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

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INTERVIEW

Q: I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about your background.

STERNER: Well my childhood was spent both on the East Coast of the United States and the West Coast. I came back and went to boarding school in Newport, Rhode Island, and then Harvard College, and when I got out of Harvard --

Q: When did you get out of Harvard?

STERNER: That was 1951. When I got out of Harvard, I got a job with the Arabian-American Oil Company in Saudi Arabia and that really was the beginning of a life-long interest in and specialization in Middle Eastern Affairs.

Q: Where did you go?

STERNER: I went to Dhahran in the first instance but I also spent about six months in as Ra's at Tannurah which is where the refinery is located. Then I spent about a year on the pump stations on Tapline which takes oil from the eastern part of Saudi Arabia to a port near Beirut.

Q: Aramco is a very important factor in American foreign relations. It's a unique organization--I might add just for the record, that I served myself on my second tour from 1958-1960 in Dhahran, so I'm familiar with some of this. Could you tell a little about your staffing and how you related to the Saudis at that time?

STERNER: It was a fascinating first job for me. This was a period when there was the largest American presence in Aramco because shortly afterwards the company began to, Arabize its labor force, to bring in both qualified Saudis who were of course very hard to find for many jobs, but also Palestinians who were refugees at the time and therefore some of them very well qualified. But when I was there, there were about 15,000 Americans doing just everything. They were the geologists, of course, the refinery managers, but they also were the clerks, the maintenance people, the air conditioning people. My own job was on the government relations staff. Our job was to conduct the company's business with various elements of the Saudi Government. At the top level it was conducted by people like Floyd Ohliger and Tom Barger who were responsible for concession affairs and dealings with the King and his ministers. At my level as a junior employee of the company it was clearing things through customs and later on when I was on the Tapline, keeping the affairs of the little pump station amicable with the local Saudi governor in that area. That consisted of building water wells for the tribes, keeping the local amir supplied with certain things we were obligated to do, making sure that he provided police protection and that kind of thing. It was a wonderful first job. Looking back on it, I was a bachelor at the time, therefore without responsibilities, and we worked seven days a week in those days because there wasn't much else to do on your day off, and every six weeks you got a week off, which meant you could travel anywhere in the Middle East. So I went to Baghdad, Cairo, Damascus, Aleppo, Beirut, and took trips up into the mountains of Lebanon many times. It was just a wonderful experience. I ended up feeling that though I probably did not want to go back to spend a career in the oil company, where one tended to keep going back to just Saudi Arabia, I was very interested in the Middle East and wanted to pursue a career somehow in that area.

Q: Let me ask a question about the attitude as you saw it, of Aramco, the upper echelon of Aramco towards the Saudis, because it struck me, and I'm going somewhat ahead to my time-- that Aramco had the idea that let's turn this over--we're going to lose out if we get into a nose to nose confrontation with the Saudis and let's give them as much as they

can absorb whereas when you talk about British Petroleum or any of the other companies that were dealing in the area the whole idea was no, no, never ever. And, of course, these all ended up with nationalization. It was a much bumpier road. Did you feel that? Were you under instruction or why did they have this idea?

STERNER: I didn't realize it fully until later on when I had a broader perspective of oil affairs in other countries. The extent to which Aramco was perceived by other people in the oil industry as being very forward in granting concessions to the host government--

Q: Or seen as a wimp--

STERNER: Or seen as a wimp--however you want to describe it. I got there shortly after the deal for a fifty-fifty split which of course set a precedent for people like the British who had equity oil interests all over the Middle East. It was very hard for them to maintain much tougher earlier type arrangements. I got the full flavor of this when I subsequently got into the diplomatic service and then was sent as my first post to Aden and the place was full of colonial Brits who still held Aramco responsible for the erosion of their interests, as they saw it, in places like Iran. It even affected my personal relations, their knowing that I had a background with Aramco. There were a lot of hard feelings.

Q: How did you get into the Foreign Service? You worked for Aramco until 1953.

STERNER: When I came back I was subject to the draft. This was the tail end of the Korean War. I finally was drafted in 1954. I spent two years in the U.S. Army as an enlisted man. While I was in the Army, I looked at various career alternatives and decided that the diplomatic service interested me. I took the exams and fortunately it was a period when I had plenty of time. I was stationed in the United States which helped. I was, in fact, right across the river in Fort Myer, Virginia for much of my time. So I took the exams and when I got out I guess I'd done the written but still had the orals when I was discharged from the Army. My Army career had nothing to do with the Middle East, but I did have an interesting job. I was loaned as a political officer, so called, to Air Force intelligence who were involved in targeting H-bombs all over the place which was a new experience for me.

Q: You're not the first man. Robert Duemling who was later ambassador to Suriname was a Naval Officer targeting nuclear weapons strikes against China in Japan at the same period.

STERNER: An awful lot of it was going at the time. My job was to figure out how to position the bomb blast so as to wipe out the communist party apparatus in various Eastern European countries. At the same time, we were supposed to jiggle the zero point so that it wouldn't break all the stained glass windows in some famous Cathedral. The job had its Strangelovian features.

When I got out I wanted to pursue my Middle Eastern interests and go back out there. I therefore came into the Foreign Service.

Q: Could you characterize the junior officers? You went into a class didn't you?

STERNER: Yes, of course.

Q: In 1956. Could you characterize the class you came into? What kind of people were they? What was their outlook? How did they approach the job?

STERNER: It was a hopeful and enthusiastic period for foreign affairs. Looking back on my college classmates, quite a few came into the Foreign Service and the CIA, and the Junior Management Program of the Civil Service and otherwise entered government service. Public service was in high regard at the time, certainly in comparison with later periods. I think that enthusiasm was reflected in my entering class. It was a rather large class as I remember it, 35 or 40 or something like that. I was on the whole regarded with quite a bit of interest because very few of my classmates had anything in their background as exotic as having lived in Saudi Arabia. I knew what I wanted to do, I was interested even then in language training. They were much more uncertain what shape their career might take. But I was age-wise in the median I guess, 27. I still see some of those fellows. Some of them are still in the Service. Bill Brown is our ambassador in Israel at the moment. He was one of my classmates. Jim Lowenstein got of the Service about when I did and is now a consultant here in town. Also one of my classmates, Walt Cutler, is now President of Meridian House--one of your interviewees I see. I think the mood was very good in that period.

Q: This was a career you were going into, not a job?

STERNER: That was very much the feeling for everybody. And it was an interesting period from another point of view because it was really the beginning of the consciousness of the Third World emerging out of World War II. Instead of the pre-war pattern of training you in French or Spanish and then expecting you to go almost anywhere, they were beginning to be interested in people who wanted to focus on a given part of the world, and were willing to learn some of the difficult third world languages. It was a new dimension which increased the enthusiasm for the Service. When we came in we had two major world crises, which also provided a lot of excitement. The Soviet invasion of Hungary occurred while our class was in training.

Q: This was in the fall of 1956.

STERNER: It was in the fall of '56 and there was also the second Middle East crisis, the Suez crisis.

Q: Well, tell us about your first assignment and what you were doing.

STERNER: I was sent to Aden. It was a small two-officer post. Bill Crawford was the Consul and I was the Vice Consul. It was very much a straight consular consulate for that period of time and I did all the consular work. You know, we got drunken American seamen out of jail, and we repatriated people, and so on...but it had some interesting political dimensions to it. We covered Yemen because nobody else did. We had no post in Yemen in those days. Nothing much had happened for a long time in Yemen. It was one of those remote places in the world that nobody ever got to and nobody had any perceived interest in. But all of a sudden, there was a sort of mini-crisis in the Eisenhower Administration when it became aware that the Soviets were interested in the place. This was peak cold war period and people got interested in areas where the Soviets were making any kind of inroads. At the time the Crown Prince of Yemen, Badr ibn Ahmad, began to consort with the Soviets, invited a Soviet delegation to come and look at oil concessions possibilities, got some Soviet engineers to come down, and made a trip to Moscow, as I remember. Well, this all astonished Washington, and made them realize that Yemen, a place they'd never heard of before, was indeed one of the most strategic countries in the world. Bill Crawford began to get instructions to go up there and cultivate these Yemenis and try to point out they were doing the wrong thing. So the Cold War sort of came to the Consul in Aden and Yemen. We also had at one point responsibility for British Somaliland. That was almost entirely consular in nature--just to visit every now and then, make sure our citizens were all right, issue passports, visas, etc. Aden itself was rather a large territory if you wanted to take it seriously. There was the city of Aden, which was a British Crown Colony, and beyond it you had both the Western Protectorate and the Hadhramaut, sizeable areas to roam about in.

Q: What was the situation in Aden and around, because I've never really fully understood it, and also why that area remains a hard core Marxist regime? Why in the Arab world which seems so impervious to this sort of business, and how did it happen?

STERNER: That's a very good question. I have no satisfactory answer for it, and certainly my experience in Aden at that time would not have suggested a colonial background that was very different from many other parts of the Arab world. When we were there, it was an early stage in the growth of Arab nationalist movements in the colony itself. But Gamal Abdul Nasser was at the peak of his popularity at the time. This naturally had an impact even in far off Aden. The British were beginning to have to cope with nationalist pressures and movements. There was quite a bit of political ferment in those days but it was all peaceful and only later became violent. When Curt Jones was Consul ten years later it was really dangerous. He had to go around with guards and there were grenades going off in restaurants. It was quite serious. That was not happening when we were there. Bill Crawford ...

Q: This would be William R. Crawford?

STERNER: William R. Crawford. Yes.

Q: There are several Crawfords.

STERNER: He was later our Ambassador in Yemen and Cyprus. He tried to be in touch with some of the Adenese who were beginning to become nationalists and opposition leaders. This caused a bit of heat at times between ourselves and the British. They felt we should not have contact with some of these people because we were giving them enhanced credence and respectability, and we had to sort that out with the British and make it clear that we had a responsibility to Washington to keep them informed about what was going on. On the whole our relations were really very good with the British Government down there. Aden is a magnificent natural harbor. It had a large British Petroleum refinery. There was a lot of sea traffic. The port was always full of ships that had transited the Suez Canal, were refueling and picking up supplies.

Q: Was the Suez Canal open at that point?

STERNER: The Suez Canal was indeed open at that point. It was the '67 war when it had a prolonged blockage. Unlike the Aden Colony where there was a very direct and immediate British rule, the British in the Protectorate areas relied on a loose structure of advisors and tribal rulers who were linked to the British individually in protectorate treaties with the understanding that they were not to deal with foreign powers, that the British had commercial rights and privileges, and in return for that, they offered the Sheiks protection . Every now and then the British would feel that one of the rulers was consorting with the wrong people--Yemenis, or going off on his own and required a bit of punishment, at which point a Lancaster bomber would lumber off from Aden airport and usually after a warning so the little town could be evacuated, they'd drop a few bombs to blow up the Sheik's palace. That was the manner of British control which had been going on for a long while.

Q: They'd been using airplanes in the Arab World since World War I.

STERNER: Sure. That was the way to get the tribes in line. On the whole it worked and it was not the hinterland that ended up posing a problem for the British. It was the underground movement in Aden itself.

Q: At the time you didn't feel any great stirring?

STERNER: In our time the movement in Aden was not strong enough to be seen as a threat to British rule, but all of us could speculate from the impact that Nasser and other Arab nationalist movements were having. You remember the Qasim revolution in Iraq happened about this time as well.

Q: That was July 14, 1958.

STERNER: Quite right. We were down there about that time. The British and American intervention in Jordan and Lebanon, respectively, also in the summer and fall of 1958. It looked as if western interests were on the run.

Q: I assume you had the same thing we saw in Dhahran and Bahrain that is, the marketplaces were filled with pictures of Nasser on thermoses, on cups, on pictures, everywhere you went, Nasser was the equivalent of a sort of God. This was in the marketplace.

STERNER: Absolutely. I remember walking through the streets of the bazaar in Aden, and when Nasser was giving a major speech you could walk from place to place in town and not miss a word because every radio in the entire town was tuned in. He really had the power to stir these people up. So one could speculate, coming back to your question, that this would be a tide that would affect western interests in a far-off place like Aden.

Q: Also at the time, and I'd like your feeling on this, as Americans who were interested in foreign policy, we saw nationalist tides as being the wave of the future and we were not sure what was going to happen. We were both for and against them, sort of an ambivalent feeling. One, they might louse up our problems in some areas, but at the same time we were for anti-colonialism and wanted these people to emerge.

STERNER: I think that was very much it. We thought this was something wholesome, a new phase of welcome self-determination in the world, providing they didn't start consorting with Moscow. That was a big proviso because I think subsequently we lacked confidence that these people had the ability to make deals with Moscow and not become the creatures of the Soviet Union.

Q: Now, you went into Arabic training. Is that right?

STERNER: Yes, I left early since it was short of the normal two-year junior assignment in a post. I spent eighteen months in Aden, then went up to a class that was opening in Arabic in Beirut. I'd indicated my interest in this. I had learned some Arabic during my stay in Saudi Arabia but not very systematically because I had not had any training opportunities there. The FSI course had recently moved from Washington to Beirut, which was an enormous asset. It was great to be in the spot, and Beirut itself was a fascinating place. It was just coming out of the crisis of 1958 when I arrived. I got there in October of 1958 and the marines had just withdrawn. The Chehab Government had been installed, but there were still the occasional explosion going off somewhere in the city. But once it quieted down it was great being a student at that time. In contrast to the embassy officers who were very busy with day to day political responsibilities, the students had an opportunity to look into the causes of the conflict, to talk with the Lebanese in a way that political officers could not. On the other hand, we were constantly meeting with the political officers because we were a resource that they could draw on. We had leisure to get to parts of Lebanon that they simply didn't have time to get to. So we could travel around a bit, and had a great time, learned some Arabic apparently.

Looking back on the tragedy of Lebanon, it was a sort of wholesome period too. Both the Muslims and the Christians who had gone through this period seemed to derive a healthy lesson from the 1958 experience, and to be determined that this sort of thing would never happen again. Of course, they were so wrong about that.

Q: This was a time of unity. You did not see this thing as being the next Belfast?

STERNER: No, it was hard to predict that it would go in that direction. Of course we were all conscious of the deep divisions in Lebanese society, which had been exacerbated by the Nasser phenomenon and by Chamoun's stubborn effort to continue in office when it was quite clear it was against the constitution. There was much blame on both sides. The Nasserists were very aggressive, did not have the Lebanese interests primarily in mind. They were Arab nationalists; didn't care what happened to the Christian minorities and other people who didn't share their enthusiasm for Arab nationalism. But when Chehab came in, there was a moment of hope that the Lebanese, Muslim and Christian, would see that this involvement in broader Arab affairs would end up being a tragedy for Lebanon, and that somehow they had to preserve the comity of their own little nation. Their prosperity, their political health depended on that, and for a while they did that. Then it of course broke down later.

Q: I wonder if you could talk a little about the people taking Arabic with you? You're an Arabist, and the Arabists in the Foreign Service are often accused of being a particular breed. At that time, how did you see it and how did you see Israel?

STERNER: It's hard to tell exactly who was motivated to get into the course. Most of the people in the course had by this time either had a post or like myself, a job perhaps concerning the Middle East, or post-graduate study in the Middle East. Arabic training represented a rather major investment. Arabic is perhaps not the toughest language in the world for westerners but it certainly harder that your average European language. You not only have to spend a good bit of time to get your teeth into it, but then you have to make a commitment to work at it after that. And you can't really do that unless you go to Arabic-speaking countries and that requires a career commitment in that direction. So we had people who were interested in either the Middle East as a culture, or, motivating many of us, including myself, what looked like a good career path from the point of view of professional challenges. After all, you study Amharic, and there's only one place to go to speak Amharic. Arabic had the enormous advantage of having a dozen posts you could go to in those days, and even more now, where you could speak the language.

Q: Also it was rather an exciting time as far as the Arab world was concerned.

STERNER: Very exciting. All these things were happening that we've been talking about.

Q: FSO's like to go where the action is. We work better, and usually move ahead faster.

STERNER: That's right. There was much of that spirit. In my class there were only three students. That was a bit smaller than average. But there were plenty of candidates in those days. Now, on the Arab-Israel problem, you've got to bear in mind that we were neophytes at this point, all young folks, who had not had concentrated experience in dealing with the Arab-Israel issue. As one who had never visited Israel, and who had a private sector job in one Arab country, and a diplomatic assignment in another Arab country, at a time when Arab nationalism was a fever particularly among youth in the Arab world, and particularly at Aramco where I had made friends with many Palestinians, I was, I'm sure, sympathetic to the Arab point of view about the Arab-Israel problem. I frame it in those terms because, having subsequently spent a large part of my professional career on this issue, it's hard for me to remember exactly what my feelings and attitudes were at the time. But, I certainly must have felt that the Palestinians had had a grave injustice done to them.

Q: I might break in here to emphasize the point that so many of our intellectual and professional element we were dealing with were so often Palestinian, because these were the best educated people throughout the Arab world. It would be almost equivalent to working in California with the Armenians, and you didn't have a chance to hear the Turkish side of the Armenian-Turkish thing. As far as you were concerned you were hearing one side, which had a very good case. Both sides have a good case, but these were people who had been kicked out of their homes.

STERNER: Absolutely. To give you an example of how vivid that sort of thing can be, I was in Aramco at one of the pump stations where there were only a handful of people there on the Tapline. Each of those stations had a little hospital and the hospitals were run either by Lebanese or Palestinians. The station where I was at for quite a bit of time, the hospital doctor was a Palestinian who was a wonderful guy, and to this day remains a personal friend. I spent many an evening with him talking about the Arab-Israel problem and, his experiences. He owned a house in Jaffa, which he was no longer free to go to and which an Israeli had just moved into, and there was enormous bitterness. Some of that certainly conveyed itself to me as a vivid experience. Another example is that I wanted to make a trip to Jerusalem which I'd never seen. My interpreter--I didn't have enough Arabic in those days to deal with the tribes, and I had a Sudanese interpreter assigned to me--and I took an overland trip to Jerusalem through Jordan. In fact we hitch-hiked for most of the journey. We got a tanker truck that was rolling along on the IPC line that stopped...

Q: I just want to switch tape sides.

Now, you were saying...

STERNER: We were hitchhiking to Jerusalem. Somehow we got there. Since my friend didn't have much money, we stayed in a very simple hotel in Jerusalem--no westerners--just other Arabs. It was this kind of immediate experience that you have as a young man that wouldn't happen to you at a later stage of life, that made terribly deep impressions on

your way of thinking and on your emotional outlook at that time. So I'm sure I was sympathetic to the Arab cause. One thing that tended to give me a little balance, perhaps two things, I was brought up in New York City. Therefore, as a matter of course I knew many Jews. I put it in those terms because if you come from Omaha, Nebraska it would have been a different experience. I therefore had a consciousness of what the creation of the State of Israel meant to the Jewish community. But I would say that it was not nearly as vivid and immediate as this experience I was living in the Arab world. But I wanted to visit Israel. In those days you could take your car and drive down to Israel from Lebanon. You went through the border point at Ras Naqurah. It was not long afterwards that the border was closed and you could no longer make that trip. We had a little Morris Minor convertible and so we...

Q: You were married then.

STERNER: Yes, my wife came along and we went down just as tourists. Crossing the border in those days was an eerie experience. There was a four kilometers stretch of no-man's land between the Lebanese outposts and the Israelis. You couldn't drive in Israel with Lebanese diplomatic plates so you went to a Lebanese garage and you rented a set of American plates. You could drive in Israel with American plates. Then in the middle of this no-man's land--you could feel the binoculars from both sides peering down at you--you got out with screwdriver and pliers and unscrewed the Lebanese diplomatic plates, threw them in the trunk, put on the other plates, and drove on. This was the beginning of an awareness of how effective the Israelis were in public relations. We checked into our hotel in Haifa, and the next morning the phone rang and it said, Hello, I'm Shlomo, or whoever, and I'm part of whatever government agency it was to welcome tourists, and we understand you are down here from Lebanon. We hope you have a very good time and we don't want to impose in any way, but would you in the course of your trip like to be invited into the homes of some Israeli people? We said of course we'd enjoy that very much. And so we were. We met people who were genuinely warm and hospitable, and, of course, we got an exposure to the other point of view. Certainly we came away with the impression that Israel was an extraordinarily vibrant, and in those days, a very strong place. There was enormous conviction that they were a frontier land and it was imbued with idealism much of which unfortunately has faded. Today Israeli society is deeply polarized. That was not the case in those days. We went to a couple of *kibbutzim* which were very interesting, and that visit, although lasting only two weeks, also had a good deal of impact. I was glad I did it.

Q: Now you went to Cairo in 1960?

STERNER: That is correct.

Q: And what were you doing there?

STERNER: I was in the political section. I think I may have been the only language officer at the time. I covered the press, did a daily report on what was important in the

press, which was good for keeping my Arabic up. I also covered internal affairs which was not very active since there wasn't a great deal of political opposition to Nasser, but there was the Arab Socialist Union, labor union affairs, and I developed contacts in those areas. I was also asked to cover the Arab League, and follow the intra-Arab. I did not have any responsibilities for U.S.-Egyptian relations. The political counselor handled that and other things were handled by other political officers. African affairs for example were very lively at that time because Cairo had welcomed the exiled nationalist movements from several African countries.

Q: Wearing both an Arab and African hat at the same time?

STERNER: That's right. And you had these leaders--for example, a major part of the Algerian revolutionary leadership was in Cairo at the time, and we had an officer assigned to stay in touch with them.

Q: This was your first embassy. Could you give an impression of your idea of how it seemed to be run? The Ambassador and some of the personalities there? This is an important era we're dealing with--the Egyptians who were important players at that time?

STERNER: I had the pleasure of serving under two very competent ambassadors who were also very different ambassadors. The first was Fred Reinhardt, a career generalist who was not experienced in the Arab world but who had risen to senior rank. I think he had been Counselor of the Department before coming to Cairo. He later was Ambassador to Italy. He came at the end of the Eisenhower Administration, and as it turned out had a very short assignment in Cairo, really no fault of his own. It's just that Kennedy came in with the idea of taking distinguished area specialists and putting them in as Ambassadors. Galbraith went to India, Reischauer to Japan, and we got John Badeau, who was really a remarkable man. He started out as a Presbyterian Minister as a young man in the Middle East and then had been for years the President of the American University of Cairo. He spoke fluent Arabic and knew Arab culture as really few people did. Many of us as professionals were worried that John would prove to be a sort of dreamy academic type who leave classified telegrams in the taxicab, or something like that. And we worried about parochialism. In fact, I think Badeau was superior Ambassador from a professional point of view as well as knowing everything about Egypt. He had a very broad view and had respect for and confidence in the Foreign Service officers who were manning the Embassy. He well knew, as I well knew, that he knew much more about Egypt than I did, but he didn't try to do the internal political reporting on Egypt. He let me do that. So it was professionally a good experience and I think we had good leadership in those days. Looking back on it, I think we were going through a period where...

Q: We're talking about the 1960-64 period.

STERNER: That's right, in Egypt. As a career service and a foreign policy mechanism, we had too many people following too many things. Our political section was really quite

large. There were people assigned to do nothing but follow the Algerians, to follow what the various African Liberation movements were doing. I was doing telegrams each day on what the press was saying. I think in retrospect that we overdid it in that period, and that our staffing could have been about one half of what we had to cover adequately what was important from the point of view of real American interests. The inflation of personnel during that period caused a lot of problems later on when we attempted to shrink the service and it caused, as we all remember from our respective careers, a lot of unhappiness and grief and management problems about what you do about this big bulge of senior people.

Q: I'm afraid we're doing somewhat of the same thing. We're having vast changes in Eastern Europe and we seem to be throwing people from the Foreign Service into those posts. I'm not sure what more people reporting are going to do. This is looking from the sidelines.

STERNER: You may be absolutely right. In some areas such our commercial section--that's a legitimate area expansion--but I think you're absolutely right that beefing up the political section ought to go real slow. There will certainly be more to report, but you don't need six times the number of people that you had formally.

Q: You were reporting on internal politics. How did you find Nasser--fully in charge, or were there problems? Or was there much to report on?

STERNER: You could basically satisfy the requirements of a Presidential view of American interests in Egypt by saying Nasser has got this place under wraps and it's not likely to change any time soon. That was the long and short of it. But of course there were numbers of people at lower echelons who were interested in the fascinating detail as it were, perhaps too much so. There were too many people back here in Washington creating a demand for all that.

Q: Nasser stood like a colossus there. How did you view Nasser yourself? Here you are, a junior officer, but also what were you absorbing from the Embassy? Because there was a tremendous amount of concern about him and the Soviets and feeling that he was really a menace to our interests in some ways, and at the same time there were other feelings. How did you all feel about him?

STERNER: Well, I think during my period there, 1960-64, which was nearly five years, I witnessed a major change in attitude. In 1960 our feeling about Nasser was really quite positive and hopeful. We had actually pulled his bacon out of the fire in 1956 as you remember.

Q: That was the Suez Crisis?

STERNER: Yes, and more than that, when Kennedy came in 1961, there was even more of a positive spin imparted to U.S.-Egyptian relations. He and his advisers, Walt Rostow,

McGeorge Bundy, were all saying, "Let us select important regional countries, even though these leaders have given us problems in the past and make an effort to work with them." For example, our economic assistance programs began in a big way, particularly PL 480 Food Assistance. We tried to play a role in the World Bank and IMF that was favorable to Egyptian interests. All of that gave a positive flavor to relations in the beginning. We made a major effort to work with Nasser during this period. Then it gradually soured. And it soured over a variety of issues. We disagreed with his attempt to destabilize other countries with which we had close relations--Saudi Arabia for example. He was openly calling for their downfall. In the case of Saudi Arabia, he welcomed to Cairo some dissident princes who were openly advocating the overthrow of the House of Saud. That was one issue. Secondly, there was the more immediate problem of the Yemeni revolution which took place during this period. The Saudis immediately launched an attempt to destroy the revolution. Nasser launched a counter effort to make sure that it survived and there were some close encounters between Egyptian forces and Saudi forces. At one point we sent a squadron of airplanes based in Saudi Arabia to patrol the border, the northern border of Yemen, and to warn Nasser that if he sought to extend his influence into Saudi Arabia, he would come up against American determination to defend Saudi Arabia. At the same time, the Arab-Israel problem was gradually heating up. There had been a good period on this issue for quite a time. We had enforced, as you remember, the Israeli evacuation from Elat and Gaza which created a real crisis in U.S.-Israeli relations. Much to Eisenhower's credit he didn't allow the Israelis to acquire any territory as a result of that war. That impacted very well and the shadow of those things that the United States had done served is well for quite a bit of time. But, slowly but surely our relations began to unravel on this front as well. There were incidents in Gaza, for example, mainly Palestinians trying to run across the border, and both on Israel's eastern front and the demilitarized zone and in Gaza, there were increasing incidents. The Israelis were periodically retaliating across the borders, and in doing so, occasionally killing Syrians and Egyptians. Things were heating up. I remember the Egyptian Ambassador back here in Washington saying, "We've got to keep this problem in the icebox, keep it in the freezer". That was something that would have been good for U.S.-Egyptian relations, but it couldn't be kept in the freezer. So by the time I left in 1964, we had a lot of problems and there was a different tone to U.S.-Egyptian relations. We no longer had confidence that Nasser could play the kind of stabilizing role that the policy planners in 1960 envisioned.

Q: Then you came back in 1964 to see just the other side of this, didn't you?

STERNER: Yes. I came back to Washington and served on a number of country desks in the old Near Eastern Division. To begin with, I worked on the UAR desk as it was called then, reflecting the period of Syria-Egypt union, and then I worked for Bill Brewer for a while on the Arabian peninsula desk, but did most of my work in and around the Arab-Israel problem. I worked for Harry Symmes when he was head of the NE division, when Roy Atherton came in as Deputy of the Near Eastern Division I worked for him, and then when we all changed to a Country Director structure I worked for Roy Atherton, who was Director of Israel and Arab-Israel affairs. I was a sort of utility infielder in those days on

Arab-Israel issues--refugee affairs, Jordan water problems, the problem of Jerusalem. It was an interesting period, but basically one which was completely static as far as the Arab-Israel problem was concerned until 1967 produced the new crisis. Quite clearly Nasser's prestige had begun to run down. He had to think of something new to put himself back on the map. What better than a repetition of 1956 which had served him so well a decade before. I think that was a major factor in the new crisis.

Q: Let's talk before the '67 war. Let's talk about the period that-- In an interview I did with Dick Parker who was at our Embassy in Cairo during part of this time talked about even there he could see the relationship that President Lyndon Johnson and Nasser-- I mean there was almost something chemical there--that they really--the way they were two similar figures--I mean in both size and looks almost--but there was tremendous antipathy. Did you feel any of that where you were or not?

STERNER: Yes, we became conscious of the fact that. I would say that during the Kennedy Administration we were essentially neutral on Arab-Israel affairs. Kennedy certainly was not anti-Israeli in any way but on the other hand he wanted to make a legitimate effort to resolve some of the problems in Arab-Israel affairs and who prepared to put some U.S. muscle behind these initiatives. Kennedy didn't have long enough for us to know how tough he might have been. There was a change when Johnson came in but not one that was immediately apparent but which became apparent in slow degrees. For one thing, the back door connection between the White House and the Israeli Embassy became much more important under Johnson. It partly had to do with personalities. Johnson liked the Israeli Deputy Chief of Mission, Eppie Evron, who was with this unofficial relationship with the President and his top White House advisors. This had been going on under Kennedy, but it wasn't as prominent as it became in the Johnson period. We became aware of it in the State Department. We were not informed about these meetings, but knew they were taking place and you could see the evidence. Certain things that we wanted to do were simply not getting done and our senior people in the State Department were equally puzzled. Johnson, had close relations with some big fund-raisers in the Democratic Party who were Jewish--that's one aspect of it--but I don't think that was the main thing. I think he found American Jews and Israelis sympatico and also had a genuine sympathy for the Jewish experience in Israel. Johnson wasn't anti-Arab but there just wasn't anyone in his entourage or among his friends who made him feel the Arab point of view. I remember that Levi Eshkol, the Israeli Prime Minister at the time, turned up in this country in the mid-sixties with a shopping list which included Phantom aircraft which represented a quantum leap in the level of armament we had provided Israel. The State Department's view was that there were important things that we wanted in return, such as assurances on Dimona...

Q: Dimona being the nuclear facility?

STERNER: Yes, which was of increasing concern to us because the Israelis would not let us in to see the facility and there was a good deal of evidence that they were surreptitiously importing uranium ore and not accounting for it. We wanted them to sign

the Non-proliferation Treaty, to put the Dimona facility under IAEA safeguards, and to be more cooperative on the Jordan waters problem. I can't remember the entire catalogue of things but these were what we wanted done and our feeling was that aircraft should not be granted until we got some of these things in return. But in essence we got very little. Eshkol came over, went down to Johnson's ranch in Texas and they had a cozy meeting and the next thing we knew the Israelis hadn't given us a damn thing on any of these fronts but went home with Johnson's okay to provide phantoms. That began unfortunately a pattern where we simply did not have the stick-to-itiveness and toughness and endurance to stand down the Israelis in negotiations in which we had legitimate interests that we wanted them to be responsive to. It was the beginning of a pattern in which subsequent administrations--any administration which started to take a hard line with the Israelis--the Israelis had total confidence that if they just persisted and used their assets in Congress, that the President would cave in four months, six months, eight months, whatever it took. And they've been proved right for the most part over the years.

Q: Now, you were doing what when the 67 War started? I wonder if you could tell how the State Department operated at that time? And your view of this operation as far as it impacted on us.

STERNER: I was a Desk Officer on the Arab-Israel problem and so was one of the first people involved in setting up a Task Force on the seventh floor. Before war broke out on June 5, 1967, there was a three-week period of diplomacy to try to head off this conflict. You remember the sequence of events.

Q: Could you go over this and how we were reacting, how we were seeing it at the time? TAPE BREAK

STERNER: We were saying that the sequence of events right prior to the '67 War...

Q: And how you were seeing it and how you were reporting, prognosticating, etc. on this.

STERNER: Nasser ordered troops into the Sinai about May 15, as I remember it, and about three or four days later called on U Thant, then UN Secretary General, to withdraw the UN buffer force that had been in the Sinai and keeping the peace there. Then about the same time, or a few days later, Nasser announced closure of the Strait of Aqaba to Israeli shipping. At that point I think almost everybody felt that unless this thing could be defused very fast conflict was inevitable.

Q: The Strait of Aqaba was where they were getting their oil?

STERNER: Exactly. I can't tell you exactly what percentage but over the years about 60 to 70 percent of Israeli oil requirements came from Iran and certainly all that oil was coming into Elat. We were seized with trying to get the Egyptians to stand down and to think of various face-saving ways where it might be possible to prevent the conflict. We were, of course, worried about the implications of a conflict. No one at the time that this

thing was brewing had any assurance that the Israelis could win this war in six days time. The Egyptians seemed very confident and for all we knew could give the Israelis some real trouble and we saw emerging out of that a very serious possibility of U.S.-Soviet confrontation, the Soviets being committed to Egypt at that time and ourselves to the Israelis. Even if we did not have such a confrontation, we saw the possibility of regional conflict unraveling our interests in much of the Arab world. So this was a really serious crisis for the United States. We of course had intensive diplomacy with the Egyptians but not to much avail. However, the Egyptians claimed that on the eve of the war, one of their top people, Zakaria Mohieddine was on his way here and had the Israelis not attacked might have defused the crisis. I tend to disbelieve this thesis because Nasser was too committed in the eyes of his own people and the eyes of the Arab world to the course of action he had taken. I think he wanted a conflict.

Q: This is an important point. Sometimes it is claimed that this was some kind of bluff on the part of Nasser to posture, but at least in your impression and the people you were dealing with, you didn't feel that this was a bluff?

STERNER: No, I don't think it was a bluff. Of course if he had been lucky enough to get the Israelis to accept Egyptian control over their shipping and the right to determine who used the Strait of Aqaba and the disbandment of the UNEF Force in Sinai as a fait accompli and the reoccupation of Sinai with a large Egyptian Army...

Q: But this was never in the cards.

STERNER: But this was never in the cards. And I think he had to know it. The real error in judgment was what his military capability was in Sinai. And here I think Abdul Hakim Amer, the Defense Minister and Commander of the Egyptian Forces, probably oversold the Egyptian ability to stand up to the Israeli offensive. No one knows exactly how Amer died. The official version is that he committed suicide. Some people think he was poisoned by Nasser. My own feeling is that he had plenty of reasons to commit suicide about, so that we need not feel that explanation is totally implausible.

The other thing that we worked on during that period was to get the Israelis in Tel Aviv to hold off from taking unilateral military action. We were telling them that the international community could take effective action to protect Israeli interests.

We attempted during this period to form an international naval squadron that would in effect patrol the Strait of Tiran and the Gulf of Aqaba and insure freedom of shipping. Our own position of course was that the Gulf of Aqaba was High Seas and the Egyptians had no right whatsoever to exclude the Israelis or anyone else from transiting the Strait of Tiran. We didn't have many takers among our allies and at the time war broke out we had commitments from only the Netherlands and Costa Rica, if my memory serves, for contributions to the naval force. Our European allies were not rushing to join us.

Q: They didn't want to upset their interests because of oil particularly.

STERNER: That certainly, and also because they didn't like Washington's pro-Israel policies. In the end, of course, the Israelis decided, number one, that our diplomacy was not going to succeed and, number two, the longer he was allowed to hold these positions, the tougher it was going to be to dislodge him. And also, I think, they decided it would be much more beneficial to them to be the ones to assert Israel's rights rather than the international community. They had something to prove there and they certainly did prove it.

Q: Were you having contact with the Israeli Embassy and the Egyptian Embassy during this period of time? And how were they talking to you and were you sitting in own meetings?

STERNER: The Israelis were at first completely shocked that this had taken place. Secondly, very determined that we should take action and do something about it. The Egyptians on the other hand were full of bluster about the fact that they had the rights to do this. This was Egyptian territory, the Sinai was Egyptian territory, they waited eight years for the international community to do something about the Arab-Israel problem, and this force had been there all this time, and it was an unnatural phenomenon to have an international force. It was the expected argumentation to support their positions. We were not at all persuaded at any point of the legitimacy of what the Egyptians were doing and did not think they had a good case in international law. In my opinion, Nasser was the aggressor in this war.

Q: Were you getting any pressure or any great demands for information from Members of Congress?

STERNER: Yes.

Q: How did you reply on these matters?

STERNER: We were making almost daily trips to the Hill and I was often the sidekick of some senior official who did the testifying. I remember having my arms full with maps and documents. Congressional committees were very worried at this period, as was the Executive Branch, and very impatient to know what the Administration was doing to resolve this crisis.

Q: How did we see the Six Day War and its outcome? As you were involved in these various groups?

STERNER: We were enormously surprised by Nasser's action, initially very worried. We were also disappointed with the Israelis, that they had not given us more time. We thought at the time, maybe unrealistically in retrospect, that we had something going in terms of this international flotilla and our diplomacy. Once Israel attacked we were intensely worried about the conflict itself, about the potential for confrontation with the

Soviet Union, and we were relieved when it became apparent in the third and fourth day of the conflict that the Israelis were scoring victories all over the place. We realized we were off the hook in terms of prolonged conflict and its impact on American relations elsewhere in the Middle East. There were many people who thought we might have to send troops and certainly would have to send massive supplies of military equipment at the time. But it happened so fast, you could hardly keep the shaded areas on the map moving as fast as the Israelis were taking over these areas.

Q: Well, even at your place, was there a feeling of by this point, I'm speaking of personal feeling, that well, Nasser's got his comeuppance. I say this because I was sitting in Yugoslavia at this time and I felt-Well, he asked for it. I mean this is just a personal view of a foreign service officer and I think this was reflected by people who were watching these events from some distance away, in an essentially hostile country, including I might add, the Yugoslavs. Not the Government, but the Yugoslav people were very impressed by this.

STERNER: Yes, until this time--You asked earlier how I felt about Nasser, and as a young man in those days I dealt mainly with young Arabs, and they were all so imbued with the spirit of Arab nationalism at that period, and he embodied that. And then they would say things like, well, you, know, Nasser makes his mistakes; after all he's a human being but at bottom he's the great leader we need. And I remember feeling that Arab nationalism and the kind of reform Nasser represented might be a positive force, one that did not necessarily have to clash with U.S. interests. I was at odds in this with some of the senior people in my own Embassy who were not Arab specialists and who were justifiably more skeptical. My line of argument got harder and harder to sustain as Nasser took actions more and more inimical to American interests during the sixties. The '67 War was the final disillusionment. And it was a watershed in U.S. policy. If you look back before that time, our policy really was that whoever is victorious in any Arab-Israel conflict should not profit by territorial aggrandizement. In terms of basic principle, we had the same view in '67, but with a very important difference, which was that Israel was entitled to stay in the territories it occupied until the Arabs were prepared to come forward and make peace with it. In other words, Israel was entitled to use its forcible occupation of Arab territory as bargaining chips to achieve its objectives. We were all so disillusioned with Nasser, and so relieved by Israel's victory that I don't remember anybody feeling that this was an unjust policy. I was by this time fully supportive of the view that Nasser had seriously let the United States and the world and his own people down, and that he was going to have to pay the price. Unfortunately the Arabs are still paying the price politically for it.

Q: Is there anything else we should cover on this particular time?

STERNER: No. I went to the War College in the 1969-70 period so there was a bit of a hiatus in my coverage. I came back as Director of Egyptian Affairs. I was supposed to go overseas after the War College, but this job came up. This proved again to be interesting

timing because I checked in just three months before Nasser died and a completely different chapter in Egypt's political history opened.

Q: Also a different Administration in the United States too, by that time it was the Nixon Administration.

STERNER: That's correct.

Q: And you served on there, just for the record, from about 1970 to 1974.

STERNER: Yes. One interesting thing to say just as a prelude. When I was in Egypt I got to know Anwar Sadat, a man who at that time no one took very seriously. His job was Chairman of the National Assembly, Egypt's rubber stamp legislature.
I used to go and occasionally attend debates, mainly to polish my Arabic, and when I didn't have much else to do. The diplomatic gallery was not full of people in those days because debates were going on in Arabic, and very few of the diplomats spoke Arabic. Sadat must have noticed me, because one day I was invited to tea at his house. That's how I got to know him. Shortly after that, I was transferred back to Washington. When he was invited on a leadership grant to tour the United States...

Q: This was about when?

STERNER: This was 1966, February 1966. I was made his escort officer because I was one of the few people in the Government who knew him. Sadat turned out to be an enthusiastic and genial travelling companion and we had a very good time. It may have been partly that he did not have high-level responsibility and I don't think ever dreamed he was ever going to succeed to the mantle of leadership in Egypt. We spent some time here in Washington, quite a bit in Congress because of his parliamentary role, and he called on President Johnson. We went to Los Angeles, San Francisco, Sacramento, and then ended up in New York. Except for one untoward incident, which consisted of Mayor John Lindsay canceling a dinner party that he had agreed to host because of pressures from the Jewish community, the visit went very well. Sadat's exposure to the U.S. seemed to have genuine impact and I really think that some of his confidence that things could be different in Egypt and that he could work with the U.S. derived from this visit. When I met with him subsequently in Egypt, he just could not stop talking about his visit to the United States.

Q: This is interesting because here is an Arab leader, although at a lower level, coming to the United States, being taken around and the Jewish community violently, maybe not violently, certainly strongly, anti Nasser, strongly anti-Egyptian at that time. How does one work within this situation and at the same time make the man aware of the depth of feeling within the United States and to understand the politics?

STERNER: Well, we tried to do that. I mean the people who designed the visit. I remember, for example, a long discussion on this when we called on Pat Brown, who was

then the Governor of California in Sacramento. Brown after all had a large Jewish community in California, and the conversation about this was very forthright. They got along marvelously together. He invited Sadat to attend one of the sessions of the legislature and he invited him to join him when he gave a talk to a group of high school students. It was a vivid example of American-style democracy in action.

Q: Were you explaining this to him? Were you trying to give him or were you trying to coat it over, or be diplomatic, or using this as a lesson time?

STERNER: I thought on the whole that the best thing to do was to let this come from people other than his escort officer. Indeed it came from them in one form or another. I remember feeling that I thought I ought to be neutral and facilitating in my role and that I shouldn't seem to be shaping the visit, or being a pedagogue. I think I was right about that because he drew his own conclusions from the experience. He must have met with two dozen Congressmen and Senators during his Washington visit. He had a meeting with Johnson. Of course, other Executive Branch officials. He met with community leaders in California and New York. So he got the full flavor of American life. I think the big impression he went back with-- here's a man who had never been to the United States before; he'd been to Europe and to Moscow and to Third World countries--was an impression of dynamism in the United States. It's not that he ended up liking our policy more but I think he respected our society more, particularly in contrast to what he had seen in the Soviet Union and in Third World countries. Something here, strange as this government was over here, something had released the energies of the American people in a creative and productive way. What was the key to that? Because it was what, as he looked back on two decades of rule by Nasser, he felt his own country desperately needed. In that sense, rather than in any specific policy sense, I think he went back feeling that he wanted something of what the United States had. He associated openness, more open political systems, economic free enterprise and less state control over economy as part of the American success story. Even if the seeds of these ideas had already previously been planted in Sadat, and they probably were, I think the American visit gave them a considerable boost.

Q: How did we view the accession of Sadat? You were Country Director at that time. Not only you but the people who were dealing with this. I mean, a towering figure had left-- one who had already been tottering but Sadat, but this time we were more committed to Israel--how did we feel about it?

STERNER: It was hard to get anybody to take Sadat seriously for a long time.

Q: He was considered an interim figure?

STERNER: He was considered an interim figure and a weak one. He was a question mark for a long time. For nearly a year, until Sadat would against them, it was assumed that Nasser's lieutenants who were still there would control him and might indeed even choose to dump him a little bit later and install one of their own as the real leader of Egypt.

Therefore we could expect no major policy changes and had to be prepared for an Egypt that continued to be an adversary. That was very much the mindset in the American Government. It was the mindset in the State Department coming out of the 1967 War and the war of attrition period, and it was also the view of Henry Kissinger, who had come in as Nixon's National Security Advisor. And certainly it was a mindset in Congress. I didn't know how strong Sadat would be and certainly didn't go around saying, "Listen, this is the man of the future" but I did send up memoranda to the Secretary of State saying, keep an open mind about this guy; I've spent some time with him and I think he thinks differently from Gamal Abdul Nasser. That's not to say that he's going to survive because I didn't know that, but if he did he might be a guy we could do business with. At the same time over the winter 1970 to 1971, Don Bergus, who was head of our Interests Section Cairo, was beginning to get some...

Q: We might point out at this time that we did not have full diplomatic relations. It was broken off in '67.

STERNER: That's right, It was broken off in 1967 as a result of the conflict and ever since that time we had an Interests Section in Cairo which at this time was headed by an experienced careerist by the name of Don Bergus. Bergus was being called up by Sadat and invited to come and talk to him and was beginning to get both directly from Sadat and through various intermediaries a different flavor from the Nasser line. There was a former army fellow who, I can't remember his name now, who was coming directly from Sadat and putting forward these ideas. And as I said, Sadat himself very cautiously in direct meeting with Bergus began to outline some of these ideas. In April of 1970, still fairly new to the Desk, I made just a routine visit out to my area of responsibility. I didn't even expect to be granted an interview with Sadat because after all I was a Country Director and he was the President of a major country, and I expected my contacts to be limited to people in the Foreign Ministry. While I was there an invitation came from Sadat to meet with him. Bergus and I went out and met with him at one of his rest houses at the Barrages, the Dam across the Nile north of Cairo at the head of the Delta. It was a lovely spring day. Sadat had a large topographical relief map of the Sinai tacked up on a board and without many preliminaries--he was happy to see me and so forth--he began to outline a deal for partial Israeli withdrawal in Sinai and a reopening of the Suez Canal. Bergus had some of these ideas before, but not as clearly or in as much detail. We had certainly never heard anything like this from Nasser. Still, there was the question of how stable Sadat was. This was clarified about a month later when there was an attempted coup by Nasserists like Sami Sharaf and Minister of Interior Guma. Sadat moved against them before they could move against him and chucked them out. And that was the end of Nasserist influence in the Sadat regime. At the same time Washington was troubled when Sadat shortly afterward concluded a treaty of friendship with the Soviet Union. So I was sent out again in July of that year with a set of questions to pose to Sadat to get reassurances. He gave us very good reassurances about this, that this did not indicate that the Soviets would have any more influence, that this did not detract in any way from the ideas he had previously discussed with us, etc. With this in hand we thought we were on the road to a major new opportunity in the Arab-Israel issue. Assistant Secretary Sisco's

trip in August of that year was an effort to make further progress. But unfortunately we were up against some serious obstacles. One was Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir who was a very tough and suspicious old lady about these developments in Egypt. She really did not believe there had been any significant change in Cairo. The Israelis were skeptical that he meant what he said, that even if he did, that he had the ability to follow through on it, etc. Essentially the Israelis contributed nothing to this diplomatic dialogue and we were constantly going back to Cairo and saying Now what more can you do for us to help persuade the Israelis you're for real, and Sadat was getting increasingly impatient with this performance. There was just no reciprocity messages coming from the Israelis. The second obstacle was the fact that Sadat himself was not very methodical. He was good at these big concepts, but down the line he didn't have good foreign ministers or advisers who could translate these ideas into smart negotiating tactics. This is a lack that plagued him, throughout his career. Even in the Camp David period later on, we were bedeviled by the same lack of capability. And the third problem was an emerging split over all this between the White House and the State Department. The State Department really thought we had something promising here. Kissinger at the White House was much more skeptical, much more of the Israeli view. He tended to see things in terms of the U.S.-Soviet chessboard on which Israel was our pawn and Egypt was the Soviet Union's pawn. It was just a different optic from the one that we regional specialists tended to have. In this particular case, I think, Kissinger was wrong and we were right. The events of history demonstrated it. Had Israel responded in 1970 and 1971 they could have been spared the 1973 conflict.

Q: Well tell me, do you have the feeling--because in other interviews I have gotten people who have dealt with Henry Kissinger on various things-- that often, because he had his own policy on the Soviet-United States chessboard conflict, that he was undercutting other policies by going around and maybe telling the Israelis to hang on tight, as long as you're with us , we're with you. I've gotten this, not in the Arab-Israeli, but in other contexts. Did you have any feeling of this? I don't want to put words in you mouth.

STERNER: Yes. I have mixed feelings about the Kissinger legacy. In some ways, he brought to American foreign policy a needed corrective. We were coming out of a period of excessive bilateralism all over the world, with desk officers rushing up to the Secretary of State and saying, "I'm the Desk Officer for Tierra del Fuego and you've got to realize, Mr. Secretary, that Tierra del Fuego is one of the most strategic places in the world and therefore we have to have this enormous bilateral aid program". I think Kissinger is to be respected for having brought a more systematic evaluation of American interests-where they were vital, less vital, important, semi-important, some kind of scale of values to an assessment of American interests around the world. He lent a sense of architecture to American foreign policy, as well as accomplishing some very important things like the China opening and getting us out of Vietnam and some major arms control agreements as well. So leaving aside Middle Eastern parochialism for a minute, his contribution was a major one to American foreign policy. Unfortunately, in the Middle East in the 1970-1973 period, his influence was deleterious in my view, and unfortunate. He was undermining an effective policy to avoid yet another Arab-Israeli conflict and to start a

negotiating process. He consistently underestimated the importance of regional actors and overestimated the importance of the superpower rivalry and superpower control over events in that part of the world. After all, as we all know, Sadat went to war on his own in '73. The Soviets had very little to say or do about it, and there was plenty of evidence that they were taken almost by as much surprise as the United States was.

Q: Well, there you were, the Country Director for Egypt at that time. How did you relate, or did you have any connection with the National Security Council under Kissinger or was this all at a different level?

STERNER: No. It was by proxy because the person who had the relationship was Joe Sisco and I was working for him. And the people on the seventh floor in the State Department.

Q: The seventh floor being the Secretary of State and his policymakers.

STERNER: Yes, and the Deputy, and the Under Secretary for Political Affairs. I mean those are the people who dealt basically with Kissinger. But relations were already very strained between Rogers and Kissinger at this time, and the strain had a lot to do with the Middle East in specific terms. At my level, I was constantly getting directives, think pieces, national security decision memoranda, that struck me as being wrong. My first action would be to try to get Joe Sisco's attention. He didn't always see it the way I did, but sometimes did, and try to get him to do something about this latest policy distortion. You would see it in many different forms. For example, in the period right after Nasser's death, we had a major problem with Egypt over the commitment it had entered into in the so-called cease-fire-stand still agreement that brought the war of attrition to an end in 1970. The Egyptians had agreed that they would immediately halt the construction of a SAM 2 Missile defense system which...

Q: SAM being a surface-to-air missile. Let me stop here to flip this.

STERNER: I don't know how much detail you want on this.

Q: I do. The Egyptians saying they would disassemble...

STERNER: Not disassemble but cease construction. That was the so-called stand still part of the agreement and to monitor that we had frequent flights of a U-2 airplane to conduct aerial photographs which had been agreed to between the two sides as part of the monitoring arrangements, producing very good photography of what was and was not being done in this defense zone. Within days it became quite clear that the Egyptians were cheating. There simply were changes, in ramps being built, enclosures being completed, structures being completed, that had not been completed on the day that the treaty went into effect and which was recorded in that initial photography. Don Bergus in Cairo was instructed over and over again to see Nasser. Nasser would simply deny that anything was happening or say that the photography must be in error. That kind of thing.

We realized we had a major problem on our hands. The interesting thing however, coming back to Kissinger-State Department differences, was the different perception of who was responsible for this. It didn't affect our instructions, because we and the White House were both agreeing on instructions saying, "Go to the Egyptians and get them to stop doing this thing", but from the White House we were constantly getting assessments to the effect that "It's Moscow and the Soviets that are really putting the Egyptians up to this and we ought to be making this a major issue between the United States and the Soviet Union. Kissinger believed Nasser was crippled by the 1967 war and had no personal power any longer. The Soviets are propping him up and of course he's taking orders from the Soviets. It was not however, my perception, having lived in Egypt for five years, but not knowing much about the global perspectives. So, who was right? I can tell you what my speculation is.

Q: On the war?

STERNER: On this cheating business. On why the missiles were being built. I think Nasser was indeed weakened by the 1967 conflict, but not vis-a-vis Moscow. I think he was weakened in terms of his own military. His own military had been extending these missile sites under Israeli bombardment into this zone to protect Egyptian territory from Israeli air attack. All of a sudden, unbeknownst and unconsulted, I suspect the Egyptian generals, air defense generals, are taken by Nasser's agreement with the Israelis and the United States that freezes their activity at a stage that leaves them in a vulnerable position militarily. Should the cease-fire break down as they thought it certainly would at some time, they would be caught with their pants down. They wanted to get these sites done. I think they put it to Nasser in those terms. Nasser probably thought I better not fight them on this one. The Americans are just going to have to accept this, and eventually the activity will come to a stop. No one can prove this, but that's what I think happened. The episode in itself is not all that important, but I cite it as an example of the kind of disagreement that was going on between the State Department and the White House exacerbated by the personal differences between the Secretary of State and the National Security Advisor, and the fact that the President was clearly relying more and more on his National Security Advisor for advice and Rogers was increasingly a Secretary of State who was just meant to continue to manage this bit of machinery called the Department of State and Foreign Service, but have relatively little input on policy matters.

Q: Was there a Mr., Ms. Middle East on the National Security Council whom you would talk to or was Kissinger doing this really from personal conviction? Was there much information going up to him from somebody who knew the Middle East on the National Security Council?

STERNER: Yes, I think there was good information. Hal Saunders was over there at that time. He is a very sound man, and probably would not have shared many of those views. You see, Kissinger started out in 1969 saying to everybody the one area I don't want to have anything to do with is the Middle East. The reason is I'm Jewish and even if I were completely impartial which I'm sure I'm not, I would be suspected of not being. So I'm

going to leave this area to the State Department. For a while that seemed to be the case, but slowly but surely, as this cease-fire and stand-still agreement took place, as there was a change of leadership in Egypt, as the State Department began to get engaged in this diplomatic effort and to see new opportunities, Kissinger began to feed the President memoranda which took a contrary point of view. I don't think that the people on the National Security staff had much to say about those things because it was not systematic. And their brief in a way was to stay out of the Middle East. But privately some of these memoranda were going forward in effect saying, "Look Mr. President, don't get sucked in entirely by the State Department's views on this matter. Israel is our ally. As long as Israel is strong, the Arabs do not have the ability to make a new war in this part of the world and we should be very very reluctant to discard that policy which has served us quite well over the years for something new and uncertain when we don't know how stable this guy Sadat is, when it's going to cause a ruckus down in Congress, when the Russians will see it as weakness, and so forth. This began to lessen the President's confidence in what the State Department was doing. At about the same time we were running into great problems in trying to move the thing forward, because Golda Meir was having none of it, and Anwar Sadat was so unsystematic that he couldn't take advantage of the situation. We were not going anywhere and Kissinger on the other hand was gaining the President's increasing respect because of his ideas about China, about how to get out of Vietnam, and so forth, and suddenly we turned around and Kissinger was not only calling the shots everywhere else, but calling the shots on this one as well.

Q: Now I wonder if you'd talk about another player there, although in a subsidiary role. And that was Joseph Sisco who became a very close collaborator with Kissinger at a later date. But this time you're talking about him being, what was he like working for him? After all he's a controversial person. This is somewhat different role from what you see later. Could you talk about him and working with him and how he operated?

STERNER: Yes. As assistant secretaries in NEA go, Sisco was a particularly strong bureaucrat, and I don't mean that in any invidious sense, I mean it as a compliment. He could get things done more effectively than most other assistant secretaries that I've seen and most people with foreign service background. He was very good at seizing the initiative and at retaining control over affairs. Indeed, we saw this happen in a very vivid way. He moved from Assistant Secretary in IO to NEA ...

Q: IO for International Organization.

STERNER: International Organization Affairs. And when he was there he had control over several issues that might have been construed as Middle Eastern issues. Such things as the refugee problems, Middle Eastern issues that were handled by the United Nations. Joe wanted to run those and he did while he was Assistant Secretary. The minute he came over to NEA he brought with him all those issues, so we realized what a powerful Assistant Secretary could do for you. I found him effective in this way. He also lent a new cast to our whole operation as a bureau. Let me speak about that for a moment. Traditionally many of our Assistant Secretaries of State had come up through the ranks as

Middle Eastern specialists in one form or another. There had been a few exceptions to this. Phillips Talbot, for example, who was John Kennedy's appointment was an outsider who came in. But the others, Parker Hart, Ray Hare, for example, were area experts. And it meant this was a place where you could at least expect a dispassionate view of American foreign policy interests in the Middle East to prevail. In many other quarters of the U.S. Government you had to expect that the judgment would be affected one way or another by domestic political considerations, or at least that they would not put up a big battle to resist domestic political pressures. And in general, we expected, whether our Assistant Secretaries were Arabists, as they occasionally were, or if they were people brought in, we expected that kind of view to prevail at the Assistant Secretary level. Joe Sisco brought something different. He did not perceive his job as being one to speak up for Arabs, or our interests in the Arab world. And in that respect, I think he was a disappointment to many of the Arabist officers or the Middle East specialists in the Bureau. He was much more interested in getting something accomplished and believed that the way you did that, rather than just standing up for a policy interest point of view, was to understand and work within domestic policy constraints to get something done. It was only through that type of attitude and that viewpoint that you could effectively relate to the seventh floor, the Secretary of State, and the political levels of our Government. Sisco was success-oriented. What good, he would have asked himself, does it do to stand on principle if you can't accomplish anything? And he saw accomplishing something as the only way to approach the big objectives.

Q: In other words, we're talking about domestic politics.

STERNER: We're talking about domestic politics. But also about the global as opposed to regional viewpoint. Joe usually saw which way the wind was blowing. In order to get a few points won and a few things done for the State Department he knew he was going to have to take into account and maybe meet half way the Kissinger point of view. He was really fundamentally different in attitude. Now was it more effective or less effective? There were times when I felt it was far more effective, and operational, than what had gone before. At other times I thought Joe was being too tactical and sacrificing too much of what should have been policy firmness for the sake of achieving short-lived tactical advances.

Q: Can you give some examples now?

STERNER: No, it's really...I would have to review notes to do that, to be fair to Sisco. I can just at this stage, give you my impression that I reacted, maybe on several occasions, saying Joe, you're giving too much for tactical reasons here and you're eroding an important point of policy that ought to remain firm. And that of course had to do mainly with giving in to the Israelis at various times, with what they wanted. You know, give them those aircraft, don't fight them on there settlements, that sort of thing.

Q: Well, how did the October '73 War play out from your perspective? How did we react to it and what were you doing at this time?

STERNER: Well, again, I happened to be back--I mean, I was still back. It was six years later, or whatever, from the '67 war and I was still in the Department. This time I was a couple of notches up the line. But there I was setting up another Task Force. This was a much more interesting, difficult and of course less decisive war. To Kissinger's credit he saw about midway through the conflict that there were major diplomatic opportunities that could be seized, if you could bring this conflict to an end in a way that preserved those diplomatic opportunities. And he charged in. He had just moved over from the National Security position to the State Department as Secretary, so he was in a position to do that. He had all those loyal folks over at the White House still working for him in effect. Brent Scowcroft had been there as his Deputy, and saw eye-to-eye with him on most issues. And now he had all this machinery he could mobilize as he saw fit within the State Department. He negotiated the terms for a cease-fire with the Soviets that set the stage for negotiations. He fought the Israelis down when they wanted to persist in the war so as to complete the encirclement of the Egyptian Third Army in the Sinai. He knew if that whole army was captured or destroyed the Egyptians would be so humiliated and so defeated that it would detract from post-war diplomatic opportunities. And in this case the Israelis backed down. In essence, the war ended on a no-victor, no-loser note which was important for what transpired. Kissinger got talks going at Kilometer 101 in Sinai, which led to a more stable cease-fire. Then talks began under U.S.-Soviet auspices in Geneva. The Soviets were then firmly moved out of the picture and Kissinger took over the negotiations himself. He achieved three agreements: the first Sinai agreement, the agreement for disengagement on the Syrian front, and finally the Sinai II agreement for a further stage of withdrawal. So it was a notable achievement. But with the Sinai II agreement the potential for further progress along these lines was exhausted. You could not carry this slice-of-territory for slice-of-peace concept any further. The Sinai II agreement was a victory but it had its costs for American policy in the form of an ill-considered undertaking never to deal with the PLO which plagued our policy for the next ten years. Kissinger agreed to that. The Israelis got very tough--said they were not going to agree to the Sinai agreement without this assurance and he ended up giving them that. And then I went off to the United Arab Emirates at about this point.

Q: How did Kissinger at this time use the Desk? Or the Country Directorate?

STERNER: It was frustrating. Kissinger really was his own show. It was frustrating for me but if you talked to Joe Sisco who had by this time become Political Under Secretary, and he reminisces accurately about this period, he would admit to at least equal frustration. Kissinger was an exciting guy to work for. I mean he was the man who was getting these agreements done, he knew how to use power, he was a supreme diplomat, he had these Middle Eastern leaders eating out of his hand. At the same time he was maddening because he wouldn't confide in you completely and wouldn't delegate authority on any systematic basis, which maybe a Country Director couldn't expect, but the Under Secretary had a right to expect every now and then. He dealt behind your back with other intermediaries. The end result was that you got used as a flunky of one kind or another. And if you got upset about it, he sent you off as an Ambassador somewhere. He

didn't hold it against you, he just didn't find it very convenient to continue to operate with you around. In fact, he may have thought these are the people we ought to have as Ambassadors. He was frustrating. But there was a lot to do at the desk level. We were emerging from a situation of severed relations with Egypt. I had a very busy desk all of a sudden which meant without even messing with high policy up there on the Arab-Israeli problem, I had a lot to do. We had to reconstruct our entire embassy staff, get an aid mission out there to take care of aid matters, and deal with debt problems. I helped negotiate a debt-relief program and also spent a lot of time organizing the effort to clear and reopen the Suez Canal.

Q: Shall we come to your last assignment then?

STERNER: Sure.

Q: I hope I'm not tiring you out here. Could you then go into a little more detail? How you got it? What it involved? And when?

STERNER: You mean going to the United Arab Emirates? Right. Well, it was really my second to last assignment because I came back as Deputy Assistant Secretary later.

Q: Would you like to go have some lunch and then come back?

STERNER: If you don't mind, Stuart, carrying on, I think I've got to be at my office at about 1:30, and I think I'm just going to grab a bite. I don't want to run out of time.

Q: Sure, sure.

STERNER: Going from the policy maelstrom of the Arab-Israeli problem out to one of the most remote parts of the world took quite a bit of psychological adjustment. Mind you, I remembered this part of the Arab world having started there many years before. But that was twenty years earlier. And I really wanted to go back. I had a good time when I worked for ARAMCO and I liked those Bedouin types. I was the first resident Ambassador in the UAE and the country had achieved its independence only a few years before, after more than a century, as a British protectorate. There was much to do. There was first of all a lot of question as to whether this rather shaky federation between the emirates...

Q: Are there seven or five of them?

STERNER: Seven of them, a couple of them so tiny one could hardly spot them on the map. The Sheiks were nevertheless rulers who were dealt with as rulers of territory by the British. Maybe sovereign is too strong a word for that in legal terms. In any case, when the British made the decision to withdraw east of Suez in 1969 they had to work very fast to put these people together. They knew they couldn't survive as individual entities and they finally stitched something together in which the seven agreed to form a kind of

confederation with a federal government responsible for banking and currency and foreign policy. So you had an unusual situation which was like dealing with the American States under the Articles of Confederacy. The individual Emirates had a great deal of authority, particularly over economic matters. If for example you were interested in an oil concession in Dubai, you didn't waste time by going to anybody in Abu Dhabi which was the Federal Capital, you went directly to speak to the ruler of Dubai, and he had an exclusive say as to who would get that oil concession. He maintained his own armed forces. So one question was whether the Federation would hold together and who was on top; who would emerge as the effective leaders. And that gave you scope for a certain amount of political reporting. Another major commission was commercial work. The area had been, as you remember Stuart, from your own early days travelling there, totally dominated by British companies. That was part of the deal. The Sheikdoms got British protection, but in return they didn't deal with foreign companies. The oil companies were the Iraq Petroleum Company, a British-run consortium that had the oil concessions down there, and all the big engineering and infrastructure projects were carried out by British companies. I saw it as one of my tasks to try to get some American commercial activity going down there. There was a desire to diversify on the part of the rulers but it was a difficult process. They were very used to, for example, British consultants and British engineers, which drew plans that favored British construction companies. So a major part of our battle was to say, Listen, give us an even playing field here commercially. Gradually they did. Fortunately, I had a very effective economic and commercial officer...

Q: Who was that?

STERNER: Dennis Finnerty. He did a good job.

Q: Well, let me ask, because I speak as someone who was a very lowly Vice Consul was the commercial officer for the Persian Gulf back in '58-'60. We couldn't get American firms to give the time of day to make bids and to look at this. Now I assume this had changed? Had you found this?

STERNER: Oh, it has changed completely now. But at the time I was there it was in the process of being changed and relatively early in the change. So the situation you knew was much the reality that we were fighting against. As you say, the British just had it locked up.

Q: Also the American firms weren't giving much time or trouble.

STERNER: Well, they weren't for good reason, because they knew if they were invited down there at all it was generally as a stalking horse to enable some British firm to prove that it was really the lowest bidder. They thought, and with good reason, that the contracts down there were cooked in favor of British companies. Gradually it changed though. Nowadays I think American companies have a good crack, at least in some areas. Of course, in some areas we are simply not competitive. Like road building and bridge building and that sort of thing. The Koreans can do these things so well and so much

more cheaply, but now even the Koreans are being undercut by Turks, Paks and Yugoslavs. The third area which was so interesting at the time was oil affairs. Abu Dhabi and the United Arab Emirates as a whole was the sixth largest oil exporter of the world at the time. And one of the countries that have major reserves, unlike Libya, for example, whose reserves are not expected to last very long. So there was a good deal of interest on the part of Washington in oil policy , in OPEC, in the United Arab Emirates role within OPEC at the time, in concession affairs, who was getting the concessions. We had a small staff, but a pretty busy staff working all these fronts. When you got tired of the people in Abu Dhabi, you could travel to one of the other Emirates and get a completely different set of characters with a different set of problems that you could deal with. Of course some of these places were the smaller and poorest Emirates that had no oil. You couldn't spend much time there and justify it.

Q: Fujairah was not on the top of the list.

STERNER: It was not on the top of the list. That's right. The main work was in Dubai and of course Abu Dhabi, which were the two biggest oil producers. The rulers in my day didn't speak much English so I was forced to bring my Arabic up to speed which I benefited from and enjoyed. I thought I was going to spend a third year down there but I was summoned back to the Department again to work on more Arab-Israel stuff.

Q: By that time was Carter in?

STERNER: I actually got back at the very tail end of the Nixon Administration. But Carter came in...

Q: You mean Ford.

STERNER: I mean Ford. Exactly. The job I was brought back for did not as it happened open up. It was to be the Middle East man on the NSC staff, but that didn't pan out. Then one of the Deputy jobs in NEA opened up. It was back to my old Arab-Israeli specialty, but the timing was very fortunate. I took the job only a few months before Sadat made his famous trip to Jerusalem, and what had been in doldrums the whole time I was in Abu Dhabi, suddenly became the liveliest thing in town. Originally the job was to cover geographic responsibilities, several desks that had Egypt, Israel, the Levant, as well as Arab-Israeli negotiations. But the Arab-Israel negotiations side of it proved to be so time consuming that they split the job off, and I took over that responsibility. I went along on all of Vance's shuttles.

Q: That's Cyrus Vance.

STERNER: Yes, the Secretary of State. Under Hal Saunder's direction, who was the Assistant Secretary, I was responsible for preparing all of the staffing for the trips and the paperwork that had to be done. I was expected to come up with ideas on how to move this thing forward. Later, when it was decided to use a special emissary, first Roy Atherton,

then Bob Strauss, and Sol Linowitz, I had a sort of double role. I was a Deputy to them and made trips with them while still holding the Bureau responsibility. I did an awful lot of travelling in those days.

Working both for the Secretary of State and for the special emissaries was interesting and sometimes a bit difficult because there were frequent differences of view about how to proceed. It ended as we know with Jimmy Carter summoning everyone to Camp David in September of 1978. I then had the professionally rewarding experience of being on the American delegation which supported the peace treaty negotiations at Blair House and at the Madison Hotel, that finally resulted in the Peace Treaty between Israel and Egypt. We thought the Egypt-Israel negotiations would give us a good start on doing something about the Palestinian issue, but unfortunately we were wrong. Before the day was over, I must have spent thousands of man-hours trying to get the so-called autonomy talks for the West Bank and Gaza off the ground. Bob Strauss and Sol Linowitz were our leaders in that effort. We ran into the insurmountable problem, which was the Israelis wanted their bilateral peace treaty with Egypt, but did not want anything to happen on the West Bank or Gaza. They just stalled, and Washington was not prepared to have a major crisis in U.S.-Israeli relatives to break the impasse. So, the autonomy talks gradually ran into the sand. In my final year in the Department, before I decided to retire, I had another assignment coming out of the Peace Treaty, which was to set up the peace-keeping force that is a buffer between the two sides in Sinai, between Israel and Egypt in Sinai. The UN Security Council, not favoring what increasingly became apparent as a bilateral peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, would not participate, would not agree that this force should be constituted under a United Nations mandate. So the three parties, Egypt, Israel with the United States help, determined to set up their own peacekeeping force, outside of the UN and I headed the negotiating team that helped the two sides fashion an agreement. I had a good time doing this and it was nice to leave the Department--instead of on a note of disappointment which would have been the case with the autonomy talks, to leave on an upper, at the conclusion of a successful negotiation and a professionally rewarding experience. I don't know how much time you want to go spend on this, Stu.

Q: I'd like to go into it. But first I'd like to go back one and then come back to this. When you came back and you were dealing with the Arab-Israeli problem once again, what was your impression of the Israeli Government, particularly Menachem Begin and his Government? How did we view it and how did we deal with it?

STERNER: Anyone who knew anything about the background of the Arab-Israel problem had deep cause to be worried about the implications of Begin's coming to power because in 1970, if I remember correctly, Begin led his party out of the then National Coalition Government on the issue of whether Security Council Resolution 242 calling for Israeli withdrawal from territories in exchange for peace applied to the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza. His position was that the Security Council Resolution was all well and good for the Syrian front and the Egyptian front but it didn't have anything to do with the old mandated territories of Palestine. On this he parted company with Prime Minister Golda Meir, whose government had agreed to the proposition that Security Council

Resolution 242 applied to all occupied territories. Now when he reappeared as Prime Minister, head of the largest coalition in the Knesset, six or seven years later, people who remembered his personality which was single-minded and stubborn, could have made the reasonable assumption that he was not going to change his views on that subject. On the other hand, Begin was a bold leader. He'd after all created a party out of nothing. Herut was his creation. And built it to a point that it had become the main challenge to the Labor Party. I think there was something of that in his background, a willingness to take chances; which made it possible to get the peace treaty with Egypt. Unfortunately the present leader of Israel, Yitzhak Shamir, with whom we're wrestling now, voted against the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty, even though he was a member of Begin's party. And I think one of the problems we're finding with Shamir is that he has all of Begin's stubbornness and none of his imagination and none of his boldness. Maybe imagination is too strong a term but at least none of his boldness. So, we were mainly frustrated, and God knows so was Anwar Sadat, but at least the leadership in Israel in those days was strong.

Q: And could deliver.

STERNER: And could deliver. Today you have a Government that's not strong and no one knows what it could deliver.

Q: What was your impression? I mean, as time goes on, Jimmy Carter seems to grow in my estimation; he's been involved in the tricky business in Nicaragua and he's comported himself extremely well. This is my own--but what is your impression of how he operated and how much he was in control of this process, as you saw it?

STERNER: He was, the most effective President that we've had on Middle Eastern Affairs, because at some point he got interested personally in the Arab-Israel problem. And I think he genuinely felt, without any anti-Israeli feelings, that some kind of redress should be done for the Palestinians, that they had lost their homeland. He also felt a keen personal bond with Anwar Sadat, that Sadat was a great statesman of the period. Carter just got involved in a way which was unprecedented for an American President. A great deal of credit must be given to him for his boldness in summoning everyone to Camp David. A lot of these things are pre-cooked and you have these Presidential meetings, summit meetings, you know exactly what's going to happen ahead of time. Quite clearly this was not the case at Camp David. It was a high-risk proposition. He could have looked very poorly if it had turned out badly, and it damned near did, if Sadat hadn't gone the extra mile and saved his bacon.

Q: How did he do that?

STERNER: Well, Sadat gave in, perhaps not wisely, on a number of key issues. Jerusalem was one of them, the question of settlements in the West Bank and Gaza being another, the whole question of linkage between the bilateral peace settlement between Egypt and Israel, and the Palestinian question.

Q: Well, this is whole other thing and I hope sometime we can work something to go into this, maybe with Dick Parker. I wonder if you could tell some of the problems you had with setting up this peacekeeping operation.

STERNER: The first problem was to get the Israelis and Egyptians to agree on the terms under which the force would be set up. I had no idea how complicated this would be--establishing a peacekeeping operation de novo, outside of the UN. I got good advice from Brian Urquhart, the UN Assistant Secretary General who had set up so many peace keeping forces.

Q: Was he British or Irish?

STERNER: No, he's British, and a fine man. Incidentally, if you haven't read his memoirs they're quite interesting. He also did a good biography of Hammarskjold. He writes well. He had fascinating experiences in the Congo as well as the Middle East. Anyway, to get back to the Sinai force, there was the question of the size and composition of the force: the Egyptians wanted it as small as possible, and the Israelis had no confidence in it unless it was considerably larger than that. How should it be equipped? The Egyptians wanted very lightly armed forces, the Israelis wanted heavy military equipment.

Q: Why? I mean why would there be this difference between size and equipment?

STERNER: The Israelis basically saw it as a force that might well have to fight. The Egyptians saw such a large force as a derogation of their sovereignty because of course the force was entirely stationed in the Sinai, on their territory. And as they saw it the peacekeeping force had been imposed on them as a condition of the peace treaty. It was not something they liked. There were also problems about where these units should be stationed, about where the observation posts should be placed. The Israelis made a determined effort to try to get the Egyptians to agree that two large Air Force bases in Sinai that the Israelis had built should be used exclusively by the force. The Egyptians didn't want that because they saw that as a further detraction of their sovereign right to reoccupy Sinai as they saw fit. At the beginning the two sides disagreed about every provision and detail. There was the additional problem of creating the zones, of how you staffed the observer mission to carry out the peace treaty's provisions for the other zones in the Sinai. We also had a major problem about American involvement. The Israelis wanted American troops in the force. The new Reagan administration also liked the idea. You know, we must reverse the Vietnam syndrome. Let's show them that we can send American boys out there. But the Egyptians didn't want American forces there. They wanted contingents from non-aligned countries. We had difficulties over such matters as a status of forces agreement. What happens when one of these soldiers was arrested for drunkenness in Cairo or Jerusalem. So it was a prolonged negotiation, but I had the enormous advantage that both sides knew that unless they came to an agreement the Peace Treaty would not be implemented. I had a little delegation that consisted of a political officer, a military adviser--a Colonel in the American Army--a legal adviser from the State Department, a couple of other specialists brought in from time to time to help

me out. And we had excellent support from the Embassies and the Consulate General in Jerusalem. We negotiated to have one session in Jerusalem, next session in Cairo and got to know those places pretty well. I must have made nine or ten trips to both places, occasionally shuttling between the two with the help of the Cairo Air Attaché's little Beechcraft aircraft. It was a professional challenge and also a lot of fun. As your career goes along in the State Department, no matter what position you reach, there's always somebody looking over your shoulder, so to have almost exclusive responsibility with nobody between you and the Secretary of State to just get something done, was very gratifying.

Q: Was this really the order--Get something! I mean, rather than we want it like this, I mean it was really let's get this thing going?

STERNER: No one cared what the details were, but they wanted this thing to be in place by the time the peace treaty was supposed to go into effect. So I had a deadline of about eight months to get it done. And we had a lot to do in this period. For example, funding turned out to be a major problem. Both the Egyptians and the Israelis started out saying we're not going to contribute a penny to this. I had to go back and say to them, Uncle Sam sure as hell isn't going to pay for the whole thing and you know, we had some tough sessions on this point. I finally got Sadat to agree to put up a third of the money and the Israelis -- I said, if he puts a third, you've got to put up a third--and got them to agree to that. I committed the USG to the other third, and to a financial arrangement for the initial year, because there were some major start up costs, for the U.S. to pay 60% of the costs, the Egyptians and Israelis 40%. We made a hand-shake deal on this without even reporting it to the Department, let alone Congress. I knew I had to get something done, and that time was limited. I said this may be the end of my career but to hell with it. I then came home to face the music in Congress. I went down there and said this is the arrangement which I think will be real good if we can get it, if we can only sell it and Lee Hamilton and others down there said, Gee, it sounds all right to me. Compared to what Federal officials generally have to go through to get funding for projects, I still can't believe it happened so easily. People tell me now, who are involved in that part of the world, that the Sinai peace-keeping force works well and that the agreement and all the details we negotiated provide a good foundation for its operations. Much of that was not my doing but the doing of Ray Hunt, who was appointed to be the first Director General of the Multi-national Force and Observers, and was tragically assassinated in Rome where he had his headquarters by Italian Red Brigade.

Q: Was it connected with it, or just...

STERNER: I think he was just a convenient target of some kind. You know, next to the Ambassador who may have been better guarded, he was one of the prominent Americans in Italy.

Q: How did the other great power, the Pentagon, which was going to supply the troops, how did you find dealing with them?

STERNER: It was difficult getting countries, including our own country, to participate. At first the Pentagon really didn't want to have anything to do with this thing. They were with the Egyptians. It ought to be a non-aligned operation. But at a very high level the Israelis clamored for American participation. The answer is they didn't have any confidence that...

Q: Well, they'd already been through this other thing in '67.

STERNER: Exactly. And had a good reason to have some lack of confidence in peacekeeping forces. So the State Department made up its mind that it was in favor of American presence, and we after all had a Secretary of State at that time who had been a military officer, who had considerable clout with the Pentagon. And it was decided that the Pentagon should contribute an infantry battalion and some support elements. The only trouble was these packages came in much larger units than we wanted in the Sinai. For example, we got a Fijian battalion that was 600 man strong. Self supporting American battalions don't come at less than a thousand and we had already negotiated an overall manpower limit for the force which had been very difficult to get because the Egyptians had been so sticky about it, and then we had to go back to them and say, listen, I'm sorry, but if we have to have American forces and we do, we have to raise these limits. It was also very difficult to persuade any other countries to participate. We finally got a battalion from Fiji, that great power out there in the South Pacific somewhere, and Colombia, which was somewhat more respectable or at least a country which people had heard of. And that was the initial force along with the U.S. battalion. Then with that in place, our European and other allies began to say that it was something we can participate in in a quiet way and they contributed some support elements. The Italians gave us a couple of frigates, well not frigates, but small naval vessels that patrolled the Sharm el Sheikh area. The French gave us helicopters. The Australians and New Zealanders gave us fixed wing aircraft. The British gave us an MP contingent. And gradually it became a real international force. Since then the Canadians have come in with something. So it's worked out well. I had several meetings with Anwar Sadat himself, shortly before he was assassinated, and with Menachem Begin, so it was a fascinating experience for me. And before I got involved with anything else, I decided to retire and do other things.

Q: What are you doing now?

STERNER: Well, I'm mainly earning my bread in a consulting company but I've gotten involved in a couple of entrepreneurial things on my own. The consulting company is international oriented with four partners who give it reasonable global scope. I tend to look after Middle Eastern work when we have it. It's mainly helping American corporations doing business overseas.

Q: Well, one last question I'd like to ask. If a young man or woman comes to you and asks, Mr. Ambassador, what about the foreign service as a career? We're talking about today. How do you reply?

STERNER: I tend to be a booster in spite of all the bad things we know about, and perhaps the things that are weak in the Service since our days, Stuart. There is, I think, lower morale generally within the Service. There are far greater problems because the issue of distaff jobs, of double positions for married couples, all that business. Nevertheless I started out in life as a private sector person and am now back in the private sector and I feel two ways looking back on it. First of all, I am grateful that I had the opportunity to spend the bulk of my professional career in public service. Secondly, there are not many jobs in the private sector that have as much day-to-day interest and fun as most foreign service jobs. Of course that can vary. I may have had a particularly interesting time during my career. Perhaps others have not been so rewarding. Obviously you have cases of people who get diseases which isn't fun at all, but I think on average, the Foreign Service offers more interesting work wherever you are and whatever line you get into than most private sector careers that I've seen. I have really no regrets, and I think furthermore that some kind of low point has probably been reached in the Service. And it's likely to come up as we adjust to many new things: a smaller overall Service; acknowledgment that the United States doesn't have this enormous role in the world--has a more modest role to play, but nevertheless, it seems to me a leadership role; adjusting to a bisexual service; adjusting to affirmative action for minorities, getting rid of the big bulge at the top. But if they can shape up on these things and get some sort of stability it's bound to be once again a good career, and being an American diplomat, although it may involve somewhat less status than it did in the 1950's and 1960's when we were all regarded as Proconsuls of some kind in many parts of the world, is still going to be a lot more challenging and interesting than being a Turkish diplomat or a Danish diplomat. You have real things to do out there, and the United States Government will be playing a lead in developing a world mechanism for the new "global" problems--the environment, world economic imbalances--to mention just a few. So I would say, if you're not worried about living in foreign countries, and you are interested in foreign affairs, I would place a Foreign Service career on the list of things you should be looking at as a young man or woman.

Q: Well, thank you very much.

End of interview