable, but those militants, had every right to do what they were doing build support for its own independence.

So it was frowned upon, what they did, as a terrorist act, but at the same time their objectives and their goals, in terms of bringing the issue of independence to the attention of the American public, was considered laudable by many.

Q: On your mother's side, what do you know about them?

ROMERO: On my mother's side, as I said, they were Polish and Lithuanian. My grandmother and my grandfather met in northeast Pennsylvania, in the coal mining district, the anthracite coal mining district. My grandfather was one of 14 children and was the only one to move out to New York City. He was a plasterer and a carpenter. That's how he sustained a family.

As I said, on my father's side they were shopkeepers and my grandfather owned four or five of the cigar shops, candy stores, called "Teamo" in Manhattan and was on the board of the American Tobacco Association for a couple years.

My father was an architect, very artsy guy, architect and musician. He was a Latin jazz type and a contemporary of Tito Puente, a famous Latin drummer of the mambo era. My father was a big *salsero*, a salsa dancer, and at 81 went out dancing three nights a week.

Q: Did either your mother or your father get a college education?

ROMERO: My father graduated from college a few years before I did. He was a draftsman for many years. He couldn't sustain himself being a musician and an artist and his parents frowned on him studying art, because they had just come through the Depression and didn't want a starving artist to support and so he was a draftsman for many, many years, but always wanted to be a designer-architect and graduated from the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, a famous school for design and has had his own company and done very, very well. He just retired about ten years ago and now is a fulltime artist.

Q: You say your mother and father divorced? Did you shuttle back and forth?

ROMERO: For a while, when I was very young.

Q: But sort of in New York?

ROMERO: Well, we moved down to Florida. My mother remarried and she remarried to a Cuban fellow, Jose Romero, whose name I've adopted. He was just a terrific human being, very sensitive to the needs of people, either the family or down and out people in general.

Growing up in South Florida, it wouldn't be unusual to come home from school and have some family that was walking by the railroad tracks or in a dumpster or something like that that he would bring home and cook for.

He was just that kind of guy and in terms of taking care of the family, much of his family came to Miami and lived with us in the Fifties and Sixties.

Q: On the Cuban side, you were already settled in Miami, in contrast to the refugees from Castro?

ROMERO: That's a really good question. We moved to Miami, but at the time that we moved there and this would have been 1958, there was not yet a Cuban community. My stepfather was probably one of the small numbers which constituted the Cuban community in Miami pre-Castro.

So my growing up period got interesting when Cubans inundated South Florida, fleeing Castro, at the time, the late Fifties and Sixties and I was kind of caught in the middle. I felt very much an American kid, having been born in the United States and growing up as an American kid, but because of my surname, Romero, many took me for Italian or associated me with Cuban émigrés.

Q: And also coming from Puerto Rico, your family were Americans.

ROMERO: That's correct, but at the time there were so many Cubans coming over and fleeing that I felt like I really wasn't part of one community or the other. I sympathized with the wave of Cuban refugees that were coming to Miami, but I was an American kid, but caught a little bit in the middle, in terms of what I was and who I was and how I viewed the newcomers and the kids that I went to school with, who were all born in the States.

So it was in many ways like what Obama faced, in terms of being black in Indonesia, for example, not really feeling a part of Indonesian culture or, really, American culture, in a complete way and being kind of always a little bit on the outside.

Q: I assume you spoke Spanish and English?

ROMERO: My Spanish wasn't terrific back then. It got better when my stepfather's mother came to live with us. She fled Cuba and lived with us and she only spoke Spanish, so my Spanish really began to pick up.

Q: How did your family look upon the Cuban refugees? I would have thought it's a bit like, newcomers, they're not really one of us, really.

ROMERO: Well, my stepfather, being Cuban, had lots of family fleeing Castro's Cuba. They were doctors and lawyers and well-to-do people in Cuba, who left with nothing and many of them, whole families, would stay with us for three months, four months, six months, etc, until they got on their feet, many times doing manual labor and going to high school and learning English.

I had an uncle who was a doctor, a very famous doctor who was head of the Red Cross in Cuba. He came to Miami, didn't know English, went to Miami High School and studied English and then went to the University of Miami and studied medicine, passed the medical exam and became a practicing medical doctor in the U.S. and all of that in his fifties, while doing manual labor, cutting sugar cane in South Florida, which was something that the Cuban upper class wasn't used to doing, at the same time to support himself.

And a lot of these people stayed with us. So it was pretty hard to have any sort of sense of superiority towards these people when you were really very much enmeshed in their sacrifices.

Q: What about the community as a whole? Did you see almost a takeover of suburban areas by Cubans, or not?

ROMERO: Now that has happened, as the generations have progressed the Cubans have moved out from downtown Miami, the *Calle Ocho*, the Eighth Street area and moved out. My sister, who married a Cuban who immigrated during that time, lives out in Pembroke Pines, Florida and that is overwhelmingly Cuban-American.

But at the time most Cubans lived downtown and there were high schools that were primarily American black and Cuban at the time: Edison High, Miami High, etc.

We lived in North Miami, the suburbs and there weren't really, in fact I was the only Hispanic in my high school graduating class.

Q: What was family life like? Did you sit around and discuss Cuba as a kid, with the rest of the family, or was it America or movies or music or what?

ROMERO: All of the above. I remember when I was about nine years old we made a trip to Havana and stayed there for a couple of months, in the summer of 1959. This was the first anniversary after the successful takeover by Castro and the celebrations in Havana were unbelievable.

I'd never seen anything like it. I was an American kid and all of a sudden put in a milieu where you had little kids running around wearing Cuban camouflage uniforms and fake beards, fake guns and marchers in the streets of the Young Pioneers with red bandannas.

You had soldiers everywhere, listening to conversations in restaurants and other gathering places and if they found you talking politics, they would take you out to the street and big dump trucks would come periodically and they'd put you in the back of the dump truck and take you downtown for interrogation.

They also bussed in tens of thousands of *campesinos* from the countryside when I was there for this first anniversary and they bussed them in free of charge, they gave them a couple of pesos and they bought them white guayaberas, I'll never forget this, the white shirt that hangs outside the pants. It's a kind of semiformal type shirt in the tropics.

They bought them all there white guayaberas. They wore them with blue jeans and they wore sombreros, big straw sombreros, with red bandannas and it was like an army of peasants literally everywhere.

And I remember after three days of celebrations those same peasants where laying in the streets and in the gutters with these white guayaberas that had turned black by that time, had spent their pesos buying rum and celebrating and that sort of thing.

This must have been the first time that any leader in Latin America had so involve ed the poor, rural peasants into inaugural celebrations. To me the whole environment was just so stimulating, because I had never really as a child seen how governmental policies can affect the individual behavior of people.

You grow up in the United States as a kid and the Federal Government is kind of remote. And here you are, a 45 minute plane ride away from that milieu and you're in a completely different environment, where government policies and radicalism and revolutionaries and that sort of thing radically changed day-to-day life. And for me that was just remarkable as a child.

Q: Early on, was your family welcoming of the Cuban Revolution? Things started to go sour, didn't they?

ROMERO: Well, I think everybody, or most everybody, unless you were in the Batista government, was in favor of a change, that change really had to come, corruption was rampant, the Mafia was running rampant in the country, etc, but things did sour quickly and people's attitudes in Miami started to change.

Like most families in the Miami area then we didn't talk politics at home much when things started. We all felt betrayed by Castro. But people started to express real frustration and talk about the treachery of the Castro brothers, in terms of taking a popular revolution in the direction of Communism, which was something that was anathema to Cubans, 'cause Cubans, in their very DNA core, are small business owners and believe very much in capitalism.

But mostly it was things that happened in my youth that impressed me. I remember when we left Cuba after that two months stint I walked into a bedroom just as we were packing to leave and I saw my father sticking hundred dollar bills into the head of my sister's doll. I was shocked that he would be smuggling money out of the country, because this, to me, showed that people were starting to get desperate, which added a whole new dimension to this carnival environment that I was seeing.

And then, back in Miami, through the ensuring years, I recall opening up a book that was on our bookshelf at home and discovering that the pages in the inside were cut out, obviously designed to conceal something inside.

I asked my dad about it and he was circumspect.

So it was these kind of little episodes that really had a great impact on my youthful imagination and outlook.

Q: Okay, moving to you, did you read a lot?

ROMERO: As a child, we lived across the street from a community sports complex. I can remember doing two things: playing sports and reading. Back then you didn't have prescribed summer activities for children, so you made do with what you had and I lived across from the park, so I could always just slip across the street and see who was there, jump across and play a few hours of football or baseball or basketball or whatever, come back and read. Basically I would read for hours a day and I would play sports for hours a day.

Q: What kind of books were you reading?

ROMERO: I started out by reading children's books that are historical fiction, things like *Johnny Tremaine* and then I started really being captivated by the Civil War. As a child I actually had a library of Civil War books and it all started with a picture book that someone had given me of Matthew Brady's photographs of the Civil War. I found the photos so intriguing.

Q: I have a copy of that. It's falling apart, but

ROMERO: It's amazing. To be a child and to look at those pictures was just unbelievable. Again, that experience, the Cuban experience, the interest in the Civil War, living in the South during the legacy of segregation, because there was still, you had the *Brown versus Board of Education* decision declaring that separate was not equal, but you still had separate schools for blacks, you had colored and white bathrooms and water fountains and that was everywhere in Florida into the Sixties, as I can attest from personal memory.

Q: How did segregation hit you, your family?

ROMERO: My family was lower-middle class and liberal. There was never any sense of white superiority or black inferiority or anything. We were basically humble people and treated everybody else with respect.

But I lived on the cusp of a white neighborhood. About seven, eight blocks away was an exclusively black neighborhood called Bunche Park, after Ralph Bunche. There were a number of blacks that would use the rec center across the street, because it was a terrific facility. Sometimes I was the only white guy playing.

Q: How were you in, say, elementary school? Good student, moderate student?

ROMERO: I'd say above average, but I wasn't on fire. I used to read a lot. I wasn't particularly disciplined, in terms of studying and test taking and that sort of thing, but I did read a lot. I would suspect that I was above average, but not in the top one to two to three per cent. That came later -- in graduate school.

Q: Looking back, how did you find elementary school?

ROMERO: Well, I went to Catholic school all the way through high school. There was a lot of emphasis on discipline, on writing and math, memorizing multiplication tables over and over, writing multiplication tables, lots of grammar and lots of diagramming sentences with a heavy dose of Catholicism.

And, back then, we never challenged, that was just the way it is and my parents believed that the more structure, the more discipline you instill the better off the kid is and to include corporal punishment. If you hit the kid and he deserved it, that was a good thing.

Q: You had nuns as teachers?

ROMERO: Yes, nuns, to the eighth grade and then brothers in high school?

Q: How were the nuns? Some people had difficult experiences with nuns, others really enjoyed it.

ROMERO: It's interesting, I had a particular teacher in the sixth and seventh grade by the name of Sister Anthony of Padua and she was just out of college when she got there, she was just a kid, but she was tough as could be, a lot of corporal punishment and a lot of tests and a lot of discipline. However, in the end of the day I think I'm probably a better person for it.

Q: How Catholic were you?

ROMERO: Oh, I was very Catholic. I was an altar boy until they could no longer find a cassock for me that fit, until I was about 15. I was over six feet and by the time I was 12.

I also joined the Sodallity, which was a kind of intellectual-religious group, in high school.

Then the Sixties and Bob Dylan, Baez, Collins, Mitchell, etc. came and I questioned everything.

Q: Of course, most of these people that you questioned were over thirty.

ROMERO: Right.

Q: This, I think, was the slogan

ROMERO: "Don't trust anybody over thirty," yeah, exactly. Now, I'm well into my sixties.

Q: Now, high school, where'd you go to high school?

ROMERO: I went to a high school in Hollywood, Florida, just over the county line from North Miami, in Broward County; called Chaminade High School. The school was named after Father Joseph Chaminade and the slogan of the school was "For A Better World."

So it was relatively secular for a Catholic school. You had religious training, mass and confession and all of that, but most of the instruction didactically was geared towards social responsibility.

Q: You were in high school from when to when?

ROMERO: 1963 to 1967.

Q: Okay, this is the height of the civil rights movement.

ROMERO: Yes.

Q: In Catholic school, so you weren't as affected by Brown versus Board of Education.

ROMERO: Well, we were affected, to the extent that we were the first school to have blacks enrolled. The public schools were still segregated.

As I said, I was a real jock. I played basketball, baseball and football. When we played other schools, particularly public schools, they were segregated, they had all white players. I remember a specific incident where we went to Avon Park to play football. High school sports there were the center of the social world in that town and when they had a football game there were banners on the main streets and police escorts to the games. About 5,000 people in the stands that night, probably half of the town turned out.

At the time, we had three black players on the team and during whole game both players and fans threw racial taunts and epithets. "Nigger lovers" and that kind of stuff. We beat them. It was an upset and all hell broke loose.

And I remember that there was such chaos afterwards that the police had to escort us out of town, after our school bus pulled up literally to the side door of the locker room, so that you couldn't get a fist through the distance between the back of the bus and the locker room door. We all jumped on the bus, got a police escort out of town, and were not attacked. That's how bad racial feeling was back then.

Oh, they also called us "Kennedy lovers," "Nigger lovers."

Q: Kennedy, being a Catholic and all, must have struck a responsive chord on your family, or not?

ROMERO: In my family, yes and throughout my whole career as a Foreign Service Officer you could go to humble homes in Latin America and see pictures of John F. Kennedy on the wall, forty years later.

Q: You'd see some of that in Yugoslavia. It's interesting.

ROMERO: He was very much seen almost as a saint in Latin America, as a champion of the poor. But back then there was less talk about Kennedy in the family and more talk about Kennedy in school.

And most of it had to do with whether he could be a president, being Catholic and having an allegiance to the Vatican. And most of the discussion centered on what the issues were, in terms of being a Catholic with allegiance to the Vatican and his role and duties and responsibilities as president and what that would mean.

Q: In high school, did you get involved in extracurricular activities?

ROMERO: I did. I did things that I really liked to do. I wasn't in the National Honor Society, I can take that off the list, right away.

But I played a lot of sports. I played football. We had a coach that was a lunatic for physical fitness and so if you played football you had to work out with the track team.

So oftentimes I played baseball and track, working out with the track team, at the same time. So I was probably in the best physical shape that I've ever been in.

And so that took up a lot of my time. I did that and I worked part time in a grocery store, stocking shelves, after school and I was in the debate club and student government. I was Vice President of the junior class. I was on the staff of the school newspaper.

Q: Did foreign affairs cross your radar much at that time?

ROMERO: Other than these kind of impressionistic experiences with Cuba and that sort of thing, I would say no, except for one incident -- that was the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Q: '62.

ROMERO: In '62, I was 12 years old at the time and we were living in South Florida. Tensions began to mount. I had an uncle who was in the U.S. Army Reserve, they called him up.

They ordered him, as well as tens of thousands of other soldiers, down to South Florida. I don't know what they would have done in the event of a nuclear war, to be honest with you, but they moved them down there, as well as Nike missile batteries along the sides of the roads to Key West. I had family in Key West, and I can attest to the batteries being there for years afterwards.

South Florida was militarized. They were using racetracks to bivouac U.S. troops. The news was filled with the convoy of Russian ships headed towards Cuba, whether they would turn back, Kennedy's ultimatum to Khrushchev, etc.

That became everyday talk, at school and around the dinner table, because we were in the bulls eye. The range of the missiles emplaced in Cuba, as I recall, could reach northern Florida, but certainly the targets would be South Florida, which was the more populous area. So we felt particularly vulnerable.

I recall my aunt had called my mother, "Well, I'm calling just to make sure you all are all right" and my mother saying, "Oh, yeah, well, we're okay, but we're expecting a missile any day now." I was old enough to know about mushroom clouds, Hiroshima, etc.

I was just terrified. We had done these "duck and cover" exercises in school, which even back then, as a 12-year-old, I realized that if a nuclear bomb was to go off, ducking under your desk, under a wooden desk, wasn't going to save you.

Q: Were you able to take Spanish, at all?

ROMERO: I was able to take Spanish in high school, but it wasn't a particularly good program and I think that probably more than anything else talking to my grandmother did more.

When I came into the Foreign Service, I had roughly a 2/2 level Spanish speaking ability and a zero plus in reading. I had never read Spanish, other than *Bohemia* and other Cuban magazines I would find around the house.

Q: You graduated from high school when?

ROMERO: 1967.

Q: What were you thinking of doing? Were you going on to college? Was this a given, or not?

ROMERO: At the time, no one had graduated yet from college in my family, I was the first one and not just my nuclear family, but the extended family. But there was great expectation that I would go to college. After that, there wasn't any expectation that I would do anything in particular, but that going to college would open doors for me that had never been open to anybody else in the family. I was basically on my own. There wasn't anybody there to guide me to a particular career.

As an undergraduate I majored in social sciences, liberal arts. I had a minor in education, did student internship, teaching in a high school just a couple of miles from my home in Florida and in fact when I graduated from graduate school, I went on from undergraduate to graduate school at Florida State. I got a job teaching high school in the suburbs of Washington.

And my parents were happy with that. That was good. That was bringing it to another plateau.

Q: How was Florida State at the time?

ROMERO: An interesting question. Florida State at the time was in many ways characterized as the Columbia University of the South.

There was a lot of radicalization there. I don't know why. At least fifty per cent of the student body was from the South and very conservative.

Q: But with Miami being heavily Jewish, everybody who was Jewish would go to college.

ROMERO: Back then.

Q: And be pretty radical, this was just part of the pattern.

ROMERO: Like I said, you had about fifty per cent of the students that came from the South. Generally, not all, but generally they were conservative. But then you had Jewish-Americans from South Florida and then you had probably about twenty per cent from the northeastern United States and they were all pretty radical people and they shut down the university, they had H. Rap Brown on campus, when the shootings at Kent State happened, the school was shut down for almost a week.

Governor Claude Kirk came on campus to try to calm things down, he only made things worse. He tried to have a debate with H. Rap Brown, didn't work out. They brought National Guard troops on campus. We occupied the ROTC Building, all of the classic things that happened back then happened at Florida State at the time.

And interestingly Stanley Marshall was president at the time, was a very young professor of engineering and they made him president and I think largely because they thought they could control him, he was so young.

And he took a very strong stand on law and order on campus and for many years afterwards, after he'd stepped down and went back to be a professor at the same school, was stigmatized by that era, for disregarding the faculty senate recommendations on law and order and following what they thought was the governor's line on law and order and calling in troops and taking pictures of students at demonstrations.

Just by way of anecdote, years later I'm being awarding the Distinguished Graduate of Florida State award at homecoming, this was about four years ago and in the audience is Stanley Marshall, who was the president at the time and then.

And I didn't know that since that time there is still ill feeling towards him on the campus, because he had disregarded the powerful faculty senate, imposing too much law and order and trampling on civil liberties.

And that this had lingered on decades after I had graduated and in my remarks, in my acceptance remarks, I said I was glad to see Stanley Marshall there and that by and large I thought that he did a pretty good job in preventing people from getting hurt or even worse during that period of time, not knowing that I just stepped on a land mine, that there were a lot of other faculty members from that period who were still there and ill feelings still lingered.

Q: Where did you stand, demonstration-wise, during this period?

ROMERO: I was part of the demonstrators, but I have to say that I was not a main organizer or a leader. I was very idealistic and I had a lot of issues with the motives behind some of those who were leaders: personal motives, personal enhancement, aggrandizement.

Q: This is the thing that really struck one at the time. I was older, but looking at this, it seemed to be a proving ground for a lot of young men and women, to be in leadership, the cause was secondary to their personal enhancement.

ROMERO: Well, in some cases that was the case. Other people really believed that change had to come and they put the issue in front of their own personal advancement. But there were enough people who were doing this for their own personal political advancement, or just to meet cute girls, that was part of it, too. That kind of turned me off, so I picked and chose those things that I became part of.

At the time, the South dealt with this whole issue of student radicalism in a very heavy handed way. It was very much in a *Cool Hand Luke* kind of way. If people were out of line, you just beat them into submission or put them in jail or on chain gangs.

At the same time that I was involved in this, they were holding the primary for the 1972 elections and at the time, for some reason, I guess it was because the South, notwithstanding this heavy law and order push, was still Democratic, it hadn't turned completely Republican and so many of the very liberal Democrats from the North came through the Deep South and came through Tallahassee to campaign for the Democratic primary.

And we had Shirley Chisholm, John Lindsay, very liberal people come down and I think McGovern, as well as Nixon, Nixon was running for reelection, he came down and there were a group of demonstrators, probably about three or four hundred of us, that they kept away from the podium at the airport where Nixon spoke.

And after it was all over, really, not doing anything but chanting occasionally, not disrupting, not trying to break through the lines, not doing anything serious, we were walking back to our cars and the police literally just attacked these people, with absolutely no provocation, the rally was over, people were going back to their cars.

And a friend of mine with long red hair, typical hippie looking kid, who was literally attacked by Tallahassee policemen with clubs, they started beating him and dragging him to a paddy wagon.

He was just standing there talking to me as we were walking back to our cars. I started screaming, "What are you doing? Why are you doing this?" and so they grabbed me and threw me in the back of the paddy wagon with him and we sat there for a couple of minutes and they threw some more people in, but when they threw the new people in they didn't lock the door and so we ran out back to our cars and escaped.

But most of my activism was basically a very self-directed kind of pick and choose, things that you wanted to do. And there's a story that I told then-candidate McGovern years later, I was seated next to him at a dinner. He had won the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party and he was on the ticket with Sargent Shriver, Eagleton being disqualified because of some psychological history that he had.

I didn't know Sargent Shriver at the time, but I did campaign for McGovern and thirty years later at a dinner Sargent Shriver and Eunice Kennedy were having in his honor out at the Shriver house here in Potomac and we were very close with the Kennedy family through the Special Olympics and I'm seated next to McGovern and I said to him, "You know, you were my first political experience," I'm sure he got that a lot, "In terms of party politics. My girlfriend and my room mate and I spent literally months at shopping center entrances and at stop lights handing out your literature, urging people to vote for you."

And he said, "Really? Thank you very much" and then he said, "Well, how did it all turn out?" I said, "When they published the precinct by precinct breakdown of who voted for whom, I have to tell you that you got three votes in the precinct: from me, my room mate and my girlfriend."

He paused a second and he looks at me and he says, "You know, I get that a lot."

I have an undergraduate degree in social science education and my M.A. in international relations.

Q: And this is also at

ROMERO: Florida State. I graduated and went right back to graduate school.

Q: How international was Florida State by this time?

ROMERO: The issues of the day were Vietnam and Cambodia and Chile, with Allende dyeing in office (with the help of the U.S. government).

I remember after Kent State they had sent a couple of hapless Foreign Service Officers to college campuses to explain our policy in Cambodia and Laos and Vietnam, this was in the wake of the shootings at Kent State and I recall going to an assembly where there were maybe about three or four hundred students there and these two hapless JOs who were being sent around, now I realize that they were probably supernumerary for a couple months and they put them on the road to quell the college campuses, which was a Herculean task.

And they're up in front and I started asking them a lot of questions about Allende and Chile and Kissinger and the coup and the murder by Pinochet and they had very little knowledge of that, I'm sure they weren't area specialists and I remember my professor giving me the evil eye for asking these embarrassing questions and being insistent upon following up.

But that was the first experience that I ever had with Foreign Service Officers.

Q: I take it you weren't enamored with the Vietnam War?

ROMERO: No, but, interestingly enough, I was in an international law class with a professor who was a real northern Floridian, good old boy guy, brilliant, by the name of Ross Oglesby, very liberal, for a southerner and he gave us an assignment to look at the Nixon Administration's bombings of the Ho Chi Minh trail in Cambodia with respect to existing international law and to determine whether it was legal or not.

Everybody in the class of a dozen basically determined that it was illegal and I said that it was legal, because any time that an adjacent country allows its territory to be used by certain forces to attack another country, there was a considerable body of international law that gave justification for countries, after they'd exhausted all remedies at the UN or regional bodies, to take matters into their own hands, *i.e.*, invade and I took that side, being intellectually honest, I guess.

And I got a C minus on the paper; everybody else got As and Bs and I thought that my reasoning and my justification were spot on. Even though you don't agree with me, at least you could give me a decent grade for having good legal justification. I got a C minus.

Q: Well, that shows, you have to be a little careful of professors and their intellectual baggage.

How long were you in graduate school?

ROMERO: It was a year-long program.

Q: And you then went into teaching?

ROMERO: I did, I ran into a friend of mine from high school who had been teaching in the Prince George's County system. I didn't have a job. I don't know if you recall, 1972 was a really bad year for employment.

We were beginning to wind down in Vietnam and there were a lot of people who had gone to college before the lottery, gone to college to avoid the draft and who were graduating and the economy just couldn't absorb them. I read somewhere there were four college graduates for every opening in the economy and things were really even worse in the South.

Very few of the people who graduated with me had jobs right afterwards. I remember one guy got a GS-7 job processing veteran's claims in the VA in Atlanta and he was considered the top of the class. Things were dismal.

And so what I did, I went on vacation, traveled around the country for about two months and then did what I had been doing during the summers to help ends meet and that is work as a carpenter.

So I started working as a carpenter in South Florida, I worked that summer as a carpenter. At the time, you were making pretty good money.

And then I ran into this friend of mine from high school who had been teaching up here and he said, "Look, there's all kinds of jobs up here. You've got your teaching certificate. Give me your number and if something comes up, I'll give you a call."

Called me a week later. So I taught at Bowie High School for five years, before I came into the Foreign Service.

Q: This is in Prince George's County?

ROMERO: Yes, between here and Annapolis.

Q: What was Prince George's County like, at that time?

ROMERO: Well, ironically, it was really behind South Florida, in terms of the end of segregation and integrating the races in public schools, because by the time I had graduated schools were integrating in South Florida and that process had already begun.

Q: South Florida did have a strong intellectual class and all that that came there.

ROMERO: But there were a number of cases in the courts that forced South Florida really to begin sooner than Prince George's County, or even Boston, which was ironic. The South had to integrate, for some reason, before the North did.

Q: Attention was focused

ROMERO: I came up here and faced great disparities among my students. You had white kids who came from middle class and upper middle class families and many had their own cars and if they lived a block away they drove the cars to school and lived very, very well.

And then you had black kids who came from what they called "Old Bowie," which was the old town. Old Bowie basically surrounded the race track, so many of the people who lived there worked at the race track or did manual labor, landscaping and things like that.

And then you had a huge chunk of black kids who were bussed in from a place called Seat Pleasant, which was right on the border with the District and at the time you had a lot of out-migration from the District in the wake the riots in 1968 after the assassination of Martin Luther King. And so those folks had settled just over the border in Prince George's County, in Seat Pleasant and Landover and a lot of those kids were bussed into Bowie High School.

So it was not a prescription for peace and there was a lot of disruption, a lot of fights between white kids and black kids, black kids having a chip on their shoulder, being brought into a school that they didn't want to be in and being confronted with a situation where they were clearly on the short end of the economic stick and there was just such a disparity between the economic and social wellbeing of the white kids and the black kids that it was just a prescription for disaster.

Q: What were you teaching?

ROMERO: The first year that I taught there I taught a vocation program for special education kids in high school. None of them had emotional problems. They all had learning difficulties.

I had no preparation at all for this. I had to read like crazy to just get kind of familiar with how to teach these kids. I was sold a bill of goods by school administration, "None of them have real problems. They just can't read."

Well, by the time a kid is 16 and 17 and 18 years old and he can't read and he's in high school, he'll do anything to not be put on the spot to read in public or in front of the class.

And huge, huge, problems, breakouts of fights in my own classroom. I did that for a year and I have to tell you, it was probably the most challenging period of my life.

And then I knew that I just couldn't continue to do this without more preparation and I didn't really want to get into the field, so I was about to leave and the head of the social studies department said, "Look, we've watched you, you've done a terrific job. We've got an opening in social studies. We'd like you to teach the senior courses."

And at the time seniors had to take two of four course offerings: there was social issues, economic issues, foreign policy issues and political issues. I taught all four and it was challenging, it was really challenging, but I got to teach subject matter that I really liked to high school kids who had to take it because of a requirement. It was the kind of civics requirement that they had their senior year and it was good, I enjoyed it.

But it was a lot of work, I had preparation for four different classes and taught five classes a day.

Q: You did this, what, for four years?

ROMERO: I did that for four years.

Q: Were you looking towards getting out, or were you looking towards sort of moving on to be a principal, or what?

ROMERO: No, I pretty much decided that I was going to move on. I felt like I had spent my whole life in academia, either going to school or teaching school. I couldn't see myself as an administrator. I was not friends with the principal of the school at the time, he saw me as a radical.

Everybody belonged to the NEA, the National Education Association. I was the vice president of the American Federation of Teachers, which is a much more radical teachers' organization, or at least considered radical.

He thought somehow I was a flaming radical. I looked the part, big Fu Manchu moustache, long sideburns and I probably took a pretty liberal bent in teaching.

So he was just happy to have me go and I had taken the written Foreign Service test and was waiting to hear about how I had done, but I decided regardless of what happened with the Foreign Service I wasn't going to go back and teach there, that I'd just take my chances. He was happy to see me go.

Q: You took the Foreign Service exam and we haven't discussed how you zeroed in on the Foreign Service. You took it when?

ROMERO: I took the Foreign Service test when I was in graduate school and I was told that I passed it and then I was sent a letter about a month or so later basically saying that they were beginning to draw down people from Vietnam, I later found out it was young officers that they'd hired for the CORDS program, there was no opening, they weren't hiring. So I forgot about it.

And then in 1976 I was going out with a woman who worked in Human Resources, then called Personnel, at the Department of Commerce and she was very much associated with personnel people at State and they told her that if I was interested and I passed the test that all I needed to do was write a letter, that they would activate my file and do a background check and an oral exam to be brought into the Foreign Service.

Q: Today is July 20, 2011. Do you recall your oral exam?

ROMERO: I do.

Q: Can you remember some of the questions that were asked?

ROMERO: The oral exam is deliberately filled with lots of ambiguity, particularly as it relates to questions. There's no right or wrong answer and they want to see how you operate on your feet, without a lot of preparation and that's probably one of the key things for Foreign Service Officers, to be able to do that, to have that skill. And I didn't know anything about the Foreign Service, so I had no idea that there was no right or wrong answer to most of the questions that they asked you.

Some of the things related to macroeconomics and transfer payments, which had right or wrong answers, but most, by and large, were hypotheticals that you had to react to.

And one of them was a question related to my being an administrative officer at a post overseas and one of my local employees, the FSNs, was making a conspicuous display of wealth all of a sudden and he worked in the bookkeeping office of the administrative section of the embassy and there were thoughts that perhaps he was embezzling money, but it was upsetting his colleagues. And as the U.S. officer assigned to that section and responsible for it, I was asked, "What do you do?"

And I said, "Well, I would bring him in and talk to him and take a look at it and see whether there was in fact a conspicuous display of wealth, or whether his colleagues were exaggerating this or there was something that I didn't know that was going on under the table."

And the made the questions harder, "Well, in fact, there is a marked departure from the way he dressed and acted and the car he drove over the last couple of months. So what do you do?"

And so I said, “Well, I would sit down and I would talk to him and counsel him and tell him to cool it, that it was causing ripples in the section and basically try quietly to find out what the source of all of this new found wealth was.”

And they said, “Well, you’ve done that and you find out that he’s been very successful at the track and that he’s had several months of winning horses and so what do you do now?”

And I said to them, “Well, I probably would ask him what his combinations are and how he’s arriving at the winner.” Some of the examiners laughed and they backed off and went on to something else.

But it’s that kind of thing, where there is no right or wrong answer. After it was all over, one of the examiners came up to me and said, “Well, you did very well and we expected as much from someone who’s been teaching for five years, where you have to get up in front of classes and present and answer questions. So your oral presentation was very good.” But what we were surprised about was the writing sample.”

I took what essentially I think was a blue book at the time and kind of outlined what I was going to say in the blue book and then I wrote four or five pages or whatever. They liked the response and they liked the fact that I outlined before I started writing and the examiner said to me, “For a Hispanic, you write really well,” which I didn’t particularly take as a compliment. I remain aghast by this statement.

But the rest is history, I passed, doing pretty well and several months later was asked to some in to the Service.

Q: You came in when?

ROMERO: 1977.

Q: What was your A-100 group like, the basic officer training group?

ROMERO: Well, like I said, I didn’t have any experience in the Foreign Service, so all of it was really new to me. There were maybe three categories of people: there were a few people in the class, there were 31 in the class and there were a few people in the class who came right of graduate school. Most had years of work experience and were older. I was 28 at the time and I was one of the older people.

So you had that small group right out of graduate school. Then you had a group, probably about a third of the group, were legacies, a father in the Foreign Service or in AID or Peace Corps, some connection with Foreign Service work.

And then you had about another third and I was in that category, people who had no experience or no knowledge, not much knowledge about what the Foreign Service did but

seemed to come from all corners of the earth, including a policeman from Cherry Hill, New Jersey and a fireman from New York City and a marine sergeant that had been living in Guam and all three of those guys and I became very, very close friends and we're still close friends today.

Q: Male, female composition?

ROMERO: I would say probably 15 per cent female, 85 per cent male. Back then it was still pretty heavily weighted towards males.

Q: Was there much of an attempt at that time to bring in, particularly African Americans and that?

ROMERO: Yes, there seemed to be. The numbers didn't reflect it, but it did seem that they were reaching out and there were a couple in my class. There was a diplomatic courier that was in my class, Foreign Service diplomatic courier and a number of others. They seemed to be making an attempt, but the numbers were still very low.

Q: How'd you find the basic training?

ROMERO: I thought it was pretty good. In A-100 they gave you kind of a broad overview of everything and that was illuminating for me, because, like I said, I had no prior experience with the work.

When I had graduated with my master's degree in international relations some five years prior there really wasn't much, in terms of diplomacy and what the State Department does. We got that, but only tangentially.

It wasn't like, where I teach now at Georgetown, which is the Graduate School of Foreign Service, which is dedicated towards foreign service and international relations, with the Foreign Service being first and foremost and most people going into careers, either in the State Department or the foreign services of Commerce or Agriculture, intelligence, but also the NGO world and some in business, but it's very structured towards doing some form of foreign service and I really didn't have that.

Q: This is sort of the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Was Vietnam much of a subject, what did we do wrong, what did we do right and all that?

ROMERO: I think it was too soon for that reflection. Most people just wanted to get out of Vietnam. Richard Nixon had set specific dates for withdrawal and most people just wanted to get out, although there were a very activist group of Foreign Service Officers, some active and some who had resigned over the Vietnam War who were looked upon as gurus from my generation.

They had made statements about the Vietnam War, Tony Lake was one of them, particularly Tony and resigned over it and had real problems with the way we withdrew,

particularly as it related to a lot of the FSNs and others who worked in the embassy, who were just left stranded there, basically left to the whim of the North Vietnamese.

But at that point there hadn't been this kind of self-examination of what we had done and where we went wrong. I think most of the country was just relieved to be out.

Q: Was there any discussion, this was shortly after President Nixon resigned and al that, about sort of the American government?

ROMERO: There was definitely in the country, particularly among my generation, an anti-government philosophy, largely because of the Vietnam War. But the Federal Government also greatly advanced the cause of civil rights, so government could play an indispensable role.

The student movements back in the Seventies were really not only student movements but they had very strong links with black movements, Black Panthers and other radicals, but also very moderate black movements and that unity started to fray back in the late Seventies, where students, even radical students, many of them, started to get on with their careers and families.

Q: The core to it, of course, was the fact that male students were threatened with the draft. That was really uniting.

ROMERO: That was a galvanizing thing and if you didn't agree with what we were doing in Vietnam, or, as myself, I didn't agree with how we were doing it in Vietnam, then, when the war ended, that cementing agent with all of the other groups who were trying to get their rights recognized and respected, really the glue in the student movement just really pretty much fell apart after the war ended, there was really nothing that pulled people together.

Q: Okay, you're in the A-100 course. Did you know or hope to go someplace, do something, or any particular thing?

ROMERO: Well, they gave us the typical first tour officer's list of options, which was kind of a joke, in that essentially you got to choose where you wanted to do visa work. There were a few of us that got what I considered to be the cushy assignments, in retrospect they weren't all that cushy, political officer in Addis Ababa and that sort of thing which I thought were really great. They tended to go to the legacy guys and girls. And for the rest of us who didn't have those kind of connections, we found ourselves either doing admin work, as some of them did, or, like myself, the vast majority, doing visa work. I figured that I would be doing visa work and it would be somewhere in Latin America and if I was going to do that kind of work, I knew it would be grueling. I didn't know how grueling.

But if I was going to do that kind of work, I would do it in a place that was at least fun. So rather than throw my luck to the wind, which I never did in my career with personnel

officers, I always got my own jobs, probably as a result of this experience, I decided that rather than find myself in the middle of the desert in Mexico doing visa work, I'd rather do it in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic and at least have a beach nearby.

And so I signed up for, there were three jobs actually in the Dominican Republic and I got one them. So I did visa work and I was able to rotate from NIVs to IVs to American services work, over that year and a half that I was there.

Q: Santo Domingo, before you go on, what was the situation there?

ROMERO: The country had been ruled by a dictator by the name of Trujillo for many, many years. He became increasingly despotic and autocratic and was assassinated just outside of Santo Domingo about 15 years before I got there.

His hand picked successor, the guy was "respectable", if there was a respectable, veneer on what Trujillo did, was a man by the name of Joaquin Balaguer and Joaquin Balaguer had been president for a couple of terms before I got there and there was relative stability.

It was a decent government, to the extent that it was relatively efficient in terms of services, but very paternalistic.

The country was desperately poor, with a lot of Dominican immigrating to the United States, both legally and illegally. And so the work of the consulate, the consulate had more Foreign Services Officers in it than the rest of the sections of the embassy combined. When you added in AID, it was probably about half of all the American officers that were in country, largely because there was just so much work.

On the NIV line, non-immigrant visa line, we would have probably 500 applicants on an average day, interviewed by four officers. So it was really the most grueling part of the work that we did in the Dominican Republic.

Q: Just to get a feel, okay, you're a non-immigrant visa officer. How would you operate during the day?

ROMERO: Well, we had interviews from about eight to noon and then we would break for lunch and then we would come back and process the visas in the afternoon and take any special cases that we just didn't have time to do during the mornings.

We literally had probably five minutes per applicant, there really wasn't much time and if there was something in particular that you wanted to find out more about, you'd ask the applicant to come back in the afternoon.

Otherwise, people got anywhere from three to five minutes to make their case that they would be going to the United States but returning, that they had a good reason to go there.

So there were serious problems with overstays and people who got tourist visas that didn't come back and worked. So the refusal rate was high, the refusal rate was probably in the neighborhood of about sixty to seventy per cent.

Q: When somebody appeared before you and you only have five minutes or less, what were you looking at and listening for?

ROMERO: Well, there were a number of things. Basically, I'll tell you the applicant that didn't make it: the applicant that didn't make it was the one who took three or four busses and "public cars," what they called *caros publicos,* to get to the consulate from god forsaken little hamlets out in the mountains or the north of the country and borrowed clothes from everybody in the family to make a nice impression and sometimes that meant blue jeans with orange tuxedo shirts and sandals, just whatever conglomeration of clothes they could put together and they would get there and you'd ask them where they're going and they'd say, "Wherever you let me go."

And you'd say, "No, you have to have a reason to go. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to have a good time."

"So, where are you going?"

"Wherever you let me go." That sort of thing. That was the guy who got probably about two minutes.

Then there were others, some of whom were just renewing, that was quick, too, they'd gone to the U.S. and came back without problems several times over several years, that was quick.

And then you had others who had problems. Sometimes there were medical problems which could only be addressed in a clinic or hospital in the States. You had to make sure that that was not bogus.

There were just all kinds of things like that that made it a little bit more challenging. Luckily we had a guy who worked in our investigations section who had been actually a sergeant in Trujillo's intelligence network and he had been assigned to Puerto Rico, which was the island right next door.

At the time there were a lot of Dominican dissidents that had fled the Trujillo regime to Puerto Rico and so this guy was key person under President Trujillo and the U.S. embassy consular section had hired him after that stint to do investigations for us.

And it was one of those things where nobody really wanted to know what he did previously, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," but he was unbelievably effective in interviewing kind of troublesome or cases where we had real question marks and he was just very, very good at what he did and I can remember about eighty per cent of the cases that I

referred to him, most of them, the vast majority, were resolved just by his interview, without doing any kind of field check at all.

His presence would just break people down and have them admit what they were doing, in terms of fraudulent applications. I remember I sent him a woman who had come to me dressed as a nun and it just didn't look right, but she had a good story, she was just transiting Miami to go to Spain, to go back to the mother convent for training.

So I sent her to him and within 15 minutes he was back in my office, "Denied." What she had done was, she was a maid in a convent of an order of nuns that were headquartered in Spain, but over the 14 years or so she would take various items from nun's habits, this, that and the other thing and she finally put together this collection, but she didn't have the crucifix, so she kind of fashioned it out of what looked to be the tops of tin cans and it looked pretty cheesy and that was the thing that just didn't look right to me and basically he confirmed my suspicions that she was not a nun and was trying to go to the United States to work.

And it was sad, because after 14 years, not only did she not get her visa, but she lost her job at the convent. So there was a lot of sadness built into this, a lot of sadness, really desperate people trying to get to the United States. All they wanted to do was work.

Our country was made out of desperate people who came to the United States, all they wanted to do was work, but your job was to hold the line. Basically, back then and now, your job was to hold the line.

I became, I think, after that stint as a consular officer, not only did I learn enough consular regulations to last me a professional lifetime in terms of the work, but I also became a much stronger professional, in terms of being able to tell people "no", because that's what you did most of the morning was tell people "no" and I became a stronger professional as a result.

We're still friends, that small group of officers that were there in the DR at the time, we're still pretty close friends, largely because of the experience that we all shared.

Q: Who was the ambassador when you were there?

ROMERO: A guy by the name of Hurwitch, a very senior Foreign Service Officer, he was the ambassador when I first got there, but he got into a lot of trouble and was later drummed out of the service, it was really a eye opener for me.

Q: What happened?

ROMERO: He went into a milieu as an ambassador, a milieu where right and wrong and morality is loose and where there's a lot of corruption everywhere in the Dominican Republic, still is and he's such a senior guy, it's surprising that it happened to him, he'd been around for a long while, but kind of got caught up in the shenanigans that Domicans

do and was doing things like importing Mercedes Benz car parts for friends through the APO, giving liquor gifts and stuff like that to locals from the commissary store, penny ante stuff.

And it all came to a head because one day the GSO had said to the local employee in his section to take one of the water trucks, we had power outages all the time, and to fill up cisterns because the power was out in peoples' homes and he ordered the head of the motor pool to dispatch two of the water trucks to fill up cisterns in American employees' homes and the guy turned to him and said, "Well, the tanker trucks are not here."

And the GSO says, "Where are they?"

And he was told, "They were sent to the ambassador's farm?"

And the GSO said, "The ambassador's farm?"

"Yeah, we've been working on the farm, we've sent people over to work." The landscaping crew that worked on the embassy was sent to the ambassador's farm, as well as the tanker trucks.

And apparently what had happened is Ambassador Hurwitch had purchased a farm, he'd never reported the purchase of the farm and he was using embassy staff to do landscaping and construction out there.

And after other Americans at the embassy became aware of this the inspectors were called in and they found all this penny ante stuff that he was doing illegally and basically not only did they remove him from the post, which was a terrible blow for someone as senior as him, but they subsequently, in a court case, there was a pleading on his part and he lost all of his pension as a result and it was just a very sad, sad thing. I remember months after that, I was still in the country and he had come back representing a Taiwanese company that was trying to get U.S. visas in the Dominican Republic for some of is executives.

And here this really larger-than-life individual as ambassador was coming back, only a shadow of his former self, interviewing with me, to try to convince me to give visas to Taiwanese business executives. It was just unbelievable to me that someone could fall that quickly and have such a wrongheaded view of what they should be doing. But he lost everything. He was divorced right after that. It was terrible for him. For me it was a great lesson in life.

Q: Did you get any feel for the Dominican community in the United States?

ROMERO: I did. One of the things about being a vice consul in the Dominican Republic is that you're probably more sought after than any other officer in the post. I'm originally from New York and when I would go visit my father, at the time he lived in Fort Washington, which at the time was heavily Dominican, I think still is and I would be

walking down the street or on the subway and people that I'd either refused or granted visas to would just come up to me, like I was their long lost friend and just start chatting me up.

So I did see the other side of it. There's a lot of Dominicans that went to Corona, New York and other places, Coney Island. But their biggest colony, if you will, of Dominicans in the United States at the time was at Fort Washington and I would run into slews of them all the time.

Q: How were they doing?

ROMERO: Most of them were doing pretty well, working families. It was a lower, lower middle class community, Fort Washington, but it was a time when the economy was expanding at such a rate that, particularly in New York, you could find jobs and there were jobs for unskilled and semi-skilled and artisans.

Q: Was the political situation pretty calm when you were there?

ROMERO: No. It started that way, but then what happened was Joaquin Balaguer, who had been president forever and was the handpicked successor of Trujillo. He ran for re-election in 1978. When they started counting the votes his opponent from the Socialist International side of the Dominican political spectrum was coming up as the winner and one of the things that the Dominican Army did and most Latin American militaries still do is to collect the ballots from the precincts.

And when they started counting the initial ballots that came in, they figured out that Balaguer was going to lose and so they stopped the counting and then everything deteriorated from there.

There was martial law that went on for months and months, there was basically a stalemate, ballots were destroyed, until finally the United States under Jimmy Carter and Carlos Andrés Pérez, who was president of Venezuela, weighed very heavily in to basically say "You have to finish the vote count here and if it looks like Balaguer loses," which it did, "You have to respect that and if you don't the Dominican Republic becomes a pariah state in Latin America, with all of what that implies in terms of economic embargo, etc."

The United States was their leading economic aid donor in the country and also the escape valve, if you will, for excess labor in the Dominican Republic and Venezuela was number two in that respect, lots of Dominicans went to Venezuela because of the oil boom. With those two countries basically transmitting the same message, after about three months Balaguer and his generals capitulated and the rest is history.

But in that intervening three months everybody at the embassy was carrying a sidearm, lots of threats. Unfortunately, Hurwitch, who had not yet left as ambassador, had a policy that he didn't want to have everybody in the American staff with diplomatic license

plates on their cars, because it would make it look like the United States had the large footprint that it had there, particularly since we probably had more diplomatic personnel than all the other embassies combined and so he didn't want everybody who deserved it or should have gotten it to have a diplomatic plate on their car.

So what he did was he decided that we would have government plates, which were green at the time, as opposed to the white diplomatic plate, which was fine most of the time. If you had military checkpoints you had to go through, it helped having a government plate.

But it became a real liability when people were rising up against the government and there was this martial law thing going on. I would hear stories about people having rocks come through the windshields of their cars because people would recognize the government plate and assume the driver was aligned with Balaguer and his people who had just tried to steal the election. So practically all of us, as I recall, were carrying sidearms for self-protection at the time.

Q: That's scary.

ROMERO: Yeah, it was scary. Pretty much everything was shut down. We were single guys, so it was kind of limiting our style, if you will, at the time, but when we did go out, we went out usually in groups to somebody's house. It was my year of living dangerously.

Q: Well, then, how did it come out?

ROMERO: At the end of the day, Jimmy Carter and Carlos Andrés Pérez were able to get a concession out of Balaguer that he would allow the vote count and then he would step down and that's exactly what happened, the opposition candidate became president.

It was the first time the opposition had won an election, nobody could remember how long it had been and there was general jubilation.

It ended strangely however. Several months after that, that same president went into his bathroom in the presidential office and blew his brains out!

Dominicans are kind of cursed in that way, in terms of having uncertainty and upheaval politically and seemingly destined to have that forever.

Q: Did Cuba play any role there? Are you aware of Cuban influence, or not?

ROMERO: I don't recall there being a Cuban embassy at the time and a couple of years before actually, over a decade earlier, in 1965 we had had the 82nd Airborne invade the country because it looked like one of the elements involved in a military coup that had seized power from an elected government, the air force, was leaning too far towards Cuba.

Q: You left there in what

ROMERO: ’79.

Q: Where’d you go?

ROMERO: Went back and got a job in INR, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Watch, which was co-located with the Operations Center, as a watch officer.

Q: Was that a year sort of thing?

ROMERO: It was actually 15 months.

Q: You covered anything that came up during the time, didn’t you? You weren’t a desk officer?

ROMERO: Right, it was an incredibly good job. When I left the Dominican Republic I wasn’t sure that I wanted to do this work, because it was just absolutely grueling, visa work.

But when I got back to Washington there was this whole world of the intelligence community and policy which was opened up for me, just like being hungry for so long and you walk into a room and everything that you could possibly want to eat is on the table.

It was just spectacular for me. I saw how NSA works and how they relate to DIA and how the CIA comes in and how all of this comes together, in terms of analysis and publications for policy makers and it was just an unsurpassed opportunity for me.

We would take site visits out to NSA and Defense Intelligence and other places, talk to our counterparts on the watches there. We had great opportunities to brief 6th and 7th principals when they would arrive in the morning.

Some of them would come in real early, at 6:30 and you would have been working the night shift and when they would come in you would take the morning summary and all the other publications showing what happened overnight, to include special intelligence, intercepts.

And as a kid, not even thirty yet, to be able to walk in to the deputy secretary’s office or an assistant secretary’s office and have them question you about what happened -- was incredible.

And the other part of it, too, was you got to write some really important articles, particularly on late breaking things that happened overnight.

I recall that a colleague and I, were tasked with writing a piece on the Iran-Iraq War, which was raging at the time and most of what we used was special intelligence, which was not in any way analyzed by anybody, it was just raw intelligence

Q: When you say "special intelligence," what do you mean?

ROMERO: It's electronic intelligence, intercepts and basically these were field commanders on both sides we were eavesdropping on and they were reporting incidents, oftentimes the same incident from different sides.

And I remember I went to a map store, because we had no maps in INR at the time of Iran and Iraq, at least that I could lay my hands on, bought a map and brought it to work the next day and basically spent the evening, my colleague and I, among other business that we had to do, such as making sure that foreign governments were notified of reconnaissance flights over their territory and if you missed that notification, people could get shot down, so there was a lot of tension going on, a lot of stress related to what you had to do, which I loved, too.

But getting back to Iran-Iraq, I remember bringing in the map, my colleague and I are getting the coordinates, who's saying what on the Iranian side, who's saying what on the Iraqi side and figuring out what the truth is between the two of them and plotting out military movements and coming up with a report in the morning, which, looking back on it, was the epitome of audacity on our part, to think that we could put this together, but we were told to put it together by the morning.

And this went on for several months and as a footnote to that, I remember at the same time, when we had our visit to the Pentagon and went into the Joint Chiefs of Staff rooms, they had a team of 25 people working 24/7 doing the same thing and we got kudos for our reports in preference to their reports, two hapless guys, one just coming in from being a vice consul.

And that really impressed me: if you put enough intellectual firepower into what you did, that you could make a difference, people will respect your work.

Q: This is, of course INR often comes out on top of sort of the intelligence competition, because it doesn't have the layering you see in larger intelligence outfits. I think this is often the problem, because once you start layering intelligence, the people who are somewhat removed from the analytical effort have to do something and then they start wordsmithing and they begin to qualify everything. I think this is the problem with CIA.

ROMERO: I think you're right.

Q: If you want quick and dirty, you shouldn't put your product through a sort of sausage making machine, such as CIA or Defense Intelligence.

ROMERO: Where the final written product, whether it be a spot report or analysis, comes out in a mangled version of what the analyst who's actually following an issue had intended, because it goes through so many layers. You're exactly right.

In the morning, one of our jobs was to go brief the INR front office, along with everybody else on the Seventh Floor and they would ask you, they were very disciplined in their questions: "How did you arrive at this? What pieces of information did you use?"

And going through that exercise every day with these guys who were really senior people honed your skills. You didn't have a lot of preparation for this, but being able to answer and to follow their line of thought and being able to have access two levels above or three levels above where you would normally have access made your reports better and better.

And I remember one night, it was shift work, I got to the Operations Center around eleven o'clock and when I got to the office I was told by the previous watch stander that there was intense interest on the Seventh Floor about what was happening in El Salvador. There was all kinds of tumult and a possible military coup, that policy makers really wanted you to watch that, be able to report in the morning, have a good, solid, analytical article about what was happening in the morning.

I had zero experience with this and there was State Department reporting and then there was a slew of intelligence reporting and the Operations Center, S/S-O, the counterpart organization, could only report on State Department reporting. We had to report, in INR, on all the intelligence stuff. That was the division of labor.

But what the Seventh Floor wanted was a comprehensive article from all sources, State and intelligence, that would brief people about what was happening in the morning. Again, there was fear that Cuba, through surrogates, would take over El Salvador.

And it was, to me, fascinating. The country had set up a temporary triumvirate, drawn from the leftist movements and the military, to govern the country. It was falling apart, in retrospect, largely because all of these people on the triumvirate were less concerned about the country and more concerned about appeasing their constituencies.

The whole thing fell apart and in the process of falling apart, within that 24 hours, people started arming themselves and running into the streets and shooting. There was real murkiness as to what was happening.

But we were able to put all of this in a very, very good analytical piece that was a couple of paragraphs long, which got rave reviews. And I was able, in this case, to sort through slews of intelligence and to focus on two or three really good pieces. I could just tell by reading through all of the facts that these reporters were on top of it and you just have a feel for that.

And like you said, we had no colleagues on duty that were more familiar with this than we were. This other Foreign Service Officer that worked in the Operations Center and I put together a report that was highly praised afterwards.

And that experience did a number of things for me. Number one, I became fascinated with Central America and what was going on with the insurgencies in the region and the fact that the isthmus was literally in flames at the time. I then spent most of my Foreign Service career on Central America and on insurgencies in general.

And secondly, I worked with a guy who later became my brother in law, after I introduced him to my wife's, my then girl friend, but my subsequent wife's sister and we're still very close friends to this day.

Q: Who's that?

ROMERO: I guy by the name of Chuck English, who was our ambassador in Bosnia, just came back this past summer.

Q: When you first starting looking at this, was there a feeling that the Sandinistas were a breath of fresh air or something like that, or what?

ROMERO: That's a very good question and still to this day I'm still a little murky about what would constitute a really reliable answer.

I think that there was every effort on the part of very seasoned career Foreign Service Officers, one of whom was Larry Pezzullo, who tried to wean the Sandinistas away from their strong anti-U.S. stance.

But they were so anti-U.S., their ties with Cuba and the Soviet Union and Qadhafi in Libya, for example, were so solid that it was really hard to break.

And we did offer them lots of incentives to come over, once they were victorious. They had overthrown Somoza, a horrible dictator and this was a populist movement. The vast majority of people who supported the Sandinistas were just moderate, centrist people hoping to get a democracy. And we did try. I think more could have been done and I think that we unnecessarily aggravated them.

I remember at the time in the U.S. there was a transition from Carter to Reagan and most people know that Reagan inherited an image problem, that the United States had overseas, that the United States was weak under Carter. The Iran hostage crisis and the assassination of Dubs, our ambassador in Afghanistan, only showed us as being exceedingly weak. And when Reagan came in, his goal was to reassert U.S. power and influence and he did.

And one of the things that happened was where Carter and his people were trying to reach out to movements like the Sandinistas, to try to kind of wean them from their

orthodox communists underpinnings. All of the senior FSOs who were part of that were summarily dismissed from their positions by the Ronald Reagan hit team that came into the State Department for the transition from Carter to Reagan.

There were a number of really right wing fanatics that Jesse Helms was able to get Ronald Reagan to clean out the State Department, his words, to get rid of all the "softy leftists" that had got in key positions under Carter.

Robert White was one of them. Jim Cheek was another. The worst case was Bowdler, who was Assistant Secretary and when the hit team came in one of them walked into Bowdler's office, a guy who had 32 years in the Foreign Service, career guy and said, "Pack up your stuff! You're out of here by three o'clock, end of story." Bowdler left that day and no one ever heard from him again, he was so pissed off about the way he was treated.

But there were a lot of other people, lots of other people, who were just serious and gifted Foreign Service Officers, who were treated very badly and exiled. Jim Cheek had to go to Nepal as DCM, after being a deputy assistant secretary and hide out there for a while. After that he went to Ethiopia and hid out there too.

This had an indelible impact on me as a young officer. I said, "Wow, this is not a touchy feely, friendly place to work. You get on the wrong side of a political issue and it could come back and haunt you, or even bite you in the ass." This experience guided me throughout my career.

The other curious thing that happened was I was pretty much the only person in the Department of State left standing after all of this was over and after all of these experienced people were kicked out and had to find jobs elsewhere, I was the only person in the Department of State who knew anything about Central America, literally.

And it was through no merit of my own. I just was young enough to have kept my head down, 'cause they went down to the desk officer level getting rid of people. And because I was in INR, I guess that inoculated me a little bit.

But what happened after that was unbelievable, because as a third tour officer, I had gone from the INR watch to become an analyst for Central America in the analytical part of the INR bureau, I was, like I said, the last person who knew anything about Central America left standing and I was asked to brief members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in closed session. I remember briefing both House and Senate Intelligence Committees. I was the only State Department guy in the room.

And I remember with the Senate I was there with Bill Casey, the two briefers were me and Bill Casey, about what was happening in Central America.

Q: He was the Director of Central Intelligence, a rather spooky character.

ROMERO: Yes, a guy who I could never even begin to understand what he was saying, you couldn't understand a word he was saying.

Q: Muttered.

ROMERO: He was unbelievable. It was like you were speaking to somebody who was speaking an exotic language.

So briefing members of the Senate, not being able to understand what he was saying, I just went ahead and gave my briefing. His was highly skewed towards the Agency at the time seeing communist threats everywhere and mine was a little bit more, I would hope a lot more, balanced.

But to have that kind of experience at my age, of seeing all of these people who you revere gone the next day and then you the only person left standing, doing these kinds of things that you could probably have waited 10 to 15 to 20 years to do, in a normal career, I learned lots of lessons from that.

But the lesson that I learned in retrospect was not to shy away from tough or controversial assignments. It was the exact opposite and that was that if you take tough assignments, doors will open to you that you never even knew existed.

Q: I must say that some of the things you said, I recall that from my own experience, that you had people coming out of the Joseph McCarthy period who talked about sort of the lesson learned that you couldn't rely on the State Department to back you up. People were tossed to the wolves under John Foster Dulles. The State Department is not as benign as one might think.

ROMERO: I don't think it's benign at all, to be honest with you. Basically I always felt that politically you're pretty much on your own at the State Department. There's nobody's going to help you out unless it's some egregious thing that someone is accusing you of that you had nothing to do with. But otherwise, if it's strictly political, you're on your own, buddy.

For better of worse, that's the way it is and you take your chances and there's a lot of people who don't take tough or controversial jobs, simply because of that, they shy away from them.

But I always felt that you're in this business to make a difference, to make it better than the way you found it and if you want to just have a nice, easy career, or if you want to make money, do something else.

But if you're going to work for government, you're obligated to take tough assignments and sometimes those will be controversial and sometimes they'll kick you in the ass.

Q: Well, then, your third assignment was in INR itself. Were you the Central American analyst or not, or what?

ROMERO: I was, I was.

Q: This was early Ronald Reagan?

ROMERO: Correct.

Q: What was the situation in your area of assignment?

ROMERO: Well, let me answer your question with what was happening in Central America and then fold that into what was happening in the Department.

What was happening in Central America was that basically you had a mélange of guerilla movements in countries like Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala and they spent more time fighting each other than they did, mostly, the government: assassinations, all kinds of nasty stuff that they did to each other over the years and they lived in a very, very autocratic environment, these were not democratic countries, by any stretch.

And what had happened was Fidel Castro came in and basically forced these groups to put aside their differences and to form umbrella groups and to operate under a unified command.

That happened with the formation of something called the URG in Guatemala and the FMLN in Salvador and, while it didn't have an acronym, in Honduras there was attempts by Cubans to pull all dissident groups together.

And that, probably, more than anything else, scared the United States, that Fidel and Cuba would have a hand in unifying these dissident groups, with the added advantage of Cubans working through Sandinistas in Nicaragua to supply, train, provide safe haven, R&R, etc, for these radical groups in the isthmus itself.

So it was not good and that's what we faced. Now, to say that we had an agile, effective diplomacy would be to vastly overstate what we did. At the same time that all of this was happening of course Ronald Reagan gets elected president, he looks at Central America, thinks that everything that's going on there is a failure of the Carter policy that was "soft," if you will.

Carter wasn't really all that soft, but he had a cockamamie policy. Oftentimes he put the cart before the horse and so the policy was not going well, for us or for Central Americans.

And so Ronald Reagan appoints Alexander Haig as Secretary of State. Alexander Haig comes in and makes Central America THE central pillar of his foreign policy focus.

So, as I said before, there is nobody around that had any experience, I'm the only guy left standing that had the facts on the ground. Haig, as his first course of action, wanted to have the State Department issue a white paper to show that there was communist meddling, deep meddling in our backyard and that it was only a matter of time, if we did nothing, before communists would be rolling up, taking over Mexico and then penetrate the southwest border of the United States.

The whole thinking was that this was inevitable, unless we did something fast and hard. I thought it was grossly exaggerated and at the time was kind of quiet about that, but did my work as an analyst and subsequently as a desk officer.

But they pulled me into writing this white paper on world-wide communist-supported aggression in our backyard. I pulled together all of the intelligence that we had over the last several years, all sources and I wrote what I thought was an honest reflection of what you could say was communist involvement with these movements and there was a lot, to include a cache of records, some written in Cyrillic that were Soviet documents, others in Amharic that came from Ethiopia, that reflected a worldwide communist movement intentions and the critical word is "intention," to help the Salvadoran guerillas, in this particular case with arms, training, expertise, some money, not much, and this cache of documents was found in a false wall of an art gallery in El Salvador that was owned by one of the leaders of the guerilla movement, the head of the Communist Party and now one of the leaders of the FMLN.

His brother had an art gallery, the police went in, they found all these records. They turned them over to us because Salvadoran intelligence had no ability to read Cyrillic, let alone Amharic and all the rest of it. They turned all these documents over to us. There were probably about 15 cardboard boxes of documents.

And I flew down, along with another Foreign Service Officer, John Glassman, who spoke Russian, to analyze the documents and to basically come up with this white paper. We were given a very short deadline.

Even with all of that and all of the information which came out of these documents, which was quite compelling, in terms of a worldwide communist movement trying to help their brothers in El Salvador, we wrote the white paper up and it wasn't strong enough for Haig.

He read it. He said, "The facts are good, but you don't draw the conclusions that I want about possible communist incursion into Harlingen, Texas, commies coming across the border." He really wanted this thing to have all that rhetoric and I refused. I refused to add to what I had already written.

They took me off the assignment, had others write it. They used the language that Haig wanted. It exaggerated, where there didn't need to be exaggeration to prove the point. It made the whole paper suspect.

And so what happened was the press, that was very leftist at the time and a lot of other groups in Washington picked apart the white paper. They were never really able to pick apart the facts that I put in, but they picked apart a lot of the conclusions, which were totally over the top and exaggerated, that Haig and his people had put in, to discredit the paper.

Years later, Torrijos the strong man in Panama at the time, told Vernon Walters, General Walters was a special envoy in the State Department at the time, that he thought that the factual part of the paper was well done, an excellent summary of what was going on.

I was responsible for that, but I couldn't be responsible for everything else that was put there. So the so-called white paper on Central America was discredited.

That opened my eyes to the fact that you overstate, whether it be for an audience in the State Department, or outside the State Department, somebody's going to find that out, somebody's going to call you on overstatement.

And that was another lesson that I learned which was totally invaluable.

Q: All right, well, you write this thing and you are told, "No, that won't fly," as far as Haig was concerned. Did you feel that this relegated you to the "softy" side of things, or were you discounted by the powers that be, or what?

ROMERO: There was a guy by the name of Wilcox who was a Senior Foreign Service Officer that was working in Haig's secretariat at the time who was my boss on this assignment.

My other bosses in INR basically let me alone to do this, as they did most everything else. They knew that I knew more about it and they didn't really help me with this, to be honest with you, so it was me, Glassman, Wilcox and Haig and he tried to get me to beef up certain things and I said, "The intelligence just doesn't support it."

He wanted me to say that there were designs in the captured documents to take over Mexico and penetrate our southwest border. That information wasn't there. You could say that it increased the possibility or a generalized threat that maybe eventually that would happen, but it wasn't there and I wouldn't do it. And when I wouldn't do it he offered me some phrases that Wilcox suggested that I use and I said, "The information doesn't support it."

And luckily he accepted that. And at that point, the deputy assistant secretary in INR, a great guy by the name of Stoddard said, "I can't do this." And because INR is respected for what it does and because INR is supposed to be the oasis of freedom from policy influence, people respected it and they backed off. I never suffered any kind of career penalty as a result of it.

Q: Then were you kept away from Central America after that?

ROMERO: No, I kept doing my reporting. The place was in flames, it was just terrible, what was going on, fighting everywhere and I kept doing my analysis and I kept getting good marks for it.

And then the new office director at the time who had replaced the Carter appointee for Central America in the ARA bureau, a guy name of Craig Johnstone, liked my work and he asked me if I wanted to come over and be the desk officer for El Salvador.

And I thought, "Man, this is a great opportunity. It's a hot desk, a lot happening. I know more about it than anybody and I think I could provide value added right away."

I said, "Yes."

So I never suffered any penalty as a result of refusing to do Haig's bidding on the white paper.

Q: Did you by any chance run across, early on, the operations of Ollie North?

ROMERO: That's exactly where I was going.

Q: So you were on the El Salvador desk from when to when?

ROMERO: That would have been in 1983.

Q: So what was the situation in El Salvador when you had responsibility for it?

ROMERO: Well, the country was being governed, again, by a triumvirate when I first got there. This was I believe two military officers and a Christian Democrat by the name of Duarte.

By that time the opposition had formed the FMLN, under Castro's tutelage and had basically gone to the hills and it was fighting a very, very vicious insurgency, based up in the mountains northwest of the cities bordering Honduras and they were leading a very nasty, protracted fight against the government of El Salvador.

Q: When you were in INR, what sort of things were you being tasked with?

ROMERO: Back in INR? The political side of what was going on, but mostly writing analysis of military counterinsurgency actions against the FMLN.

Q: I would think that you would run across a dichotomy or something, here you're a political officer

ROMERO: No, I was an admin officer.

Q: Okay, you're doing political analysis and then probably there must have been a counterpart, or counterparts, in the Pentagon and the CIA who were doing the same things and you must have been coming to quite different conclusions, weren't you, or not?

ROMERO: I wouldn't say that everything was different. Much of what they wrote and what we wrote was very similar at the time. Because Central America became worse and worse as a security threat, at least to them, they were adding on huge staffs of analysts and that sort of thing in all the other agencies. DOD set up an intelligence "fusion center" to develop and pass on actionable intelligence to the Salvadoran military. They had about 40 analysts.

Of course the State Department is like the U.S. Marines, they get castoff equipment and have to make do. At that point, as I was leaving INR, they added another analyst to help me out, Anne Patterson, who was most recently our ambassador in Pakistan.

It always elicited a smile on my face when I'd go to these other agencies and they had a million people doing what one or two of us would do at State, without the layering that you're talking about and getting a product out which routinely garnered lots of rave reviews and to this day I really do think that a small nucleus of people without layering do a whole lot better job than the large groups of analysts, where there's a lot of layering.

Q: I used to get this when I was in Vietnam. I was consul general and I used to go to different places and I'd get the military briefing and you'd realize how canned it was. I found out that they usually start out with a lieutenant writing it up and then a captain would work it over and it'd keep going up the totem pole and then be put in front of some colonels and all. The whole thing was heavily scripted and of course it represented, again, the layering problem, a very significant problem that is found in any corporate bureaucracy.

ROMERO: Absolutely, it wasn't particular to the State Department, intelligence community, or DOD.

Q: How did you see the situation when you took on the job and how did it evolve, or devolve?

ROMERO: The Salvador desk?

Q: Yeah.

ROMERO: Well, it was really about the toughest job that I've ever had. They should have had more officers on the desk. Along with all of the stuff that you had to do, coordinating visits and writing analyses, policy papers, just an incredible amount of writing, we had literally 20, 25 congressional letters that had to be answered every week and it was just excruciating. I was working about 14 hours, average, a day, six days a week.

I had just been married. It was a really stressful and tough job and when I left I was replaced by three desk officers.

Q: Okay, but what was happening during the time you were there?

ROMERO: We had thrown our lot in with this provisional leadership in El Salvador and with sitting governments in Honduras and Guatemala that were fighting insurgencies. We still had the problem in Nicaragua with the Sandinistas exporting their revolution. Costa Rica was neutral at the time and Panama was always of great concern, because of the canal.

To Haig this was pure communist aggression. In other words, "You can try to do this in our back yard, you can try to get us more focused on our southwest border as opposed to deployments to NATO," which is what the feeling was, in other words, they were trying to get us to focus defensively on our border, pull troops away from NATO, so the Soviets would be in a position to put more pressure on Europe.

Whether that was true or not, no one will ever know. I've never seen that policy formulation in writing, but that was kind of the hysterical nature of all of this.

And we threw our lot in with existing governments and the idea was to try to change them, to try to get them to become more democratic and respect civil liberties and human rights to have them evolve in that direction, at the same time they were fighting insurgencies.

Which, in the world today, as we see in Pakistan, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, it's a pretty damned hard to do, for them to change their stripes without a war, let along conducting a war at the same time, in the way that they think they need to conduct it, which is usually a lot more counterproductively brutal than necessary.

And so that's what was happening. There were lots of human rights abuses. American nuns were murdered, along with about 65 thousand Salvadorans killed and it was just terrible and basically I found myself on a desk where our chosen foreign counterparts were responsible for human rights abuses, but I also thought that since we were the biggest donors to the region and we were propping up these governments that we could do more in terms of leaning on them to do the right thing on civil liberties and human rights. I did feel that we were not leaning on them enough.

Q: For example, with the nuns, what happened?

ROMERO: What appears to be what happened was what played out in Central America and particularly El Salvador hundreds if not thousands of time and that is that an illiterate or semi-literate sergeant of the National Guard decided that these nuns just came from Nicaragua and that they were *agents provocateurs*, somehow, from his own cockamamie view of the world, limited view of the world and took these nuns out and killed them.

They had just arrived from the airport, they were on their way to meet up with Salvadoran nuns in the capital and this squad of National Guardsmen intercepted them, took them and decided, on their own that they were infiltrators and murdered them.

And this happened in Salvador all the time, not only with Americans, but with Salvadorans.

Q: What did we do about that?

ROMERO: Well, there were years and years where we saw a National Guard attempted cover-up of what happened, then they coughed up the guys who did it, the guys had a trial in El Salvador and went to jail. One of them, the sergeant in charge of the group, was given a maximum sentence. I think of 35 years or something like that. So there was some justice that was done.

But we had to lean on them the whole way. The first attempt was to try to show these nuns as *agents provocateurs* and when that didn't work, because they weren't, they were just American nuns trying to do their best, there was an attempted cover-up and then there was an acceptance that, yeah, these National Guardsmen did the deed and then there was an attempt by human rights groups in the United States, to try to show that there was a clear line of authority from Vides Casanova, who was the general in charge of the National Guard at the time, to this sergeant and that was never proven. Basically, as I said, it looked like these people just took matters into their own hands.

Q: What about the Ollie North connection, during the time you were there? Was it there?

ROMERO: Yes. I saw less than vigorous leaning on the Salvadoran military and the Guatemalan military, in particular, to clean up their act. There was some, but there wasn't anywhere near where it could have been and most of that was initiated by the State Department and not the White House.

And that kind of soured me, after about a year on the desk. And then it seemed to me that the White House never really took an interest in Central America or Central Americans.

They were all political appointees, including Ollie North and they were working on Central America because that's what a good Reagan soldier did back then, that was the issue and they were doing whatever it is needed to be done. It was the place to burnish your anti-communist credentials

But what occurred to me after I got involved in that white paper as an intelligence analyst and then later, on the Salvador desk, was that the administration at its highest levels didn't care about Central America in terms of Central Americans, they were using it to make a point about stopping communist aggression and all the details and all the other things that we worked diplomatically were just ignored.

There were opportunities that existed to try to end the conflict, but they weren't taken, simply because that wasn't in the interests of policy makers in the Reagan Administration.

Q: Would you call a lot of this posturing, showing we're tough?

ROMERO: Yes, absolutely, a lot of it was posturing and in fact the war went on longer than it had to because of posturing, in my view.

But, anyway, the fact that there was no real appreciation for trying to solve this, helping those in Central America that wanted to solve it, to include Arias in Costa Rica, who won a Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts later, in terms of engaging with any of the locals.

Even at an early stage of my professional career I saw that as a big void. We had our interests, they had their interests. Ours rarely touched their interests.

And that, coupled with the epitome of the policy, kind of an arrogance, in Ollie North, I decided that the best thing was to get out of the job. I had worked on Central America at that point for over three years, in a career that was only five years old, so this was a big chunk of my experience, but I decided that I had to leave it.

I didn't know anything about what would later become known as Iran-Contra, but I did know that Ollie North seemed to be driving a policy in an area in which he had almost zero expertise. He was a cowboy out there, doing what he wanted to do and seemed to be doing it simply as a form of self-aggrandizement. And unbelievable exaggeration about his role and what he was doing. It was just incredible.

And I just saw that the policy seemed to be more and more taken over by people who were using the situation for their own political or personal gain and I decided it was time to leave.

That, plus almost sheer exhaustion, after about 15 months. So I left and decided to take a break and became consul in our consulate in Naples, Italy.

Q: You mentioned the fact that you got married. What was the background of your wife?

ROMERO: I had met my wife about two years before I entered the Foreign Service and after I met her she decided to go to law school. We were both renovating a house on Capitol Hill at the time, brownstone, this being the mid-Seventies and a lot of money, relatively speaking, to be made buying and selling houses.

And we were on our first house and it was a humongous project, of which I was doing most of the work. She got accepted to Catholic University Law School, so she was working full time and attending law school full time at the time, so she couldn't help me with the house and I was doing most of that.

Then I went into the Foreign Service when we finished the renovation of that house and went overseas to the Dominican Republic. She stayed in Washington, finished law school and took the bar.

When I came back to Washington, she said, "I'm taking off, I'm going to New York, I've got a great job offer at a real prestigious law firm," Cadwalader, Wickersham and Taft, the oldest law firm in America, "and I'm going to take it, it's a great opportunity."

So she went to New York and we went our separate ways and then came together again in 1982 and then subsequently got married in '83.

Q: And then you're off to Naples. When did you go to Naples?

ROMERO: In '84.

Q: And you were there from '84 to

ROMERO: '87 in Naples and '87 to '88 in Rome.

Q: Today is November 9, 2011. Peter, you're off to Naples. What were you doing in Naples?

ROMERO: Well, my official job was to be the political/econ/commercial officer in the consulate and we had a consular district that covered from Molise south to the tip of the Boot. At the time we had a consulate in Sicily.

And it was a really interesting time. Our administrative officer, a good friend of mine, an A-100 classmate of mine, Pete Brown, volunteered to go to Lebanon and so I had to do the administrative work too, which I didn't mind.

It was a big portfolio, it was a good-sized consulate and we had a big area of Italy, and it gave me a lot of experience, with hands-on kind of work, with security upgrades and the like.

I guess the highlight was we were in between consuls general, I think this might have been the summer of '86, and we got a CODEL congressional delegation, one of these CODELs from hell, that was led by the majority leader in the House, then Jim Wright from Texas and we had 18 congressmen,.

Those trips were payoffs to people who did whatever the majority leader and the Speaker wanted at the time. Jim Wright was tapped to be the next Speaker, so this was really, if you got invited on this, it was really a big deal, both Democrats and Republicans were in the CODEL.

He brought a bipartisan group and it was great. They were there for an excruciatingly long period of time and it was right in the middle of the *Ferragosto* holidays. Congress takes its vacation in August and of course everybody else does too.

So it was really hard to find people at the NATO base, particularly Italians, that were in town and that wanted to see them. So we ended up taking them out to an island off the coast of Naples called Ischia and they spend four out of the five days on Ischia.

There's no limit to their demands and expectations, but as a relatively junior officer it was a great experience for me. I met Bill Richardson, who was a congressman at the time, Mickey Leland, who later died in a plane crash in Africa, Jim Wright, Senator Roth from Delaware, really good people and those relationships lasted throughout my career.

Q: Who had been the consul general?

ROMERO: A guy by the name of Walt Silva had been consul general and he had retired and the new consul general, a guy by the name of Lou Goelz hadn't yet arrived. Lou Goelz was famous for having been the consul general in Teheran during the evacuation and hostage taking.

He was a very senior consular officer and a lovely person, but notwithstanding my pleas to have him come early, a couple weeks early, so that he could help out with this massive CODEL, he decided not to. So it was all up to me and a rag tag skeleton group of consulate FSNs, who were pulled back from vacation.

Q: Walt Silva replaced me in Naples. I was consul general there. And Lou Goelz actually replaced me in Seoul.

ROMERO: Two very different people.

Q: First place, how had Naples recovered from the earthquake? I was there during the earthquake and it was quite something. What had happened by the time you arrived?

ROMERO: Well, what had happened was that because Italy had so many promoters and supporters in Congress we had an aid program that was in place, much of it for reconstruction of key, vital infrastructure, to include municipal buildings that had been destroyed.

But by the time I got there, that was winding down, because quite honestly the Italians had plenty of their own money to do that, but unfortunately the politics and corruption in southern Italy was such that all of our projects, and we had over a hundred of them, had been done before the Italians got their first project finished.

Because, as you know, in Italy, if you put up scaffolding and walk away, you get paid that whole time that you're not doing anything and so there was no impetus to get these

projects done and quite frankly they never got not one project done when we were completing over a hundred of ours.

Q: How stood the situation with the local organized crime syndicate, the Camorra, when you were there, because I understand it got worse than it was in my time, It was a messy situation.

ROMERO: It's gotten worse now. Essentially, the culture in southern Italy, particularly Naples, is such that if you want justice, you don't go to the authorities, you go to your local Camorra who can get you an enforcer and you can get justice that way, unfortunately.

The Italians in general, southern Italians in particular and even more particularly the Neapolitans have a very non-institutional view of justice, and they rely on Camorra enforcers and there was a case that's illustrative of all of this in *Il Mattino*, which is the big newspaper. A Camorra hit man went into one of the poor housing projects in Naples and asked by name for a 12-year old boy and when somebody pointed out that the kid was playing in the courtyard, he walked over to the kid and said, "Are you so and so?" and the kid says, "Yeah." The hit man takes out a gun and he shoots him in both knees.

And *Il Mattino* the next day was incredulous: ""How could the Camorra stoop to shooting a child?" Front page, banner headline: "They're stooping lower than ever before."

I tell you this story because it's illustrative of southern Italy and organized crime. From banner headlines, front page, the next day, nothing. Second day, nothing. Third day, a little article on the inside of the newspaper, on page 14.

And what had happened was, this little kid was on the back of a scooter snatching pursed from pedestrians. They were driving by and there was a pregnant woman and the kid tried to grab her handbag as they were driving by on the motor scooter and the woman was dragged along and she lost the baby.

So the husband and the family sought justice. They had no confidence in the *Carabinieri* or the police. So they went to a local camorra.

And that's essentially the psychosis, if you will, of southern Italy and that is that they abhor organized crime, but they find them expedient.

Q: How did you find the work of the consulate, the visas and all of that? Were there problems there?

ROMERO: Not more than you'd find elsewhere. You had the phony marriages, fraudulent documents and the like. You had more of an issue, even back then, with third country nationals, because at the time Italians really weren't immigrating to the United States, or even visiting the United States, the way they had previously.

Q: Really, it dried up in my time.

ROMERO: You had a lot of interviews with Filipinos and Somalis, third country nationals. But, generally the busiest part of the consular section was not visas, it was American Citizen Services and that had to do with lots of people who'd get their room robbed in the hotel or get their car stolen or their ID, their wallets, their bags because the Neapolitans always had an angle, they were always working some kind of crafty thing and there was always some scam, always a scam out there, from the young girl who's on her first trip alone to Europe and she's on a train and she meets this handsome, dashing Italian, Neapolitan kid and after he slips something in her drink robs her blind on the train. They had a scam going for a while where they would put something on the road in front of the port, all the cars going south had to go through the front of where the port was and it would give you a flat tire, but your tire wouldn't go flat for a couple miles and then when you got up on the elevated *autopista* going south your tire would be flat and then these really helpful people in jumpsuits would come up behind you and say, "Oh, look at you, you're so nicely dressed, don't get your hands dirty, let us change the tire for you" and so the guy changing the tire would distract the occupants of the car, they'd come around back, watch the tire being changed, meanwhile the other guy would go around the front, steal everything out of the car, put it into his car and they'd finish changing the tire, but they would always leave a couple of lug nuts loose so that the people had to tighten the lug nuts before they could get into the car and they had already made off with all of their money, travelers checks, cameras and bags.

And just the stuff that was reported to us (and only some of the Americans would report what had happened to them) we calculated that they made over $160,000 in the space of two months doing this one scam.

And there were multiple scams, there were scams going on everywhere and so Americans would always come to us destitute or without their IDs. That was a huge chunk of the work that we did.

Q: How stood things politically while you were there?

ROMERO: Well,

Q: When I was there, there was a Communist mayor, but I imagine there had been a change by the time you got there.

ROMERO: The Red Brigades had kidnapped one of the city councilmen in charge of public housing and he'd just been released just before I got there. And they kidnapped him because he refused to allow people who had lost their homes in the earthquake, he refused to allow them to live in what they called containers but were rudimentary mobile homes, he wouldn't allow them to use the central park right next to the consulate to situate these houses, they would have filled up the whole park with these containers and

he said, “The park is for the public. It’s really unfortunate what happened to these people, but they can’t take the little green space that we have in Naples.”

And so the Red Brigades were always looking for some popular cause, to show that they were with the people. They kidnapped him and his driver. They killed the driver and they held him for several months. They kneecapped him.

What affected my time more than anything else there was Middle East terrorism. They hijacked *Achille Lauro*. They detonated a bomb outside of the USO in Naples, didn’t kill any Americans, but, I think, over a dozen Italians were killed and three dozen more wounded.

We over flew Italy when we bombed Libya in 1986. So tensions in Europe generally and particularly in Naples were really right at the knife’s edge and it was a very tough time to be there.

Q: Were you getting good support from the embassy in Rome?

ROMERO: No, generally, the embassy did its own thing and we did ours in the consulates. There were eight consulates in Italy at the time, a huge consular presence there and after expecting to be tasked by the embassy as the political/econ/commercial officer and not really getting tasked by them to do things, I just developed my own agenda and it was fabulous.

I was on the road probably thirty per cent of the time, meeting with *carabinieri* and elected officials and justices who were prosecuting the ‘Ndrangheta, which is the Calabrian organized crime syndicate and the Camorra and getting to know these people in the way that most Americans, official Americans, never did.

In fact, there were a number of national-level politicians that I got to know better than people at the embassy, simply because on weekends, they only worked two days a week, the senators and congressmen were in their districts in southern Italy, to include Giulio Andreotti and I would always meet people who could say, “Oh, well, I’ll introduce you to so and so,” to where my reporting got to be competitive with that of the embassy, in terms of really sitting down with them in casual environments, not necessarily issue-focused and doing some valuable reporting.

The Embassy and State were really interested in organized crime reporting. It was really the precursor to criminal insurgencies that we face today and this was 25 years ago.

Q: There’s a book on the Camorra in Naples by an Italian reporter which talks about the horrors.

ROMERO: I’ll tell you a story that really impacted me. I had an FSN who was really good and he was tied in to all the elite families. He had great contacts, including a woman whose husband had been a doctor living in a little community near a steel mill.

That whole area around the steel mill and that whole area north of there was Camorra infested, because it was all heavily unionized and the unions there were heavily infiltrated by the Camorra.

And he told me this story and afterward arranged for me to meet with the woman. Her husband had been a kid growing up in this little town and when he was 17 or 18 years old a local thug who was also in competition for her favors kept riding the doctor and at some point he couldn't take it anymore and in a very public place in the middle of town they had it out and the doctor wins, he beats the thug up pretty badly.

The kid goes on to become a doctor and is beloved in the town, because he comes back and he treats everybody and if you don't have money it doesn't matter , one of these beloved, saintly local doctors.

And the other kid goes on to become the head of the Camorra in that town and at the age of about 50 the head of the Camorra has the doctor killed. Everybody knows why. There is no question about who did it.

And the widow of the doctor writes the thug a letter and in that letter she denounces him for what he did and then at the end of the letter she says, "But thank you for waiting this long, to allow him to see his children graduate from college, get married and have children."

Q: Now, one of the things that had already been established when I got there. I was only there 18 months, the problem of jobs. They would put a factory in to help the mezzogiorno *and then of course the local people who helped construct the factory said, "We want to work here." Almost everything revolved around jobs.*

ROMERO: Well, yes and no. The unemployment rate in the *mezzogiorno,* in the south of Italy, at the time that I was there, at least, was usually double compared to what it was everywhere else in the country, even in the central part of the country, but particularly northern Italy.

And the people who lived in southern Italy were always looking for work, but not necessarily to work. There was a very big difference between "work" and "a workplace."

Everybody was in search of "a workplace," but not really work, because if you got a job with the government or if you got a job with some of the big corporations there, like Fiat and Alfa Romero had big plants just outside of Naples, particularly if you were a union official or something like that, you really didn't work.

You might show up for work occasionally. They used to call them "ghost workers," because they would come in to work and they would put their coat on the back of their chair in the office and sometimes they would change their coat, but then you'd never see them, because they 'd leave and then they would either go home and do nothing or they

would go to their real job, where they really had to work and so they would double their salary.

And that was perfectly acceptable, the art of arranging your life in a way that's comfortable for you, regardless of whether it's wrong or right. And that was one of the big problems. There was a huge unemployment rate, but there were not a lot of middle aged or older people who were really, truly looking for work, they were looking for "a workplace."

Q: I know when I was there Naples had the highest production of gloves in the country, maybe in the world, yet there wasn't a single registered glove factory.

ROMERO: Well, you see, that's what they would do: they would get a job, mostly working for government, the government bureaucracy was totally bloated, so they would get a job working for government and they wouldn't make a lot of money, but they would make a decent salary and then they would leave and go to the glove factory or to the shirt factory or they would make Christmas figurines, where they would get paid piecework with no benefits, but they had benefits from their other job, so between the two they lived well.

Q: Well, you did this for how long?

ROMERO: I was in Italy for three years in Naples and Rome.

Q: Okay, first place, while you were in Naples, did you run into the, I don't know what they call it, but sort of the "Rome Cub" or something, Foreign Service Officers who spent an inordinate amount of time in Italy?

ROMERO: I did.

Q: In the short time I was there, I found that, we'd get a change in government, there was always a change in government

ROMERO: Always.

Q: Well, how did you find it up in Rome? What was the view from Rome?

ROMERO: Well, when I got to Rome, I was Ambassador Rabb's executive assistant and there was a whole other constellation of issues. Professional growth wise, it was also a tremendous experience, but it was very little outside work and all inside the embassy work.

There was a great deal of intrigue. The ambassador didn't talk to the DCM. Ambassador Rabb was an old Boston poll, Republican, who was a protégé of Henry Cabot Lodge Senior, to tell you how far back he went; he had been assistant secretary of the navy after

the war, been a naval officer during the war and he went back to Boston and then later New York and became a big political boss -- a mover and shaker in the Republican Party.

Cut to the Reagan run for the White House against Jimmy Carter and he organizes New York in such a way that Manhattan and New York goes to Ronald Reagan and they ask him what he wants after it's all over and he says, "Ambassador to Rome."

So he gets to be ambassador to Rome and he hires a guy, a career guy by the name of John Holmes who's a very soft-spoken , understated kind of quiet guy, 'cause he didn't want anybody to overshadow him and this was his first diplomatic posting, a lot of ambassadors do that.

But then, for some reason, they didn't hit it off or they had a falling out, I don't know, it preceded my being there, but then when I got there they didn't talk to each other. So I was the bridge between the ambassador and the DCM. I found myself in a position of working with the DCM and the ambassador to coordinate what we did. It was dysfunctional, but it was a great experience for me, to see how a big embassy runs and to be a part of that whole thing, it was just a fabulous experience.

Q: Were there any particular issues while you were there?

ROMERO: Yes, there were. By the time I got there, terrorism had tapered off, by and large, still an issue, but it had tapered off and most of the issues that we were dealing with the Italians at the time were trade issues, everything from California wine to Parma ham.

There was an appetite for Italian products that was just taking off in the United States, everything from espresso coffee to Gucci handbags to everything else and there were huge trade barriers at the time on both sides.

And then there were a whole constellation of issues related to organized crime and law enforcement and drug trafficking and that was fascinating, I loved it all.

The station, they only devoted a very small portion of what they did in Rome at the time to Italian politics. Practically everything that they did was mostly related to the Middle East, because everybody would come through Rome and there were just incredible amounts of listening and reporting on Middle East issues out of Rome, but that was fascinating, too. It was just a great opportunity for me, I guess I was an FS-2, to be a part of embassy decision making in key issues.

Q: You mentioned the dysfunction between Rabb and Holmes, but were there a lot of embassy politics at the time?

ROMERO: I wouldn't say any more than normal. That schism between the number one and the number two, obviously your question is right, in that that would spawn lots of internecine, behind the back kind of stuff going on.

But Rabb was a big picture guy, so notwithstanding the fact that for whatever reason the two personalities didn't mesh and they didn't talk to each other, Holmes ran the embassy and Rabb worked outside. He would go to the *Biennale* in Venice and spend a week out there with all the stars, Sophia Loren would come into the office, Brigitte Bardot would come into the office, he had Michael Jackson stay at the Villa Taverna, two unlikely human beings to be in the same room, Max Rabb and Michael Jackson,.

But he liked to do all the outside contact work, so in effect they weren't stepping over each other on the substance, they worked pretty well and Holmes was an old hand.

Q: His father had been an ambassador.

ROMERO: John Holmes' dad?

Q: Yeah. One of the problems that sometimes happens in Italy is that sort of the nobility, or whatever passes for nobility gathers around and can almost capture the ambassador. Did Rabb fall for that, or did he keep a distance?

ROMERO: He was a pretty savvy guy. He surrounded himself with those kind of people and all the big designers from Milan who kept yachts and had villas in southern Italy, they'd work in Milan, he'd come down and spend a weekend with them and he always was very sure to reciprocate.

Luckily, he was a fairly wealthy guy, had made a good living as a lawyer and so he would stay at Valentino's villa and on Valentino's yacht for a weekend and then the next time he'd come down he'd buy him an expensive gift, out of his own pocket.

So he picked and chose. The thing about it is, he wasn't one of these people who all of a sudden have the headlights on them and they're the ambassador and they have no bearings at all.

He was in his seventies at the time and he'd been around long enough to determine who was taking advantage or not. So he wasn't a babe in the woods.

The Fourth of July party at the Villa Taverna was like a who's who in the entertainment world, it was just phenomenal, some beautiful models and actresses and the biggest names in Italian politics, to be there for that, to talk to all these people, was just a unique experience.

Q: Were the Agnellis

ROMERO: Yes, he knew Gianni pretty well, but he was closer to Gianni's sister, who, at the time, just as I left, had been named foreign minister, Susanna Agnelli had been named foreign minister and he was very close to her.

With Max, I learned the value of the schmooze. I was more content driven and Max taught me how to schmooze people, he was a master at it.

Anthony Quinn would come and stay with him. Leahy, Senator Leahy, whose mom is Italian, would stay with him for days, sometimes weeks on ends. He would reach across the aisle. Democrats, Republicans, everybody loved Max Rabb.

In fact, Max, when he left, he called me up when he was leaving Rome after, I think he stayed a year or two into the George H.W. Bush Administration, so he was there for almost ten years, when he left he called me up and he said that he wanted me to come to New York and with my Hispanic surname, my Puerto Rican background, that he could make me into a serious Republican office holder, run for Congress, run for Senate, that he would mentor and sponsor me, 'cause he said that I had the prerequisite skills.

I didn't take him up on it, I was too wedded to what I was doing and the Foreign Service.

Q: The Foreign Service is a trap. I can't tell you how many people I've know over the years, I'm sure you have, who say, "Well, I'll try it out for a year or two

ROMERO: And then they never, I started out saying, "Well, I'll try it out for a couple of years" and I've never looked back, I just loved it. It's a trap, but it's generally a challenging and satisfying trap.

Q: It's a comfortable trap and it's also fun. It's not a place for dullards.

ROMERO: No, you've got to be sharp and your job changes every couple of years, move on to the next thing. For me, it was like being in a candy store with your weekly allowance! I loved it.

Q: Okay, in this candy store, after you left Rome, where'd you go?

ROMERO: Actually, I was offered a job as the Italian desk officer in EUR and I was scheduled to be paneled for that and then a guy by the name of Elliott Abrams came through Rome and I asked the ambassador if I could be his control officer, because I'd known him before I left Washington.

I was involved in Central America and at the time he was the Assistant Secretary in the Human Rights bureau, but he was still very involved in Central America and then when I left for Italy they brought him over to become the Assistant Secretary in what was then called ARA, the Latin American bureau.

And he was having his biannual meeting with his Soviet counterpart. At the time, the Soviet Union was on the verge of collapse, '87, I guess, or '88, but we were still meeting with the Soviets at the assistant secretary level on regional issues throughout the whole world, coordinating our policies where we could.

I took him around, stayed with him in the meetings, took notes, and I had a great time with him and he said, "Look, I really want you to come back into the bureau, regardless of what happens."

At the time, you had all this Iran-Contra public revelations and hearings and terrible scandals and Bud MacFarlane, who was the national security advisor at the time, tried to commit suicide. It was ugly.

But he said, "Whoever wins, whether it be George H.W. Bush or Dukakis, they have to address Central America and need people who really know the region back there and you know it better than anybody."

And he got my juices flowing and I took that job over the Italy desk and the people in EUR thought I was crazy for passing up the Italy Desk. I chose the Deputy Director job in the Office of Central American Affairs in ARA. They questioned my judgment afterwards, I'm sure.

But what happened after that was incredibly fortuitous, because I got back and I was deputy director of the office

Q: This was when?

ROMERO: This was 1988. My boss, the director was a guy by the name of Joe Sullivan and he had been working almost exclusively on demobilizing the Contras.

We had created the Contras in Nicaragua as a force against the Sandinistas and Secretary Baker had given orders to demobilize them, particularly after the elections and after Violeta Chamorro, a non-Sandinista, had won the Nicaraguan election, she had been elected president.

And so there was no real need or even desire to have a counter-government force, the Contras, working against the democratically elected non-Sandinista government, so we had to demobilize them and Joe pretty much worked on all of that, it was complicated, as you can imagine.

And they brought in Harry Shlaudeman as a special envoy to help with that whole process, because they were in Costa Rica, they were in Nicaragua, they were in Honduras, they were spread all around, different groupings of Contras.

One of the last things that Elliott Abrams did before he left was to come to me and he said, "Look, I want you to write a paper, which should be a blueprint for achieving peace in Central America. The Vice President's office has asked for this. It is to be very 'close hold'." This was a month before Bush was inaugurated as President.

And he said, “Look, keep this very quiet, don’t show this to anybody except for Joe and I’ll look at it, but I want you to write what you think is the way to go, in terms of achieving peace.” At the time, Central America was in flames.

And I wrote a seven page paper, didn’t show it to anybody but Joe and then later Abrams saw it and he passed it on to the vice president’s office. I never got any feedback on it, other than to say that it was helpful.

But they followed that paper scrupulously, in terms of moving these countries towards peace and embracing the Esquipulas process and all the things that we did and it was an input, one of those things where fortuitously they come to you and they ask you what your opinion is, you write it down and they follow it. And I was still, at the time an FS-2, so I was still a pretty junior guy.

Q: It does show, when things get complicated, if you know what you’re talking about, and somebody asks you, you can have a real influence on what’s happening, particularly if other people don’t know what to do.

ROMERO: And that was the problem. You had a lot of people who cycled in and cycled out and never really gained any expertise. And then you had a lot of other people who cycled in but had a political agenda and couldn’t be trusted to give you honest, objective advice. So it wasn’t that I was the best of the best and rose to the top, as much as the other people just disqualified themselves.

Q: I think when a situation moves up the political agenda and gets a lot of attention, often the experts get pushed to one side and the operators take over. They often don’t know what the hell they’re doing, but they want something that has their input, so they can say, “I did that” and often, as you were saying, it disqualifies them.

ROMERO: Well, I was young enough not to have a big ego. I just thought, gosh, if they follow some thread or semblance of what I said, I’m a happy camper. And so that’s probably one of the reasons why it worked. And people trusted my judgment, even though I wasn’t even forty yet.

Q: It is a process that does go on. Somebody who comes with knowledge and is not there trying to throw their weight around, say “Look at me!”

What were sort of your major recommendations?

ROMERO: I’ve always been a big advocate of creating stakeholders, not trying to impose your vision but building consensus around a shared vision.

Q: Stakeholders, people who are directly involved

ROMERO: Directly involved, the Central Americans, in this case, Central American leaders. We refused to accept the recommendations and the entreaties of Oscar Arias,

who later won the Nobel Peace Prize. He had gotten Central Americans involved in something called the Esquipulas Process.

We didn't like it, probably more than anything else because it wasn't ours. I advocated to not only embrace it, but to try to tailor it in a way that looks like what we'd like to see happen .

One of the things that was a redline for us was power sharing by guerilla groups or armed opponents of regimes. We felt that if you allow power sharing without requiring elections that that would create a precedent and that if guerilla groups, narco groups, whatever they might be, insurgencies, believed that they could become enough of a menace through blowing things up and shooting their was into political power that would work at counter purposes with what it is you're trying to do, in terms of strengthening democracy.

So that was a redline for us, no power sharing. Take part in the elections, form a political party, yes. But we're not going to allow other governments in the region to share power with guerilla groups.

And at the time, most of those groups had been aligned with the Soviet Union and the fact that the Soviet Union had collapsed, or was collapsing helped us, because these same groups looked around and said, "The people who have been supporting us, with Cuba, are not going to be there any longer. We have to create other dynamics here."

And it just was a confluence of really good things and we were able to get our government to become a whole lot more flexible, largely because the issue of Central America had been so divisive over the years, between the Executive Branch, Reagan and then George H.W. Bush and even before them, Jimmy Carter, it was just bloody and nasty with all kinds of scandals, Iran-Contra and when Bush was elevated from vice president to president, he'd been on the periphery of all of this, including meeting with Contras in Honduras and had seen some of his closest collaborators, like Bud MacFarlane and others, pay a price for all of this, he wanted it done, he wanted it solved.

So you take that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, it created an environment for a Central American peace process that we could hang our hat on and embrace, with lots of details to be worked out but still it was enough of a basis to move ahead and things worked out.

Q; Was it palpable that the Cubans were no longer a principal player?

ROMERO: That was helpful. They could no longer do what they had been doing before. But most of the support the Soviet Union gave was arms and logistics again, through Cuba, through Nicaragua, into El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala.

The Cubans were mostly advisors. Some Cubans were actually on the ground in Central America, but most of them were advisors and trainers in Nicaragua and so they could have continued doing that, but I think that most of these groups felt that without the deep

pocket benefactor, the Soviet Union, behind them and all its satellites that it was going to be hard.

Plus, to be honest, there had been enough reform in these governments that I think they felt comfortable with taking that step. Certainly in Honduras and El Salvador and then later, years later, in Guatemala they decided there was enough political space there to take the step.

So there were a lot of things that needed to be worked out, but they did come together.

Q: I would think there would be some either people or factions or something who had committed such horrible atrocities or something that they were untouchable and that could have caused problems.

ROMERO: Well, it's interesting, because each one of these countries dealt with the issue of abuses and atrocities in a different way.

In El Salvador, which I had the most experience with, they had a Truth Commission and basically everybody got immunity from prosecution across the board, that was part of the deal. And there was a lot of criticism from the international human rights community and international jurists, this was before the creation of the International Criminal Court in the Hague, of course, for accountability, "What about this general, what about that guerilla leader, we want accountability".

But the Salvadorans really, quite frankly, believed that you couldn't get peace and justice simultaneously, you had try to get peace, you had to get some semblance of justice and then, twenty years down the road, maybe they would take up the issue again, the way they did in Chile and Argentina and elsewhere, but the important thing was to achieve peace.

I believe in that. I still to this day believe that it's most important to achieve peace and when you have an abusive dictator like Gaddafi, who the International Criminal Court says "We're going to haul you in to court and try you," that only prolongs the conflict and the killing It only makes them dig in their heels, because they've got nowhere else to go.

Q: Yeah, well, this is the concern, as we talk today, about what's happening in Syria. Where the hell is Assad going to go?

ROMERO: I'll give you an example. When I was Chargé in El Salvador, this was right after, I was elevated from deputy office director to office director for the last year that I was in Washington and then they asked me to go and be DCM in San Salvador.

That led to a lot of talking with my wife, because she'd seen me working on Central America and to her Central America was associated with "I never see my husband."

So I had to convince her to go and I went and I was supposed to be DCM, but the ambassador never showed up. This was between the Bush 41 and Clinton Administrations, kind of right at the cusp of both.

And so I was there for about 15 months without an ambassador and I saw how all of this, the issue of peace or justice, how that plays out in a practical way, because the guerillas were demobilizing completed, the army was demobilizing about half of its forces and then there were probably twenty or thirty other projects, all the way from creating a new national police force to recreating a judiciary that took oral arguments and *habeas corpus* and to reforming regulatory regimes.

It was just a huge mass of reforms that the government had pledged itself to. And there were two incidents in particular in this context of reform and demobilization and all of this:

It was the last week before the guerillas had to demobilize completely, they demobilized in stages and of course they kept their best guns and their best fighters for the last iteration of demobilization.

And we were called by a contact who had been the deputy head of one of the largest guerilla fighting factions. The FMLN was the umbrella group, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front and then you had five factions of fighters underneath that umbrella.

And the largest one was a group called the ERP, the *Ejército Revolucinario del Pueblo* and these were some hard-fighting guys and they were supposed to have demobilized their last units which were their crack units and they were going to have Boutros Ghali, because this was a UN-sponsored event, the critical stage of the peace process

Q: He was the head of the UN.

ROMERO: Who was head of the UN at the time, the Secretary General, he was coming down to bless the demobilization of the guerillas and the demobilization of the quick reaction battalions in the army.

And I talked to my subordinate who had close contacts with the deputy of this particular ERP faction, because he had warned Phil, my colleague, that the mid-level commanders weren't demobilizing, they didn't see anything in it for them, the expected to have benefits, etc, etc, they weren't demobilizing.

So after two or three days, we didn't hear anything further from him, I said, "Okay, get on the phone and tell him that he needs to give us kind of a daily report," because this is the last armed opposition faction left.

And he didn't call back the next day. So I said, "Phil, I don't care what you have to do," this was before cell phones, "call him, but get him." This was the last faction. Boutros Ghali is expected in literally a matter of hours. He could not reach him. Finally he did.

So I said to Phil, "Well, what did he tell you?"

And he said, "He told me that the mid-level commanders," these are guys in charge of a hundred, two hundred, up to five hundred fighters, they were all meeting on the slopes of the San Salvador volcano at a Catholic orphanage on the fringe of the capital of San Salvador.

And I said, "Find out where it is."

And he said, "Why?"

And I said, "Because we're going."

He said, "You can't just show up to a meeting with these guys. These guys will kill you."

I said, "No, they won't kill us. They'll be surprised, but I have to talk to them, because their superiors have obviously lost control of them, they're the last ones and talking to us might make a difference."

So without any instructions, I did it. To this day, Phil thinks that I was foolhardy for doing it, putting myself in harms way.

We had six hours of meetings with these guys. I brought Phil along with me and the head of my aid mission and, again, the first hour was "What are you guys doing in Iraq?" we had pushed the Iraqis out of Kuwait and they considered this an imperialist act. All of the "imperialist" acts of the last forty years I had to answer for.

And then the discussion got on to what they cared about and that is that they had been sold a bill of goods, that they felt that they would be left destitute, that they had fought hard for all of these reforms that were being enacted and that they should have something to show for it, other than basically dropping their guns and going home.

And we had put lots of benefits out there to assist the Salvadorian government. You could go back and complete high school, you could go to college, you would be free to participate in the political process, land to the tiller, you could get a small parcel of land, you could get vocational training. We had all kinds of stuff in place for both sides, for both the demobilized military and demobilized guerillas.

But they expected a cash payment and I had to tell them, "You're not getting a cash payment, but there's lots of things out there that would be really good" and I started going through it and I had my aid director talk them through all the programs.

Because we were the major funders. We had, at the time it seemed an outrageous amount of money but we had about $300 million a year, for a country of five million people, so we could do a great deal to assist with demobilization and reform.

And we walked through all of this and then this little commander, I remember so distinctly, in the back of the room raised his hand and he said, "I always dreamed of having my own auto parts store. You think I could get a visa to go to the United States and buy auto parts for my store?"

I said, "Absolutely" and after that the whole conversation turned to "Maybe I'll go back to college," "Maybe I'll start my own business," "Maybe I'll start that little grocery store that I always wanted."

And the whole thing changed, they demobilized, Boutros Ghali came, Vice President Quayle came down, the whole thing was a resounding success .

Q: You had a little conversation with the head of the consular section, didn't you?

ROMERO: See, back at the time, unless you could prove that somehow they killed an American citizen or were part of a conspiracy to kill an American citizen, whatever, you had a lot more flexibility back then.

Now and this is where I take issue, an organization gets put on the terrorism list, there is absolutely nothing that you can do to get yourself off. You can become the next Mother Teresa and that won't help, you're barred from the United States. Now we've lost all that flexibility with these terrorist list that we maintain.

This guy was no threat to the United States.

Q: I think for all of us who've been involved in government and all, concern about over-legislating security concerns, because what you do is you're boxing yourself into a corner and the people you're trying to deal with.

ROMERO: In fact, the guy who headed up this ERP faction was a guy by the name of Joaquín Villalobos. He tried his hand in politics in El Salvador afterwards. He helped establish a political party.

We paid for instruction of Political Party Organization 101 by Harvard dons to the FMLN *commandantes* and, oh, by the way, an FMLN president is sitting in the presidential palace right now in El Salvador.

Back to Villalobos, he tried his hand at politics. It wasn't for him. He somehow gets a scholarship to study at Oxford, studies English, gets a PhD and gets a teaching job at Oxford.

So now, in 2011, 19 years later, he's been teaching and writing and become a go-to expert on guerilla warfare in Latin America. Governments like Mexico hire him, the Colombian government hires him and he still has trouble getting a visa, he can't get a visa unless he applies for each single entry, they give him a one entry, usually just to transit the United States and the last time he was going to El Salvador he transited the United States and his 14 year old son was put in secondary in U.S. immigration for almost a day.

We tried, all of the senior State Department people in Latin American affairs from that era, speaking on his behalf, saying, "You can't get a more upstanding citizen." There was never anything that tied him to injury, let alone the killing of an American citizen. He happened to be the head of a guerilla group, they had lots of legitimate grievances and now he's a saint.

You still can't turn it around, because of the legislation. We all went to an interagency meeting put together by Assistant Secretary Valenzuela, with the lawyers from Justice and you can't turn it around and that is one of the problems.

It might feel good to put a group on the terrorist list, or the human traffickers list, or the human rights abusers list or whatever, but what happens with that is you lose flexibility in dealing with these people. And even when they turn out to be good people and have a twenty year track record of doing it, you still can't turn it around.

Q: It's a serious problem and in a way it's gotten worse.

What about the young people who were involved in this elite group, how did they adjust?

ROMERO: The elite group of guerillas?

Q: Guerillas, yeah.

ROMERO: It's interesting, the rank and file basically went back to farming or went to school or took advantage of micro-credits, you know Catholic Relief Services and other do village banking, it was a great program and some probably took advantage of small credits to start their own little businesses and then some probably snuck into the United States.

The leadership, it's interesting, those capable of transferring their leadership skills to civilian organizations and bringing people together by consensus and that sort of thing did well politically.

Those that had a hard time doing that, who were guerilla commanders, "I give the order, you do it!" had a very difficult time in the transition and interestingly many of the women who formed part of the militias where the militias had to work together to supply the troops and get food for the community in guerilla held areas had to work together to get

things done, they tended to very well at the local level, particularly becoming elected officials at the village and town level because they had this collaborative bent.

Q: And that organizational skill carried over very well into

ROMERO: Notwithstanding the fact that we had an incredible menu of benefits that people could take advantage of, we even had aptitude tests that we gave semiliterate kids to tell them what it was that they could do and that was really important, because in the midst of the fear "If I drop my weapon I'm going to be killed, particularly if I go back to my home town," this was somewhat mitigated by giving them basic aptitude tests and seeing whether they could be a tailor, a butcher, an electrician, a bricklayer, a carpenter, whatever and for the first time in their lives they were thinking, "I could do that. I don't have to carry a gun."

And the process of just doing that had a profound effect on them and then of course we did vocational training inside the guerilla controlled zones before they demobilized.

Q: Well I would think there would still be the problem of getting Juan to go back to his village

ROMERO: Once they'd seen Gay Paree, huh? Yeah, you had a lot of them who went to the cities, didn't go back. In fact, the program that we had set up where if you were a young army soldier or a young guerilla you got land, I would say, somebody told me after I left that within there years after we'd given them land and had all these ceremonies giving them titles, about fifty per cent left and went to the cities, or immigrated to the United States, they didn't stay on the land. They had been part of history, they weren't going back to live this quiet life in the middle of the boonies.

Q: Well, fair enough. At least the process worked.

ROMERO: Yeah, it did work. You always lose some who prefer to carry weapons and become criminals. I think probably about three or four per cent became armed criminals, were irredeemable, they couldn't do anything else.

Q: Well, in a way, Central America had a place for these people.

ROMERO: Yeah and I think probably a lot of these kids, the guerillas would start them off with a gun at 14 and 15. The army, you were supposed to be 16, but they would round up kids who were probably 12 to 13. So by the time the war ends, you take a 16 year old who's been carrying a gun for three or four years, you're going to lose some of them and I think probably some of them became the early founders of Salvadoran gangs in the United States and in El Salvador that have now mushroomed out to Guatemala and Honduras.

The *Salvatrucha*, the MS-13 that you hear about in the States, particularly in LA and in the Washington area, the Virginia suburbs were probably started by very young kids who were demobilized during that time.

Q: What role did the church, the Catholic Church, play in this?

ROMERO: That's a very interesting question. You had of course Archbishop Romero, who had been assassinated by a right wing death squad. I wouldn't say he was radical in any way. He was left of center, but he was a martyr, basically humble people considered him a martyr.

The person who arranged for his assassination, a guy by the name of Roberto D'Aubuisson, subsequently died of mouth cancer and is off the scene and a lot of his apparatus kind of came apart, so the truth came out about who did it.

And then you had very conservative bishops who were fighting liberation theology at the time. Liberation theology was really started by the Jesuits and then promoted by Jesuits, Maryknolls and other, radicals in the Church, but by that time it had really taken a huge toll in a lot of these countries, particularly in Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala and there was a backlash in the Church against liberation theology.

But that having been said, towards the end of the war, and this would have been 1990, a group of Salvadoran soldiers took out the rector and five other Jesuit professors at University of Central America in San Salvador and executed them. They feared that the real brains of the FMLN were the Jesuits, somehow they worked themselves up into a frenzy over this notion and they killed these people. And still to this day that haunts a lot of events in El Salvador.

So the church's role was complex.

Q: Did you have problems with Americans in implementing this policy, because this was really, it was quite new ground, wasn't it, for us, to try to bring peace and get people back to the plow?

ROMERO: Was it hard for us?

Q: Yeah.

ROMERO: There really wasn't much of a template there for people involved in this issue, there wasn't a lot of applicable experience from elsewhere that could be brought to bear. But for me, I just found it totally fascinating that we were breaking new ground.

Q: How stood things when you left that job?

ROMERO: Well, I left about 15 months later. The assistant secretary at the time was a holdover from the George H.W. Bush Administration, he was the highest ranking

Democrat in the Bush Administration, a guy by the name of Bernie Aronson and he put me up to become ambassador in El Salvador and when he took informal soundings in the Senate he got push back.

He got opposition from Chris Dodd, who I later became friends with, but at the time Chris was really liberal and held up lots of nominations over Central American issues. The thing that got them was that I had already been chargé there, it would be awkward to name me ambassador, in other words why didn't you give me the ambassadorial title to begin with? It was awkward.

And so they offered me Ecuador and I said, "I've heard interesting things about Ecuador."

And they said, "Oh, you'll love it there. You'll have a chance to chill out. You've been in the cauldron, so to speak, both as an office director and then now as chargé, you'll be able to chill out."

So I accepted it, it's an ambassadorship, I think I was 41 at the time, that's pretty damned young. So I said, "Yeah, great." So I took it and within three months of getting there war breaks out between Ecuador and Peru. The United States, along with other "friends" played a very big role there in achieving peace.

Q: Well, you were in Ecuador from when to when?

ROMERO: From '93 to '96.

Q: I've interviewed a former ambassador or DCM in Ecuador who talked about

ROMERO: Not Les Alexander, was it?

Q: Yeah.

ROMERO: Yeah, he followed me.

Q: He was saying that the Ecuadorians really had prepared for an aerial battle, in which they acquitted themselves very well, but that anybody looking at this could see that Peru had the superior resources and Ecuador just didn't.

ROMERO: Well, it was complicated. Brazil, the United States, Chile and Argentina were the four "Friends of the Protocol of Rio" establishing where the border should be.

Q: This is the 1940s.

ROMERO: Yeah, '41. Peru had invaded this whole area of the Amazon that Ecuador claimed, right on the cusp of Pearl Harbor and the Ecuadorians were our allies, but Peru

was not allied with but inclining towards the Axis powers, as Argentina did, as Uruguay did.

And they sent a delegation from the foreign ministry to the United States and they speak with Cordell Hull, who at the time was Secretary of State, and they say to Hull, "Peru just invaded and took a third of our territory. We're your friends. They're not. Help us!"

And Cordell Hull said, "I'm sorry to say, but you're on your own. We just had something happen called Pearl Harbor and we've got serious issues in the Pacific and we're also fighting in Europe, can't help you."

And so the Ecuadorians threw their hands up and Peru basically took all this land. Now, on Peru's side of the issue, they felt that this land was never, ever really solidly claimed by either country, so they just moved in and when I say invaded, maybe they had 1200 troops for this humongous area of the Amazon, but the Ecuadorians had nobody there.

See, the problem in Latin America is that a lot of these countries were formed from the Spanish crown. The Spanish monarch appointed viceroys or governors or whatever it was who were given a certain territory to administer. If you did well, they would expand your jurisdiction. If you did poorly, they would shrink it.

So at the end of the colonial period these borders had whipsawed all over the place and so nobody really knew where the borders were. And so that gave rise to 150 years of fighting to figure out where the border was and this was no different.

What made matters worse was that this piece of land that was under dispute between the two countries had never been mapped, we had promised as one of the four Friends to do an aerial reconnaissance and photography of the border, but because this area had always been covered under clouds, we could never get a picture of it.

And so neither country had a good picture of what was going in this stretch called the Cordillera del Condor, the mountain range of the condor and we had lost two planes and a helicopter trying to map that area, U.S. military aircraft, because you had a permanent cloud cover and mountain peaks that went up 5000 feet and so planes were lost all the time, so we gave up.

We tried to do it with satellite photography, but we could never find a time when there wasn't cloud cover. So basically they went to war in this little unmapped pocket.

To answer your question, had the war spilled out into the plains closer to the Pacific coast, basically Ecuador would have disappeared, Peru had much more armor, their air power was so-so, but they had much more in the way of naval forces and armor, they could have cleaned Ecuador's clock.

But nobody wanted that, because they knew that there would be horrific losses on both sides. The militaries didn't want to fight that war, either.

So it was confined to this little remote area in the Amazon that was triple canopy jungle, five to six to seven thousand feet up, temperatures ranging from and soaking humidity down at the Amazon basin. 28 degrees to 110 degrees.

It was formidable and the Ecuadorians got there first, they riddled the whole area with mines to defend themselves, they were closer to supply lines than the Peruvians were. The Peruvian soldiers had to schlep through the jungle, over a hundred miles through the jungle, carrying packs of food and ammunition. The Ecuadorians could drive within twenty miles of the conflict area.

The Peruvians would get air drops, but, again, the cloud cover was really tough. And by the time the Peruvian troops had schlepped all of this equipment and food, stepped on land mines along the way, the Ecuadorians just basically picked them off, it was bad. There were five Peruvian casualties for every one Ecuadorian and it was a nasty fight.

But it's really interesting how it all played out at the end.

I don't know if I have enough time to talk about that.

Q: Well, you want to talk about it next time?

ROMERO: Yeah.

Q: Okay, well, why don't we stop at this point and we'll pick this up in 19

ROMERO: This would be 1993.

Q: 1993 and we'll pick this up when you're ambassador to Ecuador and you've talked about the problem of the area over which Peru and Ecuador are fighting

ROMERO: Yeah.

Q: What had happened.

ROMERO: Yeah and what comes out of it is a lesson for everybody, it was really magnificently done by courageous leaders who seized the day and negotiated a deal that was a win-win.

Every Ecuadorian schoolchild learned, from the moment that they knew how to read, was that "Peru stole your land." And now it's not the case, it's like it never existed. It's amazing.

Q: Today is December 6, 2011. Peter, in 1009 you have Peru and Ecuador fighting over a little bit of jungle and you were saying the resolution serves as a good example about how these things should be done.

ROMERO: Right, well, just to recapitulate, Peru and Ecuador went to war in '93, largely because they had an unmarked border between the two countries that had been there for a long, long time and as I had mentioned earlier, the Peruvians moved into what they considered to be their territory and what the Ecuadorians believed was theirs, in the eastern part of the country, in the Amazon, just prior to the outbreak of World War Two.

The United States, as one of guarantors, or the "Friends" of the Rio Protocol, which set forth the recognized international boundary line, if you will, basically said that we would do everything that we could to map the area, so that you would know where all of the lines were and because of near constant cloud cover over the rain forest in that area we weren't able to finish the mapping and in fact the United States lost two planes and a helicopter, by the way, none of them were ever found, nor were their crews, that's how remote this area is and it was never completely mapped.

It was the Condor Mountains, were the site of the conflict, the last iteration of this conflict. Both countries had basically educated their populace, all the way from elementary school, that the disputed areas were theirs.

If you look at a grade school map of Ecuador, it's probably about forty per cent larger than the reality of Ecuador is today. Same thing with Peru.

And so there was a lot of built up nationalism about this issue and who owned what and in fact not so much Peru's, but Ecuador's national security doctrine was always geared towards Peru as the biggest enemy, because of this conflict. Troops stationed at the border.

And what happened was, I had been there for about maybe two months and the Ecuadorian Army had control of that area and there were no real land owners there, it was all indigenous peoples that never recognized the border, they would cross into Peru, Peruvians would cross into Ecuador, there was never a border there in the thousands and thousands of years of their indigenous tradition, nor did they ever recognize one. So they would hunt and gather and move across the border very freely, without recognizing whether they were in Ecuador or in Peru.

So the army had a business holding company, the Ecuadorian Army and they contracted out to a Canadian prospecting firm to look into that area to see what minerals were there and the prospecting firm came back and said that there were billions and billions of dollars in reserves of gold, silver and platinum.

The problem was that for whatever reason the summary of that study was made public in Ecuador and as soon as it was made public it aroused Peruvian interest, obviously and when that happened Peru and Ecuador starred moving troops into that area.

The deal that had worked for years and years, decades, if you will, is that notwithstanding the fact that Peru and Ecuador didn't really know where the border was in that remote

area, that the commanders of the closest military brigades would talk to one another: if they were sending a patrol out, they would alert the other side and *vice versa* and things kind of worked okay.

In fact, they had had soccer games, where the troops would slog through the jungle and they would have these soccer games between Peru and Ecuador, their soldiers. So things were okay.

What happened was a couple of things: one, the new commander that was sent from the capital in Lima was a general who had been disgraced in the Upper Huallaga Valley and who had fallen out of favor with the then president, Alberto Fujimori, in Peru and as punishment, if you will, he was sent to head up this very remote brigade.

And when his Ecuadorian counterpart called him and said that they were sending a patrol into that area, the Peruvian general said, "I don't know what you're talking about, about any deal here or any alerts or anything like that. Don't do it, because if you do, you're violating Peruvian national territory."

I think part of it was, anybody who would have been in the Peruvian military, in that headquarters, would know that there was a deal, because that was their whole reason for being there.

But because he had been disgraced and perhaps he wanted to win back favor, he started to inflame the situation and skirmishes began between the two, both sides started moving troops closer to the area.

The Ecuadorians had infrastructure that was closer to the disputed area than the Peruvians did. The Peruvians had to literally slog for days in swamp and 110 degree temperatures and a hundred per cent humidity.

After this war started rolling, the Ecuadorians sowed those trails with land mines. A significant proportion of the Peruvians that were killed in this conflicts died because of mines that were sowed by Ecuadorians on the only path that they could use, legs blown off and that sort of thing.

And because they were so deep in the jungle, with triple canopy tree cover that made it impossible for helicopters to evacuate them, most of them just died right there, bled to death. It was a terrible thing. There were skirmishes, there was shooting.

And the second thing that changed on the Peruvian side was that as this situation was inflaming between the two countries, Peru was in a presidential election campaign, Fujimori was running for reelection and he made the whole border dispute a central plank of his electoral platform, so that he could say, "We Peruvians will not stand for Ecuadorian encroachment on our national territory."

Q: Peter, what was your job at that point?

ROMERO: I was the U.S. ambassador in Ecuador.

And so this thing started heating up and there were skirmishes and shooting and outright battles. As I said, the Ecuadorians had all the advantages and quite frankly they did very well.

There was a gentleman who headed up the Ecuadorian armed forces, his name is Paco Moncayo, I just saw him last week, he was here in town, he's now a deputy in their parliament, after having been mayor of Quito for eight years, good guy.

He had turned the military doctrine around, had studied Israel, how they had basically defended their national territory and that was his model and for the first time in their history the Ecuadorians were beating the Peruvians.

Peru was a much larger country, bigger military budget and none of that really counted, because they were fighting in the jungle, so it was just a man and a rifle, basically. Tanks and artillery and planes didn't matter.

And the war never spilled over to the coastal plains. Had it opened up there, Ecuador would have been at a distinct disadvantage, but it never spread from that disputed area, which was lucky for Ecuador.

In the middle of all of this and after the Peruvian general who had provoked all of this telling Fujimori, "Don't worry, we're winning, we're winning" and obviously they weren't, they were taking heavy casualties on a daily basis, Fujimori had to answer a lot of campaign rhetoric from those running against him that his rosy reports weren't true.

And so to prove that he was telling the truth, which he wasn't being fed the truth by his general, he took about a dozen reporters to the jungle, they flew into the military base and then helicoptered in to an area that became the central focal point of the battle, called Tiwintza. It was an Indian word. There was really nothing there, except for a clearing.

And the Ecuadorians held the high ground and when he helicoptered in their gunners focused in on him and they started lobbing mortar shells all around where his party was.

At that point, the Peruvian high command notified the Ecuadorians that President Fujimori was in that group that they were shooting at and that they needed to stop immediately.

The Ecuadorians said, "So what? We kill the president, it's even better."

It was a mistake, because the Peruvian could have shifted the focus of this war to areas more military advantageous to themselves.

In the midst of this battle, I get a call from the then assistant secretary, Alec Watson, who's in San Francisco, he's giving a speech at the World Affairs Club in San Francisco and he tells me that he just got a call from the Peruvian ambassador in Washington, a guy by the name of Luna and that Luna was telling him that Fujimori and the journalists were being bombed by Ecuadorian gunners on the high ground and that if anything happened to Fujimori there would be total war and that I had to get to the Ecuadorian high command and get them to stop shooting, because the local general, Moncayo, wouldn't stop, but if I did this all the Peruvians would do would be to take Fujimori out of there, evacuate him out of harms way.

I got the call about eleven o'clock at night in my residence and spent the next three hours getting in touch with the minister of defense, Gallardo, to try to get him to stand down, in touch with the president, Ballén and then ultimately to Moncayo.

And I told them that if they would just stop, that would permit the Peruvians to evacuate Fujimori and get him out of there and out of harms way, that's what I had been told to tell the Ecuadorians by Watson.

They didn't like it, but they stopped the shelling. And instead of leaving, Fujimori stays for two more days and reporting to the accompanying press that now the Peruvian military was indeed in control of the area making me look like an absolute idiot. He's evacuated out after the two days are up and nothing happens to him, luckily and he goes back on the campaign trail. But it leaves a very sour taste in the mouths of the Ecuadorians.

The Ecuadorians, for their part, were believing that we were tilting towards Peru and they didn't understand it, at all. They would show me pictures of Assistant Secretary Watson with his arm around the Peruvian ambassador in Washington, statements that Watson had made that were very pro-Peru.

And I just sloughed them off. Our policy was neutrality, complete neutrality. We were one of the guarantors of the Rio Protocol. That meant we were strictly neutral.

Q: Who was, the U.S, Brazil and somebody else?

ROMERO: It was the U.S., Brazil, Chile and Argentina, were the four guarantors.

So the kind of tilt that was apparent was basically getting harder and harder to refute as the U.S. ambassador there.

Q: Did you feel there was a tilt?

ROMERO: Absolutely. And things like backgrounders where the front office of the bureau then called ARA, now called WHA, was basically saying that the Ecuadorians had no claim, that this was Peru's territory, everybody knew it. And it wasn't that open and shut, it really wasn't.

And it became bad, the relationship between the embassy and the front office, but particularly my relationship with Watson.

Q: Did you get on the phone, or

ROMERO: I came back, on my dime and I met with him and I said, "Look, there's a disconnect here and I want to do everything I can to get to the bottom of it."

And Alec said, "Oh, no, there's really no problem. You sent in this cable that I thought was over the top and too pro-Ecuador, but you've explained it and other than that there's no problem."

I go back. There was a decision in Washington, signed off by Alec Watson, to allow the Israelis to supply the Ecuadorians with spare parts for their Mirage jets.

Q: Mirage jets being originally a French jet.

ROMERO: Originally a French jet, but of course we had leverage on the Israelis. We stopped all resupply, any spare parts or anything, to either side once this war broke out. It affected Ecuador more than it affected Peru, because the Peruvians were always buying either French or Italian or Russian military equipment.

In fact, they had MiGs in their air force inventory and after the war ended they bought a slew of Sukhois that never got off the ground, spending millions of dollars for planes that never flew.

But, anyway, they were in a far better resupply position and if you know anything about this sort of thing, countries, when they decide to buy military equipment, have to be careful about where they buy it from, because when a war breaks out you don't want to be cut off from spare parts.

So the Ecuadorians had a very U.S.-oriented inventory, particularly for their air force, but also for their ground forces and we didn't supply them with anything once the war broke out.

I did get an okay from Washington to supply some spare parts for their Mirage jets and I mentioned that in a press interview before they announced it in Washington.

So I was dinged for that. I had thought that it was public information. I had cables showing that the decision's been made. I misread the situation back in Washington.

About a month later I get a call from a senior inspector by the name of Bill Farrand, Senior Foreign Officer. He had just finished an inspection of our embassy in Bolivia and he said that he was coming to Ecuador to do a "spot inspection," in other words it wasn't your typical every four year inspection, this was being called for specifically by the front

office in Washington to inspect my post because, as Farrand said, “You know why I’m coming.”

And I said, “I don’t have a clue as to why you’re coming. Nobody’s told me anything. This is the first telephone call I’ve ever gotten in this connection.

And he said, “Well, they think you’ve gone over to the other side.” In other words, “They think you’ve become pro-Ecuadorian, lost your focus.”

There is nothing more lethal than to have an accusation that you have lost perspective and that you’ve gone over to the Ecuadorian side, or the Soviet side or whatever it is. That is an accusation that is absolutely lethal for a U.S. diplomat.

Q: Called “localitis.”

ROMERO: I was taken aback by it. I lost a lot of sleep over it, what else could I have done kind of thing.

Bill Farrand and his team of about seven or eight inspectors get to post. He reiterates what he told me about being prompted to do this by Alec Watson and the front office, none of whom ever called me about this, told me it was coming, or even expressed any concern.

And I said to him, “Look, I’m not prepared for you. We usually have months to prepare for an inspection. We’ve done some minimal preparations, but I want you to look at everything, I want you to talk to everybody here and I want you to look at our reporting.”

He stayed for two weeks, the whole team, they looked at absolutely everything, they looked at our reporting, they talked to everybody, they talked to people on the Ecuadorian government side and they wrote up their report.

And I was thinking this is the end of my career, because they’re going to put the nail in the coffin, I’m done.

The report was one of the most glowing reports on an embassy and an ambassador that had been written in an inspection. They call them IERs, an Inspector Evaluation Report.

It said I ran a really good embassy. Their only criticism was that I didn’t get out as much as I should. He said to me, “Your people love you, they want to see you more and that’s my criticism, you don’t get out enough to see your people. But as far as what you’re doing, it’s superlative.

“In fact, I’ve looked at Embassy Lima’s reporting on the war and I see their reporting is much more tilted than yours. And not only is yours, I think, excellent reporting from a neutral perspective on the war itself, but you’ve made several recommendations in your

reporting that have either been accepted by Washington or should be accepted by Washington, in our view and we think you're doing an excellent job."

I have to say that for the rest of my life I will be beholden to Bill Farrand for having taken this strong stand, not being influenced by people back in Washington, being willing to look at the situation objectively.

Not only did he give me a clean bill of health, I got calls from people all over Washington in the management bureau who had access to Farrand's inspection report who said, "We've never seen a report like this before on a principal officer."

Q: To put it in perspective, when you get sort of a spot inspection like this, it's usually initiated by somebody above your pay grade who's saying, "Get rid of this guy" or something. In other words, it seems usually these reports are almost done deals before

ROMERO: Exactly right.

Q: In this case,

ROMERO: In this case, this guy, Bill Farrand, was an old school, curmudgeon type guy, nobody was going to tell him what to do, he was going to look at the facts. And I have to tell you, he saved my career.

The report went to the then Under Secretary for Management, a guy by the name of Moose, who offered me all kinds of jobs in M and embassies after that.

I took a job that I got on my own in the front office of WHA as the principal deputy assistant secretary, but it just turned my personal situation around. Alec Watson went into retirement after that. I got a clean bill of health and was kind of reestablished on a pretty solid career track.

Q: How did this impact on your work and the situation in Ecuador-Peru?

ROMERO: The front office was much more careful about what they did and said. I was able to get back the policy back to neutrality.

I was able to work to get the four guarantors to send military forces into the region to separate the two sides, the Peruvian and Ecuadorian militaries, to be inserted in there, to be a peacekeeping force and oh, by the way, the Peruvians and the Ecuadorians paid for the peacekeeping force.

And that's the way, pretty much, I left it, when I left and went back to Washington to be the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary in the ARA bureau front office.

When I got back, after a couple of years, the inserted peacekeeping forces, the three "friends" and us, were doing an excellent job, they were deploying in the area, had a small base in Ecuador and they had succeeded in keeping the two sides apart.

But what had happened at the time, after I was back in Washington, was that the Peruvians were starting to move in the direction of where the Ecuadorian troops were and there was every reason to believe that the fighting would start all over again, not withstanding the U.S. and other "friends'" military forces as peacekeepers.

I went down to Quito with a guy who we had chosen as a special envoy for the Peruvian-Ecuador dispute at the State Department, a person who was supposed to try to help overcome the conflict in a lasting way, not just separating forces but figure out where the border was and do offer remediation.

Anyway, we were down there at the request of then Ecuadorian President Mahuad and we were in Quito, at the foreign ministry and I remember Mahuad saying, "I've done everything that I can and it seems like we're going back to war. The Peruvian troops had moved into the disputed area that they're supposed to stay out of, as we're supposed to stay out of and their troops are moving as we speak and there doesn't seem to be anything that I can do to stop it."

And I said "Well, did you call Fujimori?"

"Yes, I've called Fujimori, but he's on the campaign trail and he won't take my calls."

I said, "Did you have the foreign minister call the Peruvian foreign minister?"

And he said, "Yeah, he refuses to return his calls, too."

And I said, "Well, you have no choice but to get in touch with Fujimori."

And he said, "I've called him twice, he doesn't take my calls."

I was grasping at straws at this point. Then I said, "Look, one of the things about Fujimori that you need to understand, he's a very lonely man. He's kind of a virtual dictator, the way he runs Peru. He cuts nobody else in and he only trusts two people. One is his spy chief, Montesinos and the other is his brother. Other than that, nobody knows what the hell he's doing."

And I spent, as PDAS, a lot of time in Lima and I got that whole picture of how he governs, in a very solitary way. I said, "If you picked up the phone and basically said, 'Let's meet' and made it a friendly thing, that you're really reaching out to be his friend and that kind of thing, I think you might get traction on it."

Mahuad did, agreed to meet with him in two days, they met, the Peruvians pulled back that column that was inching towards Ecuador and we were able to get delegations from

both countries, including Fujimori and Mahuad, up to Washington, where we were able to work on a definitive resolution of the conflict.

They spent time in Washington, they spent time in Boston. We had a gentleman by the name of Roger Fisher, who was famous for writing the book *Getting to Yes* and he'd been involved in lots of international negotiating situations in South Africa and elsewhere, a well renowned negotiator, probably the best known negotiator in the world at that time and we're talking '98.

And the Peruvians and Ecuadorians spent a lot of time with him and they came up with a solution whereby, and this is really unique, the Peruvians would get sovereignty over the disputed area, but the Ecuadorians would be able to lease that area indefinitely for a dollar a year and both countries would be able to fly their flags there and there would be an international part that would encompass the whole disputed area and if there was ever any mineral exploitation or any other form of commercial development in the disputed area, both sides would have to agree to it and both sides would enjoy the revenue from it.

That was it, very simple thing. There was some murmurings on the Ecuadorian side, "We're losing sovereignty" and this and that, but at the end of the day both countries signed it and right now there's practically no troops on the border between those two countries, saving millions, if not hundreds of millions, of dollars from having to deploy troops in a hot area.

Q: Was ARA betting too much on the Peruvians?

ROMERO: Well, by the time I had gotten back, Stu, what had happened was the front office was cleaned out. Alec Watson retired. Jeff Davidow, who was our ambassador in Venezuela, took over as the assistant secretary. He chose me as his principal deputy assistant secretary.

He had no dog in that fight, the Peru-Ecuador fight, Jeff didn't and so he was neutral on it and I became his principal deputy, the number two person in the bureau, much to the chagrin of the Peruvians, who thought that I would use that position to be very anti-Peru. Which I did not. I think in the end this delighted them. The office director and the other deputy assistant secretary responsible for South America also left at the same time.

Q: Why had there been this tilt towards Peru? At one point Peru was certainly on our blacklist, because we had a bunch of international corporations whose property in that country had been expropriated without compensation. This goes way back, but Peru was not particularly on our "really good friends" list.

ROMERO: In fact, if you go back to World War Two, they never declared their alliance with the Axis Powers, but, just like Argentina, they were pretty much on the Axis side and if you go to the border along the coast in Ecuador you'll still see U.S. gun emplacements, still there and bases that we built to stop a Peruvian advance in the coastal plains and also a fairly significant U.S. presence on the Galapagos Islands, to include an

officers club which is humongous, it's got the longest bar I've ever seen, still there, built by U.S. forces that were stationed there for antisubmarine work during World War Two and to monitor Peruvian forces.

The argument that the Ecuadorians made was, "We're your friends." We had a little dustup in the Sixties, what they called the Tuna War, where there were continental shelf boundaries that we didn't agree on, but other than that, our relationship's always been good.

"We're your buddies, we're allies, we're a democracy. Peru is an abbreviated democracy under Fujimori. We've thrown our lot in with the U.S. military. They train us. We buy equipment from them. And this is how you treat us! You cut us off!"

So it was tough to be down there, but at the end of the day, when I came back to Washington and there was wholesale housecleaning, basically that tilt towards Peru ended and I think we were much more evenhanded and because of that we were able to push for a definitive resolution of the conflict, successfully.

Q: That's one of the ongoing conflicts that have been around for a long, long time. I had an interview with a man, he was a boyfriend of Lillian Hellman, got in a lot of trouble for that, because of her communist affiliations, he had I think the Peruvian or Ecuadorian desk, this was in the middle of World War Two and they started fighting there.

He got a call from the assistant secretary at the time, Sumner Welles, who said, "I want you to stop that war" and sort of hung up. And he was the guy who put together the four party group of guarantors.

ROMERO: Well, it worked and it worked really well and to this day both countries are at peace and there's a lot more trade going on and that sort of thing than ever before.

We had an aid budget, about $35 million a year, that we put towards rudimentary micro-enterprises on both sides of the border. $35 million was for the Ecuadorian side. I think the Peruvians had an equal amount.

Q: Did the recent election

ROMERO: The most recent election in Peru? Humala Ollanta?

Q: I was thinking in Ecuador.

ROMERO: Correa.

Q; He took sort of an anti-American stance.

ROMERO: Yes, he's taking an anti-American stance, but not over this border issue, this is a done deal. Most Ecuadorians now don't even mention it.

Q: Ecuador was very much involved in the drug trade, wasn't it?

ROMERO: Not as a producing country there really is little to no coca produced in Ecuador, largely because the military has always had a very close relationship with Ecuador's indigenous population.

Most of your people living out in the *campo* are indigenous or mixed (mestizo) people in Ecuador, the rural areas and the army has been a left of center army, not seen as kind of an authoritarian institution at all, but one that supports that the humble people of Ecuador, most of whom are members of indigenous tribes and they do all kinds of things to cement that relationship, to include sending their veterinarians to doctor their animals, llamas and alpacas and cattle free of charge, they administer health care to children in these areas, they have something called a livestock bank, where we give you an alpaca, you give us two back in a year, in order to get these subsistence farmers into much more of a market orientation. And it's worked really well.

Q: This would preclude any spillover by the Shining Path, which had relied quite a bit

ROMERO: In Peru.

Q: In Peru, using the indigenous mountain tribes to

ROMERO: There never really was anything resembling the Peruvian *Sendero Luminoso* in Ecuador, there really wasn't, largely because Ecuadorian society is much more egalitarian and there isn't the vehement anti-indigenous prejudice that you find in Peru.

It's changing now, with a mestizo president, but it's still pretty strong in Peru, with whites of European origin being the upper class and not allowing a lot of upward mobility from the indigenous peoples.

Like I said, it's changing, but Lima's always been much more of a place to practice discrimination against the local indigenous peoples because of their ethnicity.

In Ecuador you had much more of an open, kind of left of center kind of society. If you go back to the colonial period, when Spain left, a number of things happened.

One of the things that Spain left was complete chaos about where borders began and ended, because Spain owned it all and those borders constantly changed.

So in the end, in the 1820's, there's uncertainty about where the border is and if you multiply this out over thirty odd countries in the Caribbean and Latin America you can begin to see that there was huge problems with defining national territory after the Spaniards left and that gave rise to a lot of these border disputes, to include the Peru-Ecuador one.

The other part of the Spanish legacy is that in most countries there was nascent political parties before the Spanish left. In some countries they were illegal and they were underground, in other countries they were kind of debating societies, because there was no democracy there, but they were allowed to exist.

And after the Spanish left most of these South American and Central American countries can trace their political history to two parties.

One was the Liberal Party, which represented small shopkeepers and professionals like lawyers and accountants, etc., etc, soldiers, in many cases. And then you had the Conservative Party, which was a very pro-Roman Catholic, status quo and composed of lots of big land owners, who would get their peons, their *campesinos* who worked for them, to vote for the Conservative Party.

And those parties basically in most of Latin America alternated power for the next 150 years. In some countries, like in Colombia, for example, there was running gun battles between those two parties for over a hundred years and still some of Colombia's problems can be traced back to that period, their current problems.

So that was the Spanish legacy, but in any event, getting back to Peru-Ecuador, there hasn't been a dustup or a problem since the Nineties.

Q: Okay, you're the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, the PDAS. You were doing that from when to when?

ROMERO: I guess that was '96 to '98.

Q: Were there any other principal problems that you had to deal with?

ROMERO: As PDAS, yes. At the end of '98 we had basically cut off most of our assistance to Colombia, because the then Colombian president, Ernesto Samper, during his election campaign, had taken drug money.

Now I think that he probably took the money for the campaign without really vetting the source of the money. It wasn't a huge amount, but it did definitely came from drug sources.

And this was a big, big story in Colombia. He's elected president and we went down there and then the front office, Bob Gelbard and Mike Skol and some other folks, they went down there and they talked to them about, "You need to 'fess up and we've got good evidence that this money was used during your campaign, but in any case most of the Colombian newspapers are reporting this dirty money in your campaign funds. You got elected anyway. Okay, fine, but you've got to get to the bottom of it."

He made a calculated mistake and that was to deny everything. And as a result of that, we decertified them. At the time we used to certify countries on their cooperation in the drug

fight and because he refused to accept reality, we decertified them, which meant that all non-essential loans would be ended, military-military cooperation was ended.

The only area in which we had a waiver which allowed us to keep essential cooperation going was, we had a fairly small cooperation program with the Colombian National Police, who we felt were the only real reliable institution in the country.

And that was bad. The country was losing ground on the security side. Colombians were turning away from the United States generally.

We had an ambassador down there at the time by the name of Myles Frechette and Myles is a wonderful human being and he's a good friend of mine, but he was very prominent in lecturing the Colombians about what they needed to do to get back into our good graces.

Q: Condescending

ROMERO: Condescending. Myles had grown up in Chile, I think it was.

Q: Born of the side of a mountain, I think. His father was a mining engineer.

ROMERO: I think that's right. He spoke fluent Spanish, but was very prominent in lecturing them in a very condescending way and telling them what they needed to do to get back into our good graces.

Our approval rating in Colombia at the time, it was about 13 per cent, U.S. approval rating, we'd sunk really low. Samper had lost ground on the drug fight although there were some significant improvements with respect to going after big narcos. At the time they took down the biggest narco of all, a guy named Pablo Escobar. And Samper, with the limited resources that we gave him and with the limited resources they had in country, did a pretty good job with going after the big narcos.

At the time, they presided over huge multinational corporations, basically, illegal multinational corporations and Pablo Escobar was the number one guy. They took him out, with U.S. assistance. And there was a lot of other support. So, in fact, if you were to ignore this credible accusation that Samper took dirty money for his campaign and just looked at his performance on the counter-narcotics side it was exemplary, really.

So that was a lot of it and Colombia became my focus after Jeff Davidow had left to go to Mexico and I became assistant secretary.

Oh, before I get to that, one of the things of note I think that I should mention is that in 1997 I get a call from the then-assistant secretary, Jeff Davidow, who told me that he wanted me to go with Madeleine Albright, who was then our ambassador at the UN, to a meeting of the Rio Group in Cochabamba, Bolivia.

The UN ambassador takes kind of a summer trip every year and they go to different parts of the world, it's a traditional thing, so that she can see or he can see on the ground what's going on, as opposed to just seeing it from the UN perspective in New York.

And they choose parts of the world to go to. She had chosen Latin America and heard about this Rio Group meeting of all South American countries in Cochabamba, Bolivia and she wanted to be invited.

I told Jeff the whole reason for the Rio Group forming itself was to exclude the United States. To get her an invitation was not going to be easy. And he said, "Well, just see what you can do." And I said, "Well, here they're having a party specifically to exclude us and we're showing up." And he said, "She wants to go. Do what you can."

So we made several calls and we got the then Bolivian president to invite us. He had to so some arm twisting with the other presidents who were attending to accept her and in fact she wasn't a president, either, so she was a level below. In fact, she wasn't even secretary of state yet. Everybody knew she was going to become secretary of state, but she hadn't had her hearings, she was just our ambassador at the UN.

But they issued her an invitation and we went down and she charmed everybody, she absolutely charmed everybody, they loved her. Of course we didn't go into the big meetings, but we had lots of bilateral meetings with all the presidents there.

By that time her reputation for being a tough gal had pretty much been reported in Latin America and there was a lot of interest, because everybody knew she was going to be Secretary, to meet her.

And so the meetings went really, really well. I can remember there was a little altercation between her and me after one of the meetings. Not an altercation, a dressing down from her part.

I don't feel embarrassed by telling you this. Anyway, we had given her talking points and briefing memos for all of the bilateral meetings that she was having with the presidents.

And one of the first meetings was with the then president of Chile, Eduardo Frei. And there were about maybe five points that we wanted her to raise and she raised four of them, she didn't raise this fifth point.

And so at the end of the meeting she says, "Well, I don't have anything else, so thank you very much, Mr. President."

And I said, "Madame Ambassador, wait a second, there's this other issue" and I explained it and she gave me this frown and the Chilean President said whatever it was he said, I can't remember.

And we got up, we shook hands and we left and we walked down this narrow staircase, where you had to take the stairs kind of one person at a time, they were that narrow.

And I went down before her, because she was still shaking hands and about halfway down the first flight she grabs me by the arm and turns me around. She's not that tall, real little, but above me on the stairs, we were eyeball to eyeball and she stuck her finger in my face and she said, "When I say the meeting's over, the meeting's over."

And I said, "Yes, ma'am."

And she was exactly right. She chose not to broach that subject, that was her decision. We briefed her. It was her meeting.

So, anyway, interestingly enough, I always felt, later on, when she chose me to be first assistant secretary of INL bureau and then to be the assistant secretary for WHA, I kind of felt like that was a test, to probe how loyal and deferential I really would be.

We had done a lot with the Colombians. When I became assistant secretary, there was a guy by the name of Andres Pastrana who was really quite a charismatic politician who was running as candidate for president in Colombia, this would have been '98.

The country had serious security problems and Andres Pastrana had been elected on one platform and that is to negotiate peace with the guerillas, that was it.

He gets elected on that platform and he proceeds, after he's elected president, to do everything that he can to reach out to the FARC guerillas, the largest group and also the ELN, etc, to try to achieve peace in his country.

The focus was on the FARC and when he was elected the guerillas said that they thought that this was the best outcome that they could have. So there was a lot of feeling that negotiations would result in the end of all this conflict that had gone on for fifty years by that time.

And through the course of the next two and a half years, to make a long story short, the government gave all kinds of concessions and the guerillas gave nothing, they never negotiated seriously.

In the end, they wanted power sharing, they wanted to be able to walk into the capital and occupy specific ministerial posts and have half a dozen or a dozen of their people named to the Senate, without elections.

Because the bottom line was, in Colombia the FARC had, even at that time, probably less than eight per cent approval rating in the country. They couldn't have gotten elected. Maybe to some local mayoral positions or something, but they couldn't have won a national election.

So they wanted power sharing and that was a non-starter for Pastrana. So Pastrana goes through two and a half years of offering concessions, giving them an area the size of New Jersey as a safe haven to operate within, prohibiting his own military from going there.

And in that two and a half or three years of desultory negotiations, President Pastrana's approval ratings are going down through the floor, as he's not achieving anything on the peace side.

The FARC was using its control of that area to increase its recruitment, in some cases forcing campesinos to join. They go from about 12,000 to almost 20,000 by forcibly recruiting and offering benefits to campesino kids.

And they start to control more and more territory. In the last two years of Pastrana's four year term, it would have been 200-2002, essentially you've got about 75 per cent of the country outside government control, you've got Colombia on the verge of becoming a failed state.

The government controls the cities and not much more than that. You can't drive from one city to another. There weren't just guerillas, but paramilitary militias, your criminal gangs, kidnappers, operating everywhere and Colombia was a place where there was no security outside of the cities.

At the time, I took a trip to Colombia and we had some Special Forces, Green Berets, that were situated inside of the Colombia Ministry of Defense in Bogota and their job was to merge our intelligence and Colombian intelligence information to put together what they called target packages for the Colombian military.

For example, they would find from our satellite imagery a laboratory in the jungle for processing cocaine. They would take that, they would put it on a map, they would see if Colombian intelligence had any more to add, in terms of how it was defended, who was there, how many bad guys, etc, etc.

And they would put together these diagrams with all kinds of pages of instructions, essentially, on how to attack that place and take it down: "Watch out, there's a sentinel here, there's a guy with a machine gun here, this is where you come in, this where you go out, this is the number of troops that you need." Basically everything but tying their shoes for them. It was very impressive and I was getting this briefing as assistant secretary and I said to the colonel who was giving the briefing, a Green Beret, "This is great! How long have you been here?"

He said, "I've been here for a year and a half."

I said, "Well, how many of these packages have you put together?"

"29."

And I said, “How many have they acted on?”

“Two.”

And I said, “Why haven’t they acted on the rest?”

“Well, they don’t have airlift, or the air force won’t lend their helicopters and this and that. There’s always an excuse.”

And I came to the realization that the country was falling off the table, in terms of security and that the Colombian soldiers were not fighting, they felt that President Pastrana was more of a mediator between the government and the guerillas than he was the leader of the government.

He never went to funerals of the fallen, or very rarely ever did and never really showed strong leadership in government. He kind of saw himself as a mediator between the two sides and not as head of government.

I was down there with my deputy, the Director of Andean Affairs, who had also been my DCM in El Salvador during the demobilization there and I told Phil, “This is the most disturbing visit I’ve ever had to this country. They’re losing it.”

The line of applicants for visas to travel to the U.S. around the consulate every day stretched for blocks, literally. Everybody was scrambling to get out of the country.

“This is serious and we have to do something to help them and it’s got to be big, it can’t be just some rifles or some training. It’s got to be big.”

The restrictions were off, in terms of our support, because Samper had left office, so we were able to now do all kinds of things legally. They had been certified again on the drug cooperation front, so it enabled us to do a lot of things.

Phil and I sat next to each other on the plane back and I said, “Okay, let’s talk about what worked in El Salvador during the war and what worked afterwards and what would a winning strategy look like?”

Literally on the back of a white airplane air sickness bag we put down the basic elements of what later became know as Plan Colombia, what it would look like. And I got back and my boss at the time was Under Secretary Tom Pickering. He and I had worked in El Salvador together and at the UN during the peace negotiations with the Salvadorans.

And I came back and I said, “Tom, I just got back from Colombia. They’re losing it. It’s going to be really bad unless we do something.”

He said, “Well, what do we do?”

And I said, “Look, Tom, this is so serious, it’s got to be big, it’s got to be huge.”

And he said, “Let me see what you’ve got.”

So I went back to the office and I got together with Phil, Phil Chicola , who was my DCM in El Salvador and then Andean Affairs director and the guy who went down to Bogota with me, who saw all of this and we put together a memo.

And he said, “Pete, you’re biting off more than you can chew. The relationship between the administration and Congress is poisonous now. Newt Gingrich and the Moral Majority and all of that, plus the Monica Lewinsky scandal with Clinton made the relationship between the White House and Congress really toxic. It’s going to be hard to get a major initiative like this through.”

He was right, but I said, “Look, it’s the right thing to do and if we don’t succeed, at least we will have tried. As far as the administration’s relationship with Congress is concerned, you’re exactly right, but I think the State Department can do this on its own, get the necessary appropriation.

“The good thing about it is, it shouldn’t be that difficult to do inside the administration, because Pastrana and Clinton had a really good relationship. there had been a state visit and their interactions had been warm and personal and friendly” and still continues to this day, it’s a very close relationship.

And I said, “It’s going to be easier for us to sell it inside the administration, because we at the State Department will take care of this with Congress, we’ll do the hearings, etc.”

We put it together, $1.2 billion. At the time, it seemed like a huge amount of money. Our assistance package to Colombia at the time was less than $100 million a year.

This was comprehensive: helicopters, training, quick reaction battalions, alternative development for people who were growing coca to grow other cash crops, judges, courthouses, civic action programs, the full program menu and we got it passed.

Q: Did you have a friend in Congress?

ROMERO: Yes, we had a lot of friends in Congress. Liberal Democrats had a hard time with this, they really did, because it was messy in Colombia. There were serious violations of human rights there.

But because of the relationship between Pastrana and Clinton and because the Colombians were desperate for something, they were seeing Pastrana ending his four year term having lost the country, they needed something to turn it around.

They had a gifted Colombian ambassador here by the name of Luis Alberto Moreno, who now heads up the IDB, who got it right away and who worked with us very closely. To

the point that by the time we sent our first draft of Plan Colombia to Bogotá, it was accepted a few days later as a final document (and only later translated in Spanish).

And I think probably the thing that was most fortuitous was after Pastrana left a president was elected down there, Alberto Uribe, who had come from a family whose father was killed by the FARC and whose brother and sister were kidnapped. He had been mayor and governor of a highly conflicted area, in Medellin and Antiochia and came to the presidency with a very strong vision of what he needed to do.

And with Plan Colombia money there and with replenishments of five and six hundred million a year, they've gotten about seven-eight billion dollars by now, he was able to use that money, along with increased local revenue, to just turn the security situation around.

In the eight years that Uribe was president, where you had about 75 per cent of the country outside government control at the end of Pastrana's tenure in office, you have about 90 per cent of the country inside government control, largely because of Plan Colombia money and Uribe's strategy of democratic security by 2010.

Q: Looking at Latin America as a whole, the Cold War ended. During your time dealing with it, what about Cuban-Soviet influence? Is that just gone, or what?

ROMERO: The Soviet influence was gone. By 1993, the Soviet influence was gone.

Cuban influence was still there, although they were dealing with their own economic problems. They had overextended themselves in Angola and elsewhere.

They really needed to pull back and they needed to retool their economy, 'cause they couldn't depend on the billion of dollars that the Soviets were shoveling into the country every month any more and so they had to pull back, too.

And a lot of military equipment that the Cubans were passing on to their clients in Latin America was from the Soviet Union, so they didn't have the wherewithal any longer to be able to channel arms to guerillas in Central America and elsewhere. So they shrunk as a player.

Q: I do want to talk to you about Cuba, during the time that you were in Western Hemispheric Affairs and developments in Venezuela, particularly, with Chavez

ROMERO: Yes, there were some interesting things happening there.

Q: And I'm sure there are other places. Bolivia, was that

ROMERO: Yes, there were a lot of interesting things that were happening at the end of my career that we can talk about.

Q: Today is the 28th of March, 2012, with Peter Romero and Peter, how did we view developments in Cuba? First place, you were assistant secretary from when to when?

ROMERO: I was assistant secretary from 1998 to the end of 2001, so about three and a half years.

Q: Okay, let's talk a bit about how we viewed Cuba. Where was Cuba going?

ROMERO: Well, at the time there hadn't been any reforms at all on the economic side. They pretty much were coasting on an outdated, flawed Marxist ideology that they had established back during the revolution in the Fifties. And at the time you still had the remnants of neighborhood watch committees spying on citizens and you had virtually no economic reforms at all.

They had experimented a little bit with allowing people in the agricultural sector to privatize some small plots of land, so that they would have the state-run farms, but then each farmer would be able to essentially grow their own crops on small plots and sell that produce in farmers markets privately.

But there wasn't much of an opening. Pope John had visited and that didn't really produce much of an opening and there was still a lot of persecution of the church at the time.

So essentially we had a relationship with the Cubans that was antagonistic, made worse by their shooting down of two airplanes over Cuba, MiGs shot them down, *Los Hermanos al Rescate*, the "Brothers to the Rescue," they were dropping leaflets over Cuban territory, violating Cuban airspace.

For their part, the Cubans had said that they had warned them not to violate their air space, but they continued to do it and rather than trying to dissuade them through a diplomatic or political strategy as part of their efforts to dissuade the Brothers from violating their air space, they just shot them down.

Then Ambassador Albright, who was at the UN, went down to the Orange Bowl and spoke before a big rally of Cuban Americans and basically said that this would not stand. It was a hard-line speech, one that the Cubans deserved.

But also the Cubans were in a place at the time of trying to in my view stop any kind of rapprochement or diplomatic outreach by the Clinton Administration and shooting down the planes was an effort to stop anything that might have otherwise happened.

That having been said, Bill Clinton knew firsthand about the political repercussions of reaching out to a Castro Cuba, because he was governor at the time when the Mariel boatlift in the Eighties resulted in hundreds of Cuban convicts that Castro unloaded on American shores, along with people from mental asylums and that sort of thing.

And part of the blowback for Bill Clinton at the time was that many of these convicts that were unleashed on American soil had to be arrested for public safety reasons in the United States and many of them found their way to being incarcerated at Fort Chaffee in Arkansas.

Q: These were, many of them, career criminals.

ROMERO: Career criminals, the worst of the worst and they rioted at Fort Chaffee, Clinton as governor, he had to try to work with federal authorities to contain the riots, it played very badly in Arkansas and he was always wary of Cubans after that and rightly so.

Q: As so often happens, we've let a small group of people dictate our policy, haven't we, by ability to provoke and we've had to respond in a certain way?

ROMERO: Well, your question deserves a complicated answer, because it's not quite that simple. In fact, I grew up in the Cuban-American community in Miami as a child and a young man.

The Cuban community in Miami has become known for being led by hard-liners who basically are out there just to punish Fidel Castro and not much more, in terms of what will work or what would result in an opening and a deep component of caring for the Cuban people, in terms of what you do.

But that generation is slowly losing its grip on power as a lot of its members become older and infirm and even die off. The younger generation is much more pragmatic. And no political party, Democrats or Republicans, has really tapped into that new generation, to give them a sense of what the possibilities are, other than just a strict hard-line policy.

And unfortunately Florida is a key swing state, in terms of electoral votes and presidents have cared more about keeping the older generation of Cuban-Americans, than actually articulating some really forward thinking kinds of things that might result in the Castros losing their grip on power.

Certainly our policy towards China, we have a policy towards China that basically is predicated on the notion that economic reforms will eventually lead to a domestic clamor for political opening.

Yet we've never employed that same strategy towards Cuba, ninety miles from our shores. I believe that there is a lot that the United States could do to make the Castros irrelevant, as opposed to what the Cuban-American hard-liners would say would be to reward the Castro brothers.

Now, after having been retired for now almost twelve years, believe that an opening by the United States on the economic side would eventually erode the grip that the Castro regime and the Cuban Communist Party have on everyday life in Cuba.

I think that the Catholic Church is playing an important role right now and has successfully been able to kind of present itself not only as an ecclesiastical body in Cuba but also almost as an alternative political party to the Cuban Communist Party.

Q: Somewhat similar to what happened in Poland.

ROMERO: Yes, a very good analogy. I believe that Solidarity in Poland, with its deep and strong Catholic ties, grew out of the Catholic Church and their opposition to the Polish Communist Party and I think that the Cuban Catholic Church is kind of positioning itself to do that.

To say that they're there, in terms of the way the Polish Catholic Church was, would be to exaggerate where they are, but there is definitely an opening now.

And during my time as assistant secretary, I had very little contact with Cuban diplomats here, in their interest section. That was mostly run out of one of the deputy assistant secretary's offices, at the time Bill Brownfield had that responsibility and he led on the U.S. side twice yearly immigration talks with the Cubans, which talked about visas, immigration procedures, that sort of thing, limits on the amount of Cubans that we would allow to immigrate to the United States and arcane things like documents that they would have to have and that sort of thing in order to qualify to immigrate.

I wanted to go to Cuba as assistant secretary and I was told that I was too high ranking to go. So I never did go as a diplomat to Cuba, but I had gone as a child of about nine years old, one year after the revolution and I found it very interesting.

Q: Were you viewed by the Miami Cubans, what's his name, Mas

ROMERO: Jorge Mas Canosa.

Q: Were you considered "one of them" or were you co-opted that way, or were you perceived

ROMERO: That's a good question, Stu. I think that because Madeleine Albright had such a positive reputation with Cuban-Americans and particularly Cuban-American hard liners, particularly after her Orange Bowl speech, that people in the State Department, career people like myself, were viewed as part of that team, but some suspected that in our hearts we were soft on Cuba and had it not been for Madeleine Albright that we would try to do something to open up to Cuba without getting anything in return on the political or civil liberties side.

I think it was an exaggeration. I don't think anybody was naive towards Cuba or soft towards Cuba, but there were some that suspected that career people in the Foreign Service would be more amenable to an opening without anything in return from the Cubans.

But that having been said, I was surprised when I retired from the Foreign Service, *Juventud Rebelde*, which is the newspaper of the Young Communist League of Cuba, published an article that said, "It's a good thing that Pete Romero is retiring. He was the equivalent of what we in the day would call an 'Oreo,'" in other words he was Spanish on the outside but as gringo as could be on the outside "and that he did everything that his handlers (read Gringos) wanted, in terms of being a hard liner while at the same time presenting himself as a Hispanic" and that sort of thing. It was kind of a stinging article. I was somewhat surprised. I don't think they particularly liked the fact that I was the first Hispanic in that job as assistant secretary,

At the time, I don't think it would be in any way hyperbole to say that we probably had the best relationship with Latin American countries that we've ever had. Much of it was collaborative and the product of partnerships across the full spectrum of issues and I think the Cubans saw that as a big threat and saw a Hispanic like myself leading that as a threat to their interests, whether in Central America, South America or the Caribbean.

Q: Is there such a thing as being deep in your heart a Hispanic? I've got German, Irish, Scottish blood. None of these sort of raise any particular thrill for me one way of the other.

ROMERO: Well, Stu, that's a metaphysical type question. I was born in the United States, my mother is Polish-Lithuanian and my father is Puerto Rican and my stepfather is Cuban. Growing up in South Florida I felt a part of the Hispanization of Miami at the time and very much a part of that community.

But I always felt myself to be number one and foremost an American and I was proud of the Hispanic side of my family and the Hispanic heritage and all that that denotes and carries with it, but I never felt myself to be compromised in any way.

I was an American, I was representing the American government and the insights that I brought to the job vis-à-vis Hispanic culture and my experiences were an asset, but I can't remember one instance where they got in the way of representing my country to the fullest extent possible.

Q: You mention knowing Hispanic culture. Are there ways that Americans from the State Department or from elsewhere sort of put Hispanic backs up in dealing with this culture?

ROMERO: Every day. Not just sometimes, every day.

Q: We have this problem worldwide. At least we try to something about it.

ROMERO: Well, you see, Stu, this gets to a fundamental question about the Foreign Service. We all know that in the Foreign Service they talk about a Foreign Service that should look like America does, in terms of ethnicity and religious values and everything

else and it should look like what we look like and I think that that's exactly right, it should.

But not just because we are representing the American government and American society as Foreign Service Officers, but I think even more importantly that that kind of ethnic and cultural mix makes us a stronger Foreign Service, because we understand where other people are coming from, where foreign countries and foreign societies, particularly their values and aspirations.

And I'm not saying that being able to be understanding and introspective about what these relationships mean is a weakness, quite the contrary, I think it's a strength, because you can get what you want by better understanding what it is you're dealing with and who you're dealing with and what their motivations are.

And in Latin America I found that there was a general lack of consideration given to Latin America in the State Department, a lack of understanding about Latin America and that coupled with kind of a knee jerk reaction on the part of many officers to just stay away from issues that were flammable, like Cuba, for example, okay, but also other issues related to Mexico and other kinds of things, immigration.

And so I'm glad to see that there is greater diversity in the Foreign Service now, that that has resulted I think in policies that are a lot more empathetic and a lot more fruitful in the final analysis, in terms of getting what we want.

But at the end of the day I tried to treat Latin American countries as partners in every sense of the word, whether it be looking at Cuba and human rights, whether be supporting Colombia through Plan Colombia, whether it be dealing with Chavez in Venezuela, whether it be disaster assistance in the Caribbean and Central America and whether it be sales of military equipment to Latin America.

I believed that we needed to treat Latin countries as equals in every sense of the word and I think it had a great effect during my time.

Q: The Latin American bureau, it used to be ARA, it's now

ROMERO: WHA, yeah, Western Hemisphere

Q: Basically, I was in the Foreign Service as a consular officer in 1955 to '85 and I developed sort of the prejudice, you better stay away from Latin America, because if you go there, that's it, once you learn Spanish, you've got all these countries, but the big game is not Latin America, the big game in foreign affairs was the Middle East, the Soviet Union and China and Latin America, Henry Kissinger would say

ROMERO: "Latin America is a dagger pointed at the heart of Antarctica." I am quoting Kissinger on the relative unimportance of Latin America to the U.S.

Q: Did you sense this? Obviously, you did, but this have an affect on the type of officer you were getting?

ROMERO: That's a good question, Stu and the short answer to that is no and the reason why is because you got officers who were committed to the proposition that what happens in Latin America has a direct impact on Main Street USA in a way that other regions and issues do not.

I'll give you a couple of examples. You're talking about nuclear proliferation or enrichment as it relates to Iran right now and as it relates to North Korea. Those two countries definitely have an impact on our national security, just on those issues, let along Iran's support for Hezbollah and being a neighbor of Iraq.

But on Main Street USA, those are pretty remote issues. When you're talking about Latin America, or the Western Hemisphere, not, under my direction and with the support of Secretary Albright, we were able to bring Canada into the bureau and that's why the name was changed from American Republics Affairs to Western Hemisphere.

When you look at the Western Hemisphere, you see our major energy supplier in Canada, almost two billion dollars worth of trade going across that border on a daily basis between Canada and the United States, great benefits for both countries.

Mexico, about a billion and a half in trade going across that border, itinerant immigration issues with Mexican-Americans and Central Americans in the United States, some illegally, some legally, those legally who've registered to vote are the biggest bloc of voters in the United States. You have all kinds of other issues related to trade in the hemisphere, drug trafficking, people trafficking, protection of our borders.

You have so many issues, apart from all the cultural things like the food and music and all that sort of thing that's going on anyway, but you have lots of issues that have a direct impact on Main Street USA every single day, a national security impact on what we do and we had a group of talented Foreign Service Officers who got that, who understood it and who did very well relating to Hispanics and advancing U.S. interests in the region.

Since that time, since I left, my sense of things is that there has been drift, regrettably, drift, during the Bush 34 Administration and now the Obama Administration with a lack of priority given to Latin America and I think that there has been a sense among many of my ex-colleagues and Foreign Service Officers working in Latin America that basically they just need to keep their head down and keep their mouth shut and be careerists and get promoted and that's it, without being responsible for a policy or policies that have impact and unfortunately it's become a lower priority, a lower priority than Africa, simply because Africa is on the anti-terrorist agenda of the U.S.

Q: You mentioned about the homogeneity of the Foreign Service and this is bad and it's better to have a diverse one. One of the things I've heard ever since I've gotten involved in diplomacy that the top ranking foreign service is the Brazilian, I've heard this again

and again and yet when you talk to people who served in Brazil and you think about Brazil, they recruit almost completely from within their own ranks, practically, or the sons of the very wealthy. Things may have changed, but certainly during most of our careers they represent an elite within an elite, which seems to be somewhat removed from Brazilian society. How did you find Brazilian word indistinct; diplomats ??

ROMERO: That's very interesting and I'll tell you a little story about it. I always felt a very high regard for Brazilian diplomats. Certainly they're one of the best paid diplomatic services in the world and they have some smart people.

But I think one of the big problems of *Itamarty*, which is the name of their foreign ministry, is that they do seem only to recruit from traditional elitist ranks and I haven't seen the Brazilian foreign service open up the way it should.

Unfortunately my view is one of the legacies of Brazilian diplomacy has been a very traditional notion that if there are gains for the United States diplomatically these are a net loss for Brazilians, in terms of their influence.

Notwithstanding the fact that we made extraordinary efforts to reach out to the Brazilians during my time in the Service, there just seemed to be this underlying traditional feeling that somehow any gains by the U.S. in the region were net losses for them.

And I can give you lots of stories to reflect that. One was that we started trade talks with Chile. Chile had been an associate member of Mercosur, which is the Southern Cone South American free trade bloc and when the Brazilians found out that we were going to start free trade negotiations with the Chileans, they went ballistic and accused Chile of being a traitorous country to Mercosur.

But one of the things that they reacted to most sharply during my time was Plan Colombia. We had reached out to the Brazilians on many, many occasion, at the assistant secretary level and at Tom Pickering's level, who at that time was Under Secretary for Political Affairs, to draw them in to being helpful in the deteriorating security situation in Colombia.

Why? Brazil was the biggest player in South America, but besides that they shared a border with Colombia and things had gotten so bad that during that period whole military bases in the east of Colombia were being overrun by FARC guerillas, who were massing thousands of their forces and overrunning military bases. On one such occasion Colombian troops actually fled into Brazil to escape being captured by the FARC, it was that bad.

So the Brazilians had every reason to cooperate with us on Plan Colombia. In fact, they should have been the ones that initiated it, who started it. But because we did and because our influence in Colombia was growing and also because of the forward operating locations that we had negotiated with Latin American countries to position U.S. military assets in the region, they felt threatened.

We negotiated a forward operating location in Ecuador, in Curacao and in El Salvador which permitted U.S., mostly air force assets and army air assets to be positioned in the region to stop human trafficking, drug trafficking, etc and to monitor what was going on in conjunction with local forces, always in conjunction with local forces and these were not bases, they were facilities that were negotiated to be used by us.

That seemed to threaten the Brazilians. So when it came to Plan Colombia, we reached out so many times to tell them we had to do something, the Colombian state is teetering, it's bordering on a failed state, in terms of losing huge swatches of its territory to bad guys, they saw our support to Colombia as a threat to them, regrettably, regardless of our best efforts.

And it all came to a head when in the last trip that Madeleine Albright made to South America our first stop on that trip was Brasilia and I'll never forget it, we had these trips totally choreographed, even the final statement is done before the first American visitor sets foot on the ground and the first meeting was supposed to be a small meeting with the foreign minister and two of his people and me, Madeleine Albright and our chargé at the time down there.

We arrive at *Itamaraty*, the foreign minister takes the Secretary by the hand and leads her into his office, two Brazilian diplomats place themselves in front of me and stop me from accompanying her.

And I call out to the Secretary and she turns around and she looks at me and she says, "That's okay, Pete. I'll be alright."

So they break the script right from the get-go, they take her into an office all by herself, I'm standing there for a couple of minutes and then another Brazilian diplomat comes up to me and says, "The under secretary for political affairs would like you to come to his office."

And so I accompany him and I expect the rest of my delegation to show up. Well, they do the same thing with the rest of my delegation and prevent them from coming with me and lead me into the under secretary's office and they sit me down on a couch and four of them are on chairs facing me and they start grilling me about Plan Colombia and why we did it, what the motivation was and who supported it and all of this stuff.

After a while I'm getting this uneasy feeling that I'm being interrogated as I am being asked the same questions over and over again. It becomes readily apparent to me that these guys are trying to intimidate me.

And after about oh about 35, 40 minutes of this, I stand up and I say, "Gentlemen, we're going over the same ground here and I see absolutely no benefit to continuing to reiterate our positions and I have done everything that I possibly can, as well as everyone in the

State Department, to reach out to you on this issue. If you feel uncomfortable about it, I think you need to look at your own actions." I walked out.

In fact Secretary Albright never knew about this until long after I retired, when I told her this story. A couple of months later, at the end of the Clinton Administration, there was an inauguration of the new president, Fox, in Mexico and the head of the U.S. delegation attending this event was Madeleine Albright.

And so we went to Mexico and we're waiting to see President Cardoso and Foreign Minister Lampreia, who headed up the Brazilian delegation and we're sitting there in the car. We get a call from the embassy saying that Minister Lampreia and President Cardoso are running late and that we would have to wait in the car outside for about 25 minutes.

So in that 25 minute we're sitting there, which seemed kind of strange, at the last minute, to tell us this, but, anyway, things happen, so we're sitting there and Secretary Albright says to me, "You know, with all of our efforts to reach out to the Brazilians" and at the time they were on the UN Security Council, we had lots of Security Council issues, many of which they just seemed to be stuck with their zero sum philosophy; any gains by the U.S. are a net loss for them."

And I said, "Yeah, that's been really unfortunate. We don't have much to show for our efforts at outreach to the Brazilians."

And she said, "You know, I kind of feel like the Brazilians basically are reacting in a way just to be contrary to things that we support. Some of which would be in their national interest. They're being obstreperous in an unreasonable way."

And I said, "Madame Secretary, I agree with you."

We go upstairs to meet with Lampreia and President Cardoso and when we get upstairs we're told that there'll be another wait. So we're waiting in an anteroom for another almost forty minutes at this point and Secretary Albright is seething.

Finally, the door opens and President Cardoso is there and Foreign Minister Lampreia is behind him and Cardoso basically opens his arms wide, "Madeleine!" He's a very charming guy but she was fit to be tied, not only because we had this conversation about Brazilian obstreperousness, but also because she had been kept waiting for almost an hour and a half.

Before we even sat down, she lit right into Cardoso, by saying, "I think that with all of the promise and all of the effort that we've made in our relationship with Brazil, that hasn't yielded much by way of understanding on your part or agreeing to work together in any way breaking the old status quo."

And Cardoso was taken aback on his heels right from the get-go, no pleasantries, no nothing. I was really proud of the Secretary for doing that, because it really, really needed to be done.

During that time we had something called the Free Trade Area of the Americas, FTAA, which was part of the summit of the Americas process and the centerpiece of our relationships with the Americas, all the way to Canada.

The Brazilians were beginning to show their opposition to that, so that was yet another area of irritation between our two countries. At the end of the day, the Brazilians worked to stop the hemispheric wide FTAA.

Q: Well, let's move over to Venezuela during the time you were assistant secretary. How stood things?

ROMERO: Well, Venezuela was going through a revolution. In many ways, the two party system that had governed Venezuela since the Fifties, the AD Party and the COPEI Party, had lost touch with the people. There was a huge mass of marginalized and poor people underneath.

The parties had alternated in power during those decades and it was a system that was filled with corruption and a lot of I guess you would say featherbedding, in terms of jobs for the political faithful. They didn't allow for talented, smart, younger members of this political elite to become a new generation of leaders.

And what happened was an ex-coup plotter by the name of Hugo Chavez who had been jailed and was running for office on a platform of getting rid of the old order, particularly these two parties. He was gathering momentum and it looked like he would make a strong run for the presidency.

At that time we had as assistant secretary a gentleman by the name of Jeff Davidow, who had been the U.S. ambassador in Venezuela just before coming back and being named as assistant secretary. So he was my boss at the time and I was his deputy, the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State.

Jeff had said many things in Venezuela at the time as U.S. ambassador about how Hugo Chavez as a coup plotter, he was anti-democratic and he deserved the sentence that he got and he couldn't get a visa into the United States because of his coup plotting.

When Chavez won the elections, the Secretary and Davidow spoke and they believed that it was important to send somebody down there, a senior person in the bureau, but not Jeff, because of the history that they had with Chavez.

So they sent me down and this was during the long interregnum between Chavez's victory and his swearing in. I think it was the beginning of December when he won the

election and the swearing in was the end of February the next year, a long period of interregnum.

And Chavez was really enjoying his victory, there was lots of jubilation in the streets, poor people came of the barrios and not only just poor people, a lot of people believed that he was going to be the reformer that the country needed, a rich country but the riches never really trickled down to the poor and he would change things in a democratic way, he swore to be a "small d" democrat.

And so because of that we believed that it was necessary to reach out to him. So they sent me down there and in the ensuing months I went down there about four or five times, either by myself or as part of a delegation.

In the first meeting with Chavez, he was exceedingly gracious, couldn't be more charming, one on one, he told me everything that I wanted to hear about his being a "small d" democrat and wanting nothing other than development and jobs and democracy for the Venezuelan people, etc, etc and that he had every intention to cooperate with us on a whole host of issues, to include counter-narcotics.

Venezuela's in a strategic location, not particularly as a site for growing coca but much of the trafficking goes through either Venezuelan airspace or Venezuelan waters, or even overland, for cocaine and heroin transit.

Anyway, early on it became apparent to me that his charm and his effusiveness was not the whole story, that he did have another agenda. I think there was one particular telephone call that I had made that led me believe that there was going to be serious problems with him. We were helping to arrange a visit by him to the United States, as president-elect, not as president, he wouldn't be sworn in for another couple of months, but he was desperate to come to the United States. He wanted to meet with government officials in Washington and he wanted to go to New York and meet with international financiers and financial types to calm the markets about the future of Venezuela and because he was such a baseball fanatic, he wanted to go to a MLB (major league baseball) game.

So we arranged for a visit up here. He was not yet president of Venezuela and he did not feel comfortable with using the Venezuelan embassy and their consulates to arrange the visit. So we arranged for him to visit the Council of the Americas in New York, meetings with bankers, businesses that either have interests or want to have interests, particularly in petroleum and gas in Venezuela. His idea was to meet with them and calm them down about what his ascent to power meant for them and private business and private enterprise.

We arranged for him to throw out the first ball at a Mets game and he loved that and we arranged for him to meet with then-national security advisor Sandy Berger. We told him it would be inappropriate for him to meet with the president, since he hadn't been sworn in yet and he accepted that.

On the day of that meeting, he was told that President Clinton might stop by for a handshake, which would have been five minutes. But the president stayed speaking with Chavez for almost an hour.

But before that, as I'm arranging this visit, he lets me know that he is going to precede the visit by a visit to Havana. And I said to him, "Well, Mr. President, with all due respect, if you're trying to convince people that you have no secret agenda, that you're pro-business and very pro-democracy and that you're into institutional reform in your country, within democratic parameters, then why on earth would you go to Cuba first. I would strongly urge you not to go."

And he said, "No, the Cubans had been very accommodating to me, when I was released from prison, I went to Cuba and have a commitment to them."

So I said, "Well, you're president-elect, you can do whatever you like, but I can tell you going to Cuba first is going to make everything that you want to do in the United States that much harder and there's going to be a lot more people doubting your sincerity."

He went to Cuba anyway and got the Cuban equivalent of a ticker tape parade as a hero and it did have a major effect on his visit to the United States, which was I think less than a week after that.

But getting back to the meeting in Sandy Berger's office, President Clinton stopped by, they had a very good meeting, President Clinton, as was his wont, stuck with his talking points and then elaborated on them, about the need to do what Chavez had said he wanted to do within the context of democratic institutions.

And of course Chavez swore that he would. Through the subsequent months and years it became evident to me that he had another agenda and that that agenda was basically a facade of democracy but behind that there would be a whole lot more, or, in Latin America, as they say, a *caudillo* approach.

And in fact he became a strong man. He did everything that he could to eviscerate democratic checks and balances. He owned every facet of government and he's attacked the private sector, particularly the press.

There were those U.S. diplomats who early on would say, "Don't worry about Chavez's rhetoric, just look at what he does, as opposed to what he says" and after having heard that a couple of times from our diplomats, particularly down in our embassy in Venezuela, I had to say, "I'm looking at what he's doing and I don't like what he's doing."

I started to speak out. I was the first person to speak out about Venezuela's support for Colombian guerillas and terrorists and when I had a conversation with Chavez about that he said, "No, no, no, there's no government support. I can't tell you whether they're

getting support from small business people or local people on our border, but there is no government support."

But he said something to me very revealing. He said to me, "I was a junior officer on the border with Colombia when I was in the Venezuelan Army and I have to tell you that many of the Colombians on their side of the border view the guerillas as the legitimate army in that part of the country. They don't see the government as being legitimate, they only see the FARC as being legitimate," which began to tell me where he was coming from. Later, as lots of subsequent information has come forward, he began to support the FARC and other groups from Venezuelan territory, as a matter of policy. But at the time, he was still playing this charade. At one point, towards my retirement, I gave an interview with a journalist from Miami called Andres Oppenheimer, where I talked about troubling Venezuelan support for the FARC guerillas.

And the reaction of Venezuela was just to eviscerate me publicly. In a speech to the diplomatic corps, the annual speech that the president gives to the diplomatic corps in Caracas, I think it was about a two hour speech and our ambassador at the time, Donna Hrinak, called me on the telephone, because she had just walked out of it after almost an hour, most of what she'd heard being devoted to discrediting me personally for having made those statements and just generally laying into me. Her voice was shaking, she was so angry at what she'd just come from.

But that was the way they bullied people into submission. They thought that somehow laying into me that way would somehow quiet me. It didn't.

But that's kind of the long and short of it, in terms of the trajectory that Venezuela has taken since then.

Q: Was this Chavez sort of being Chavez, or was he misreading the American public, because this bullying doesn't work.

ROMERO: The bullying works in his own country and it seems to work in some of the other countries around Venezuela, just to bully people into submission seems to work domestically. It does not work internationally and it got my back up.

Q: You of course went through our reaction to the Sandinista takeover in Nicaragua. Was Chavez able to tap into the European socialist left or something? You know what I'm talking about.

ROMERO: In Latin America, Stu and also in Western Europe there are socialists, many of them hopelessly romantic about the Left and particularly the armed left and they saw Chavez's victory in Caracas as a victory for the poor and the downtrodden, etc.

I share the view about doing something for the poor and downtrodden. The gap between the haves and the have nots in Latin America is worse than in any other part of the world and it's not getting any better.

Access to public education and public health in many countries is abysmal. The poor are desperately poor in a lot of these countries and have virtually little or no chance of aspiring towards upward mobility.

But to basically romanticize and overlook constitutional and legal abuses of authority, against civil liberties and that sort of thing for the sake of somehow having this result in the uplifting of the lot of poor people is hopelessly naive.

And I just found it to be incomprehensible in some countries, particularly in the Netherlands, for example, in France, with a lot of the NGO community concerned with Latin America there.

And the problem with Western Europe in this regard is that Latin America is of such little consequence to Western Europe's foreign policy interests that they allow these groups to have a larger influence on policy than they would normally have.

Q: When I was a kid we went through this with Stalin and the Soviet Union. It's always a problem. The socialist movement is an impediment to getting things done.

ROMERO: It is and I think I spoke earlier about the meeting that I had with the Europeans over Plan Colombia and how I abruptly ended the meeting and ushered them out of the office after they told me of the abysmally low amount that they were going to contribute to Plan Colombia.

This was after several months, maybe six, seven months of lobbying Western European governments to contribute their fair share to Plan Colombia and every time I went on these lobbying missions I was meeting with people who had the most skewed view of what was happening in Latin America, largely not reported from their embassies, but basically from local NGOs who had strong biases against Latin American governments and towards armed and unarmed movements.

Q: Turning now to Paraguay, a divide between sort of the indigenous population and the ruling class and all, was this a problem that we saw at the time?

ROMERO: I had to make a couple of trips down to Paraguay and it mostly had to do with loose talk about the possibility of a military coup. I had to meet with the military down there to try to convince them, "If you do this, you're going to be the odd man out, every other country in Latin America has democratically elected presidents."

So it was a continuing source of unrest, in terms of Paraguay, for a number of reasons. The first is, there's a huge mass of dispossessed, really poor people in Paraguay that have little to no chance of cracking into the formal economy, let alone having any upward mobility.

The other part of it is that there had been a long, long history of strong man politics in Paraguay, under Stroessner and the military played a big role in, if not determining who was president, determining how long they lasted in the presidency.

But this gets to another point that we've touched on earlier and that is that we worked very, very closely in coordinating all that we did down there with the Brazilians. Brazil as a country and Brazilian diplomats have an enormous influence in Paraguay. And they played a positive role. I never felt that they liked our going down there and meeting with the president and making public our support for democratic processes. The other thing was that we had a real sincere and deep concern about corruption in Paraguay.

Q: It was almost one of these smuggling states, wasn't it?

ROMERO: The governing class was a kleptocracy, in many respects and we always talked about that and the Brazilians seemed to care less about that and more about general stability and would tell us that they know more about Paraguay and what to do than we did.

And I took that point. They were right. Paraguay was on their border, it wasn't on our border. But I never felt that they played a particularly strong role in defense of democracy during that time. But things did move ahead and since then Paraguay has had several democratically elected presidents and hasn't had a coup. So I think in general it's been a mild success story.

Q: How about Uruguay?

ROMERO: Didn't spend much time in Uruguay. Uruguay, in many ways, is a model for the rest of South America, in terms of its democratic institutions, its assistance to the poor and impoverished and marginalized and just basically good governance.

I didn't have a lot of reasons to go there, simply because it worked and at the time Buddy MacKay was the White House special envoy for the Americas and he went down quite a bit, met with the president and forged a relationship with him.

Because Uruguay is so small, though, it had a minor influence, in terms of exporting its model and kind of free trade with a human face on it and we tried to cultivate Chile to try to do, 'cause Chile was quite a success story and an economic powerhouse, politically stable and good democratic institutions.

Q: Were we trying to undue what had been alleged was our influence on the Pinochet government, or not?

ROMERO: When I was Assistant Secretary, that had happened so long ago that it was pretty much ancient history. I remember one of the things that we did, I authorized a declassification of thousands of documents, State Department cables and memoranda of conversation from that period of time that basically talked about deliberations inside the

Department and the White House over Allende, Pinochet and that whole era, trying to give everything that we could to uncover whether there was any U.S. complicity in the encouragement of Pinochet's coup and the death of Allende.

And we gave all of those documents out and it did show some State Department people, particularly Henry Kissinger, who was Secretary of State at the time, it did show him to be, I wouldn't say encouraging, but nonetheless not perturbed by the move by the Chilean military to overthrow the Allende regime and I think they might have even given signals to the Chilean military that this would be acceptable to us.

I had no dog in this fight. This had happened when I was in graduate school, okay and in fact the first encounter that I ever had with a Foreign Service Officer was when I was in graduate school and they sent two hapless junior officers out to the campuses to quell all of the tumult related to the invasion of Cambodia that led to Kent State and Jackson State and all of those campus riots.

And so they sent *en masse* junior officers, one tour officers, out to the campuses to quell everything and talk about the reason why we had invaded Cambodia. In fact, I supported the invasion of Cambodia in a paper that I wrote in graduate school at the time and got a C- on that paper, because I came out on the wrong side as far as my professor was concerned.

I didn't have a problem with our policy towards Cambodia. The North Vietnamese were staging all kinds of attacks from Cambodia into Vietnam at the time and I thought we had every right to do what we did.

I was more concerned about what the State Department and particularly Henry Kissinger did or did not do in Chile. And I raised that in a question to these junior officers in a meeting of maybe about eighty or ninety political science, international relations students at Florida State in Tallahassee. They had no clue. One had served in Asia, first tour and the other one I think had served in Western Europe. They had no clue what I was talking about, didn't really guidance for that.

Q: What was happening in Bolivia at the time?

ROMERO: At the time, there was a general who had been elected president who had been a military dictator before that, during the bad years and had at that time taken a very strong handed approach, similar to what governments in Argentina and Chile and Uruguay and also in Brazil were doing at the same time.

But then he becomes an elected president years later. He succeeds a guy who was Bolivian but who had immigrated to the United States at a very young age called Gonzalo Sánchez, "Goni," we called him for short, he basically made a lot of money as a businessman in Chicago, went back and got engaged in Bolivian politics and ran for president and got elected twice, very pro-private sector, free trade, spoke Spanish with a

very heavy gringo accent, but got elected and I thought he was a pretty good president. He privatized a lot of state owned industries in a very transparent, open way.

His first administration was highly successful. He probably shouldn't have run again, but did and I can remember as the indigenous groups were marching on the presidential palace that I was on the phone with him, literally, to try to help him save himself and we were on the phone literally in the last minutes before he was smuggled out of the presidential palace in an ambulance and fled the country.

And then that gave rise to a lot of other leaders, to include Morales, the indigenous leader, now. But it was an interesting time in Bolivia. I kind of felt that Goni should have left it at one administration. He did a lot to reform government, privatized a lot of state owned industries, should have left it at that.

But coming back the second time, I think that there was just way too much popular tumult. The indigenous had never really been represented by one of their own. Morales was one of their own and unfortunately Goni was left in a tight spot.

Q: What about Ecuador?

ROMERO: Ecuador, at the time that I was assistant secretary? I think we spoke about the time that I was ambassador, didn't we?

Q: Yeah.

ROMERO: When I was Assistant Secretary, Ecuador, after I left, they had gone through something like five presidents in four years, there was all kinds of corruption going on. One president was president for 48 hours.

And when I left there was a gentleman who was elected, I use the term "gentleman" very loosely, who was elected president by the name of Abdalá Bucaram, who was basically a thief with a presidential sash, as corrupt as they come.

He was overthrown and his vice president took over. I spent a lot of time on Ecuador, largely because of the fragility of their political system, particularly the presidency, the rotating presidents and trying to keep the military outside of politics and not being the arbiter of who was the president.

One of the problems with Latin American militaries is that I think all of them have an obligation that they swear to to uphold the constitution and what that has resulted in, in many cases, is a military role in domestic politics and it's not been a positive thing. Well, there's been a few positive manifestations, but generally it's been very negative, that role and Ecuador was going through a very tumultuous time.

I think that probably the best president that they had during that time was Jamil Mahuad, but he had medical problems that interfered with his ability to govern. He was the mayor of Quito before that. Sometimes people would mistake us, because we look alike.

He would go out in the hustings, people would come up to him and complain about being denied a visa. And sometimes when I would go out in Quito people would come up to me and ask me why we turned off the water and the electricity for a couple of hours a day.

But he was run out of town, as many, many others have been and now they have a president who is more in the mold of Hugo Chavez, regrettably. There was a need in Ecuador to strengthen the office of the presidency, to make it less an *ad hoc* parliamentary system and I think they've gone to the other extreme. This guy, President Correa, is more a *caudillo*, a strong man, than he is a democratic president.

Q: Mexico almost stands outside the bureau, doesn't it, it's such a major country for us?

ROMERO: Well, it's our biggest office in the bureau, for all the obvious reasons. The relationship between the United States and Mexico is hugely important to us.

That relationship is not free of problems, relatively, the way our relationship with Canada is and it requires a lot of work across the board, from visas to immigration to border security to environmental issues at the border, trucking issues, NAFTA is huge for us, there's lot of cultural exchanges, there's all kinds of things and it just requires a lot of people to monitor the relationship.

It's a complex relationship and one that I think will become even more important as the years move ahead. When I talk about the strategic nature of Latin America in terms of our foreign policy there is no other country that is more strategic than Mexico to the United States.

Q: While you were assistant secretary, were there any overriding issues?

ROMERO: Related to Mexico? I think the overriding issue was immigration reform in the United States and cooperation with Mexican authorities on illegal immigration. That was the key issue.

There were minor issues, but nonetheless important, like trucking. The NAFTA agreement established that Mexican truck drivers could deliver their cargos in the United States. We haven't yet allowed that. Mexican drivers and rigs have to stop within a twenty-mile radius of the border to unload their cargos into American trucks.

Q: The real problem is the Teamsters Union.

ROMERO: Partly the Teamsters, but also a fear on the part of many in law enforcement that somehow the Mexican rigs were not up to snuff, they didn't have the safety and other

requirements that U.S. trucks did. And there was some justification for saying that at the time.

And this was more of a prejudice than anything else, that somehow Mexican drivers were not as reliable as U.S. teamsters, just a solid prejudice, tequila-fueled Mexican drivers on U.S. roads, that sort of thing.

But the Teamsters played a big role in it, they thought they would lose a lot of jobs to Mexican drivers. In the end, they did not.

So, anyway, that was one issue, that just got resolved.

But at the time immigration reform was the big issue, particularly when President Bush came in. Being a border governor, he had a real affinity with President Fox in Mexico and when I took President Bush to his first meeting with Mexican President Fox in President Fox's hometown of Guanajuato, Mexico, we had the meeting at President Fox's ranch and it was quite memorable.

The two bonded and they committed themselves to working together on immigration reform and the border and a host of other issues that we were going to partner on. And I don't think that there was ever a time that I can remember where our relationship with Mexico was that good.

Unfortunately, what happened over the years, number one, 9/11 put a damper on the relationship, largely because we were forced to look elsewhere in terms of our national security interests, so our focus kind of moved away from Mexico.

The immigration reform issue, we had a template and we had teams already established to start moving this negotiation forward and then of course moving reform through Congress, that stalled after 9/11 and then when it was time to get it going again, a year, year and a half, later, there was every indication that Karl Rove in the White House was saying, "Hey, we're going into off-term elections, the Republican base doesn't want to see immigration reform, leave it alone, we'll come back to it later."

The White House decided to do that and there was no coming back after that. I think those against immigration reform in the Republican Party basically took control of the issue and there was never any advancement.

Q: The Republican are now learning how dangerous that strategy might ultimately prove to be, because Hispanic voters are going to become a major factor and Republicans seem to be following a Know Nothing i.e., *a nativist agenda.*

ROMERO: Well, that's exactly right. They've taken a very nativist approach to immigration reform. This is something that can benefit our country and benefit Mexico at the same time. It's long overdue.

They're going to take a hit and I think the current polls are showing that Hispanics don't believe that their interests are served by the Republican Party.

Q: Was drug criminality, which now is rampant in Mexico, was that at all a factor then?

ROMERO: Yes, it was, but not to the extent of street violence, the way it is now, gang on gang violence that's just killing and wounding lots of innocent people. You didn't have that, because there was kind of a peace among the trafficking groups at the time.

What you did have, which was very troubling, was a penetration by these groups into the highest echelons of the Mexican police, various police forces, including the military and that was really a problem.

But the cooperation between Mexico and the United States now is unprecedented across the board and I hope it continues.

Q: I'm wondering whether, Canada was included in your bailiwick while you were there. Did you almost have to take a crash course in Canada?

ROMERO: I did. I spent a lot of time reading up on Canada before we brought them into the bureau and then spent a lot of time in Canada afterwards, assuring them that just because the responsibility changed from the European Bureau to the Western Hemisphere Bureau, that it was the right thing to do and that they would not be treated as second class citizens as a result.

And we did some incredible things with the Canadians, partnering on lots of things in Latin America, to include the last days of the Fujimori Administration and staffing out a transition roundtable for the political opposition in Peru, a lot of work together at the OAS. It was really a very, very positive thing.

We started something called the CUSP, the Canadian-U.S. Partnership, which was the blueprint for how Canadian and U.S. agencies cooperate today across the border, in terms of environmental issues, trade issues, counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics issues, you name it, this CUSP was the foundation for that.

We launched that and we treated Canada as they should have been treated in every way and that is as a partner towards Latin America and I think they rose to the occasion.

Q: It seemed to me, the Canadians have obviously got their problems about America being too big, their whole population living within a hundred miles of the American border, practically.

But Cuba has been used as one place to show we have our own foreign policy and all that. Was Cuba a political hobbyhorse for the Canadians?

ROMERO: Well, I think that there was probably some, although I think they were a minority, in Canada, in government and out, who believed that maintaining an open relationship with Cuba, as opposed to the sticks that the United States continually used towards Cuba was a way of demonstrating their independence from the United States.

But I think a lot of Canadian diplomats didn't wear rose colored glasses and mostly thought that you could gain more from an opening in Cuba by being open to them on the economic side and truly believed that the way we approached China, for example, could be done in Cuba.

They didn't have much to show for it at that time. Now there is a little bit more to show for it on the economic opening, but at the time there wasn't.

Q: I remember Prime Minister Chrétien going down and sort of hoping to get something from a visit to Cuba and getting absolutely nothing.

ROMERO: Yeah, the dark secret about Cuba is that while the Cubans decry our economic embargo, we have medicine and food going down but they decry it. But quite frankly without it the Castro regime wouldn't survive, because they wouldn't have anybody to blame for the failure of their system.

Q: Peter, when did you retire?

ROMERO: I retired in August of 2001, just before 9/11.

Q: How did you find the Bush Administration, when it came in in 2001, vis-a-vis *the Clinton Administration?*

ROMERO: I found it obviously further to the right than the Clinton Administration. I think that in the end they had an agenda to strengthen the military, to strengthen our national security.

And ironically, they had an agenda to create an agency called Homeland Security before 9/11. Most people believe that it was the son or daughter of 9/11. It was not, because I remember Colin Powell calling me up and saying, "Would you come up to my office for a minute?" That's what he would do. You never felt comfortable leaving the phone, because at any moment he would just call you directly. He had the Assistant Secretaries on his speed dial.

So he said, "Pete, come on up for a second."

So I come on up. And he said, "Listen, I just came from the White House," this was in May or June of 2001, "and they were talking to me about the creation of an agency or department that would take elements of Justice, Customs and that sort of thing, the Coast Guard, etc and bring them together into an agency that would be concerned about defending the homeland. What do you think about that?"

So 9/11 accelerated the agenda that a lot of people in the Bush Administration had had. At that time, when I retired, I was very hopeful, because of the trip to Guanajuato, because of the fact that President Bush had hosted Prime Minister Chrétien in the White House as his first foreign visitor and the interest that was being manifested by the White House towards Latin America, I said, "Man, my job is done. These guys get it."

But in point of fact what I did see was the beginning stages of excesses by the Bush Administration that were later played out unfortunately in a very bad way.

Q: Well, what have you done since?

ROMERO: I left, I went to New York, I became an investment banker, doing mergers, acquisitions and private equity, leading two banks in a joint venture. Learned a hell of a lot, worked with some really smart, talented people.

Came back to Washington, did that for while on my own, in conjunction with others. Now I represent companies that do business overseas, everything from picking local partners to staying out of trouble or getting out of trouble politically to marketing U.S. security technology to the Latin American, presumably region.

And I teach at Georgetown, I teach a course on violent non-state actors. So retirement's been good for me.

Q: Probably a good place to stop. I've enjoyed this conversation we've had here. I've learned a lot.

ROMERO: Well, good, I'm glad and I hope anybody who reads this will have the same reaction. This is going to hopefully be a blueprint for me to think through for writing something.

Q: Well, I hope you will. I hope you can expand on the transcript of our conversation, questions I didn't ask, themes that I didn't develop.

ROMERO: Okay, that's a deal. I'd like to work on that, yeah.

Q: Great! Thank you.

ROMERO: No, thank you, Stu. This has been a lot of fun, a trip down memory lane, things that I'd long forgotten.

End of interview