

Interview with Charles K. Johnson , 2000

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

CHARLES K. JOHNSON

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Initial interview date: 2000

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Q: A little background into your early life and how you wound up in the Department of State and Foreign Service.

JOHNSON: Well, the inspiration for getting into the Foreign Service came from one or two professors at Stanford University where I was an undergraduate. I started at UCLA (University of California at Los Angeles) for two years, then transferred to Stanford. We had a very active International Relations program there which was rather unusual in the West at that particular time, which was the late forties. But Graham Stuart was the name of the professor. He was an occasional consultant with the State Department and he tried to spark interest among his students in seeking careers in Washington. At that particular time, most students attending Stanford were from western states. Somewhat later, it became a magnet for students from all over the country, but at that time it was largely west of the Rockies. Stuart strongly felt that the west was underrepresented in the foreign service affairs agencies here in Washington. So he had an active program to encourage people in his classes to take the Foreign Service written test. He virtually marched us up to the Regional Civil Service Office in Oakland, California, some 50 miles away, and confronted us with this three day test. So I took it just because I wasn't sure what I wanted

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to do and was happily surprised when I passed. After obtaining my masters degree, I headed home to wait for the summons to come back to DC and take the orals.

So the next step was a summons to Washington for an oral interview by this August Foreign Service board. In those days, a candidate paid his own way back to Washington, DC. Since relatively few passed the oral test, it was a throw of the dice in which you might lose quite a bit financially. Happily, I passed the test but then came a new obstacle. The State Department had no funds to hire new FSOs. And so we were all tossed into the freezer for two or three years.

Q: Could you specify the dates?

JOHNSON: I think this must have been around 1950. I returned to California, worked for my dad, who was a banker, for a while, and then decided to return to Washington and see what other kind of a job I could find. With the help of the State Department, I found a job in what is now known as INR, I think it was just called R at that time. Instead of the three year wait, as forecast by the Foreign Service, the call to join the ranks and be assigned abroad came just after I settled into the "R" area job. A more significant factor was that I had just met my future wife and was not anxious to go abroad. The result was that I turned down the appointment. There were no hard feelings and I continued to work in the intelligence research area; made a switch in 1954 and entered the realm of what was then called the Bureau of German Affairs. It was a bureau co-equal with the Bureau of European Affairs, a big operation because we had taken over the responsibility for Germany in 1949 from the military and there were extensive reserved powers that we exercised in 1949-1955. Our mission in Bonn was a High Commission, not an embassy. Our reserved powers under the 1949 Occupation Statute meant a lot of backstopping in Washington. A lot of positions from the Army actually were transferred over to this bureau in order to administer all of the many parts of this arrangement. It was particularly complicated in the economic field. But I had a special slot in that office which many people did not envy. When I wanted to make a transfer, the only position open was as assistant to the special assistant to the director.

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The incumbent was none other than the sister of the Secretary of State, Eleanor Lansing Dulles. I remember my first meeting with her - set up so she could look me over - she was on the phone with her back to me. As she finished her conversation, she wheeled around and I thought "My God, it's John Foster Dulles sitting there." The family resemblance was startling. I was so distracted that I doubt that I came off as very intelligent in the rest of the interview. But she decided I was alive and kicking and took me on.

There began an interesting two years, an introduction to something that was quite different for me. This was an operational office concerned with a lot of current issues. Eleanor Dulles had responsibility for Berlin affairs at that time, but she also took over certain programs which flowered during my time there, that had to do with sending food aid and assistance to students in what was then called the East (or Soviet) Zone of Germany, as well as promoting East-West contacts through travel and meetings. In retrospect, one could fairly say that these programs anticipated on a much smaller scale of course what was to become known as "Ostpolitik" under Willy Brandt. She carved out a fairly formidable niche for herself. This was at a time when we were still giving some economic assistance to West Germany out of foreign aid appropriations [FOA]. With the increasing prosperity of West Germany, it was becoming difficult to get any bureaucratic sympathy for United States dollars going to Berlin, since the feeling was the Federal Republic could certainly take care of this. But there was a political justification for our being there and indicating to the Berliners that the United States, as well as the United Kingdom and the French, were behind them. So it was a politically economic program of assistance; we gave funds to equity financing programs; we helped finance a stockpile which was to be used in case there were further problems similar to the blockade of 1948- 49. At one point Mrs. Dulles got the idea that Berlin needed a Congress Hall. We managed to squeeze out of FOA two or three million dollars which went to construct a Congress Hall on the banks of the Spree River in Berlin. There were a lot of public relations type projects that she promoted. She went to Berlin at least two or three times a year.

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Q: In all of this, the question of her relationships with the Washington bureaucracy and of course the people in the field is interesting. Would you be able to characterize for us how she fitted into the government effort?

JOHNSON: Everyone thought she had the Secretary of State in her pocket and that she was whispering things in his ear when she occasionally rode to work with him from his home in Georgetown. She told me a couple of times, "You know, I don't think he has paid a bit of attention to me. I try to tell him something about Berlin but I don't think he hears any of it." Perhaps she was just trying to play that down but it was widely perceived that she was a very formidable lady. Nobody was anxious to go up against her in a bureaucratic fight, and there were a hell of a lot of them, because we were always fighting with FOA over funds. We were often crossing swords with the embassy in Bonn and mission in Berlin because they didn't ask for enough funds for Berlin. In the German Bureau, we had to base our requests to the aid agency on the basis of recommendations from the field. It was widely thought that Eleanor would time her visits to the two posts so that she could go over there and prompt them on how they should write their cables; she already knew exactly what she wanted to go in for. But in any event, she did have a lot of elbow strength in the bureaucracy. I think people attributed more than was actually there. In any event, people didn't want to tangle with her and so she usually managed to get her way. She was also a very persistent woman, very persuasive, sharp minded, and very intelligent. She also had another formidable relative in the family who was Director of CIA at that time.

A further not regarding the East Zone projects, as they came to be known. The inspiration came the Germans in Bonn. Specifically, there was in the West German cabinet a ministry for all-German affairs charged with keeping the spirit of German unity alive. There was not much they could do under the circumstances, but they did devise these programs as a means of maintaining all-German contacts and requested our assistance. Eleanor once again decided to tape FOA funds. FOA felt this was something that belonged in

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the bailiwick of her other brother, Allen Dulles, and not a suitable program for economic assistance. After a brief skirmish, she got her way. Sometime in 1955, the German Bureau was reduced in size and became an office in the European Bureau, reflecting our reduced responsibilities in Germany. The office director was Cecil Lyon who had a nice easy relationship with Eleanor. I thought he handled her very well. His door was always open, and he always kept a moderating hand on Eleanor's bureaucratic battles.

Two or three times a year Mrs. Dulles would make her visits to Bonn and Berlin. During that period, the High Commissioner was Dr. James Conant at Harvard University; he was succeeded by a career man, Walter Dowling. She would typically go first to Bonn, where she usually managed to get in to see "Der Alta," the German chancellor, as well as other German officials who had some influence on administering these programs which we were funding. Then she would spend maybe a week or ten days in Berlin. She cut quite a swath through the scene in West Berlin at that time. She knew and saw a lot of people and she saw a lot of people. In time her name became so identified with visible projects in Berlin, such as the Congress Hall and a hospital in Berlin-Stieglitz that eventually became known as "Die Mutti von Berlin" (in this connection the German word might conjure up the idea of a mother hen).

Q: Did you routinely accompany her on these trips to Berlin?

JOHNSON: No, I didn't go on these trips. I had to stay home and mop up after her departure and read the long notes she left for me about how I was supposed to handle everything that was going to come up in the next two or three weeks. That was a bit of a problem. Of course, I couldn't hold the fort quite as well as she did for there were issues others hoped to settle when she was out of town. I had good backing from Dan Margolies, who was the economic officer in charge, and Cecil Lyon and Geoff Lewis. We managed to hold things together until she got back.

Q: I notice that in 1956 you became a Foreign Service Officer 05.

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JOHNSON: That was in accordance with the Wriston program. The foreign service finally caught up with me at the right time, as I was married and the two of us were ready to go abroad and we did. The assignment to Berlin came up, not surprisingly, as a result of the initiative of Mrs. Dulles. There was an opening in the economic section and she thought this was just the place for me to be, particularly because the economic section had a great deal to do with the economic and financial assistance, the programs that she was interested in. She figured I had a good background from Washington and would have some sense of what would fly well in Washington from the Berlin standpoint. With a major blessing from that direction, I went to Berlin in the summer of '56 on transfer. I had visited there once by myself while I worked for Eleanor, so I knew some of the staff there. But I think the fact that I was assigned there was probably widely read as "Well, I'm Eleanor's man in Berlin." The last thing I wanted to be. Almost from day one, I began to look toward a lateral transfer into another section of the mission at Berlin so I could get away from the Berlin aid problems which I really felt I'd had enough of anyway. Eventually I succeeded in moving. In fact, I moved around a lot in that mission. A word about the mission. It was a huge mission. It had started out as U.S. military government, then became High Commission/Berlin and then in 1954 in an attempt to civilianize the title to make it appear the Berliners were getting more authority, status and so forth at this period of time, we became the U.S. Mission Berlin. Our resident State Department chief was the senior FSO. He was the assistant chief and the incumbent was Bernard Gufler. The deputy chief of the mission was U.S. Commander Berlin, who was a major general, and the chief of the mission in Berlin was the ambassador in Bonn. That was the hierarchy but the military had precedence on the spot in Berlin because we still wanted to maintain this occupation status because our very position there was based on military agreements that had been reached in 1945 and we wanted to preserve the occupation status of the military government period until some solution to the Berlin problem could be found. It was for that reason we were co-located with a large Army headquarters which was U.S. Command Berlin. There were, I suppose, about four thousand U.S. military in Berlin, I'm not sure exactly what the number was, and the British and French had comparably sized missions.

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This neither fish nor fowl mission which we worked in had conventional sections, such as political and economic and public affairs and administration but it also had very special sections. It had an Eastern Affairs section, which was responsible for reporting on East German affairs. Since we had no relations with the German authority in East Germany, it was important to keep ourselves informed on what was going on there because we could only have limited travel there. This was a five man section. We also had a public safety section, because we had direct authority over the Berlin police; we had three officers in that section, one of whom was a career police officer. But in any event, the liaison with the West Berlin police was an important part of that operation. We also had a lot of people who came in from time-to- time from other parts of West Berlin such as the U.S. prison guards at Spandau (where the principal German war criminals were detained). I think we may have had four or five officers who were career, I don't know whether you call them criminologists or what, but they had previously been on duty in the federal prison system. It was a very interesting group of diverse people who served in the U.S. mission.

My assignment in Berlin began in the economic section but fairly soon after I arrived there I began a series of TDYs to other sections because there were people going on home leave and so forth. I spent three or four months in the political section as the Allied Liaison and Protocol Officer, which was interesting from the fact that this was the point in the mission where there was a steady liaison with a Soviet official over in the Soviet embassy on Unter den Linden (East Berlin) and this was the channel through which we passed protest notes to the Russians (and they to us). Our channel was either through the Soviet embassy or else, when it still existed, we passed notes to the Soviet military Kommandatura which was out in Karlshorst (East Berlin). After a certain point the Soviets abolished the position of Berlin Kommandant so that was no longer a channel for us to deal with the many access problems we had with the Soviets. Our notes per force then had to go to this big embassy on Unter den Linden. I was one of three. There was a French Protocol Officer and a British Protocol Officer. Whenever we had a note to deliver, it was always the three of us passing three identical notes simultaneously to the Soviets.

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There was one phone in West Berlin that we could use to phone over there and let them know we were coming. We three then would go into this formidable concrete fortress (the Soviet embassy), it was an incredible, forbidding sort of a structure. We were ushered into an office which often reeked of vodka, cigarette smoke, and bottles that hadn't been put away. We would sit there and then the Soviet protocol officer would come in. He was very cordial, his English, we dealt with him in English, was quite good, and so we would deliver our notes. We would say "Here it is and it's about what you did on the Autobahn yesterday" or whatever it was, and so forth, and he would accept our notes politely. Similarly, if he had a note to give back to us we would be summoned. We would meet someplace en route that was central and then drive together through the checkpoints, past the Brandenburg Gate. So this was an interesting experience for a while, but it paled after a while since it was less substance and more formalities. That was one of many side trips I made when I was in the mission. I was also "borrowed" by Gufler to fill in as staff assistant for three months while the incumbent went home on home leave. Both times this happened, it was my lot to have a visit to Berlin by the Secretary of State. The first time it happened, it seemed a bit overpowering. I thought, "Oh, my God, how am I going to do this?" I hadn't really had much experience in the foreign service but the formidable Gufler said, "You're the man to do it." Our first Secretary of State visitor was John Foster Dulles, with a huge entourage. They had been in a NATO ministerial meeting in Copenhagen. Since the location was close to Berlin and probably at the behest of none other than sister, he was prevailed upon to come and make a morale building trip to Berlin. It was probably timed to coincide with some critical period in our relations with the Russians. They were putting a lot of pressure on us to do something or other and it was thought that the presence of the Secretary of State would be a good bucking up to indicate that we're here to stay; and that the security and welfare of Berlin remained essential U.S. security goals. So John Foster Dulles came with all his people. The preparations were interesting. I must say it took care of itself rather easily, much easier than I had imagined. But there was one thing that was nice about running a program like that, and I was the coordinator for the whole damn outfit. The military are experts in running visits and programs and organizing

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things. They had all the resources in the world. You never had to worry about a car or anything like that. I would convene these meetings every morning and we would sort of plan minute-by-minute. They had all these colonels in there from USCOB. There I was, sitting at the head of the table, it was funny, all these colonels were hanging on my every word. It was nervewracking but it was enjoyable, too. Everything went fine. All the drivers, I had to brief each one of them individually to make sure they didn't turn in the wrong direction, which had happened before. It all went beautifully and there was no problem. The Secretary and party were accompanied by people from the Executive Secretariat [S/S] and I got along with all those folks okay. That is probably the reason why I ended up in S/S when I left Berlin, which would have been three years later. The visit experience repeated itself after Dulles' death. Christian Herter had become Secretary of State and he had never been to Berlin. He was not a figure who was identified with Berlin and they wanted to get him there. So I ran that program again, and again everything went well.

Q: Meanwhile, following Germany's entry into NATO in 1955 it was a founding member of the EEC in 1957 so significant events were going on in the background that affected Germany as a whole. Did this get reflected in your work in Berlin or were you largely removed by your special location?

JOHNSON: In Berlin we were on the sidelines. What came first was the Coal Steel Community, which was of great significance to West Germany as the beginning of the European integration movement - the Monet Plan - and the move toward western unity. These relationships really were not an important factor in Berlin. What was important in Berlin on a larger scale, during the period I was there, fell actually into two periods. The initial period, say '56 to '59, was a period where the Soviets were not putting the emphasis so directly on getting us out of Berlin, but complicating our daily lives in Berlin and attacking the modalities of our access into Berlin. So we had endless problems that had to do with the way our transit orders looked as we were moving from Helmstedt to Babelsberg, the Berlin end of the principal autobahn. The question of checking cargo on military convoys. The question of documenting how many soldiers were in a convoy. How

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the trains moved because there were nine permitted train paths daily between Berlin and West Germany under the '45 agreements. These trains passed through the Soviet Zone. Again they went through checkpoints and these checkpoints always had the potential of being the scene of all this Soviet chicanery and making life difficult for us and wanting people to get out of their train cars in the middle of the night and be counted - head counts. Life was just a series of problems of that sort and that persisted up until October 1958. With regard to Berlin's economy, this was the beginning of a real take off in Berlin. Berlin was probably seven-eight years behind the Federal Republic in economic recovery for obvious reasons. It had lost its economic hinterland. It had been blockaded in the late '40s. The skilled manpower had left. The population was over age. Historically it was the site of a major part of the electrical engineering industry of Germany but it was very hard to keep all these big industries, which were needed for employment purposes, in Berlin. To keep them busy, to keep them supplied, everything had to be brought in from the West. But we did see in this period, the beginnings of a recovery and gradually unemployment began to fall and we began to see some returns in joint efforts - the Berliners, the Germans, the Bonn Germans and the foreign aid that we were supplying. So it was a rather encouraging picture that was beginning to unfold as we moved into 1958. A change manifested itself in November 1958 when it became apparent that Krushchev and the Politburo had made a decision to try a new tack with the allies in Germany. What they wanted to do was make a real effort to force us out of Berlin. They had tried that once with the blockade in '48-'49. They had obviously not succeeded and they had swallowed that. That was the first Berlin crisis. The second Berlin crisis began in 1958 when we all received notes saying the Soviets, within six months, were going to relinquish their occupation responsibilities, vis a vis their zone of Germany, and that with regard to questions of Berlin and access thereto, we would simply have to settle with the German Democratic Republic, as they called it. That initiated a crisis period which sort of dominated, certainly the next six months, because we were given until - I think it was until May - to come to some sort of agreement with the GDR or else the Soviets would just flat out turn over all their responsibilities to the East Germans, i.e., presumably they would disappear from all the checkpoints. They

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would no longer send someone into the air safety control center. All the modalities of our presence of getting in and out of Berlin would be placed in the hands of the East Germans.

So the period beginning in November 1958 in Berlin for the people who were stationed there, who were living there, was in a way anomalous. Our friends and relatives back in the States felt that we were in the lions mouth, living under this threat. Whereas, in fact, there was a great serenity in West Berlin about this Soviet threat. This is the time when the Berliners show their best colors. They have always thrived on challenges and their finest hours have been under stress, pressure, and threat. This was proved during the first Berlin crisis, '48-'49 and it continued to be so over the years. So life went on. We shook our oratorical fists at the Soviets and said, "We are not backing down." Obviously a great deal of contingency planning began. In fact, it had always been underway, but was now certainly expedited in Washington. We had only a vague idea of what was being planned in Washington. In fact, I only found out about this when I started declassifying the documents after retirement back in Washington for publication. That is the extremely detailed nature of our military contingency planning. Also the diplomatic track was explored and what in effect happened was that the six month deadline passed without incident since we had already begun the process of negotiations with the Soviets. There was great concern after November 1958 about Allied solidarity and willingness to stand strong against this threat from the Soviets. By this time John Foster Dulles was suffering from cancer and was not well. He soldiered on however, and after the last NATO ministerial in '59 he made a trip from capital to capital (Bonn-Paris-London), the purpose of which was to make sure the allies were going to be solid, that our positions were mutually agreed. In a way it was a sort of heroic thing that he did because he was in so much pain at the time. In fact, I guess it was in April 1959 he passed away. Christian Herter, who had been the Under Secretary, took over his position and it was with Herter and the others that this negotiation process was initiated. This led to a series of Foreign Ministers meetings in Geneva in the summer of 1959. No agreement was reached at the time with the Soviets

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about the issues they had raised but at least it appeared the Soviets had decided they had pushed so far and they weren't going to push any further for the foreseeable future.

We continued to try to figure out the Soviets' objectives. I think it was obvious that one of the things that Khrushchev wanted was a visit to the United States. The visit did take place and it may be recalled that Khrushchev was invited to Camp David in the Catoctin Mountains in Maryland in September 1959 where he spent several days discussing issues with Eisenhower and staff. It was in a press conference at Camp David that Khrushchev first made a clear announcement indicating that he was not going to push us out of Berlin. Berlin was in a holding pattern and there was nothing to be feared. They were not going to make our lives difficult for awhile. His next objective of course, was to achieve a summit meeting. The spirit of Camp David lasted through the winter of '59-'60 and led up to the long expected meeting in Paris of the four at the summit. Then along comes Gary Francis Powers! This was in April or May of 1960. Without going into any great detail about that meeting - it's a well known part of our history. The conference broke up and Khrushchev and his people, when they left Paris to go back to Moscow came through Berlin. By this time I was working in the Eastern Affairs section of the Mission in Berlin and one of the tasks for our section that day was to go over to East Berlin and station ourselves along the path the motorcade was going to take from the airport to the Soviet embassy on Unter den Linden. We all went out in our tackiest clothes and went over to mingle with the civilians and troops to see the sight. We saw him, indeed about ten feet away from us waving and next to him was the dreadful leader of the East German government, Walter Ulbricht (looking like he had just swallowed the cat). In fact, the message that was being given to him by Khrushchev was that he was not going to push anything with the allies for awhile now. Khrushchev could clearly see the end of the Eisenhower administration coming up. There would be a new president and whatever moves he was going to make on Berlin would be reserved for the next administration. In essence he was saying this in East Berlin to the East German Parliament even though not in these terms to us.

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By that time, I had moved from the Economic Section and was working in the Eastern Affairs Section where I was reporting on East German developments. We tried to go over to East Berlin as frequently as possible just to size up living conditions and clues to communist policy. East Berlin was a fascinating place and a small microcosm of East Germany. It contained the historic center of Berlin. It also was so large it contained considerable farmland within its city limits. We would visit East Berlin in our private cars bearing U.S. military plates and look into things, poke around in the stores and see what was on the shelves to size up how the economy was doing. It wasn't doing very well. That was always a problem for the East German government.

Q: Were you able to get into East Germany itself?

JOHNSON: When I first went to Berlin it was possible, occasionally, to obtain Soviet visas to travel into East Germany. Very soon after we arrived there, my wife and I went to Leipzig to a Leipzig fair. This was a standard thing for people from the mission to do. It was an opportunity to look at Leipzig and all the heavy machinery displayed there and try to make an assessment of the state of their industry. The only other place we were ever able to get documentation from the Soviets for was Potsdam. This was really very close to the border with West Berlin. I think sometime in the second year I was there, as part of their policy to turn more authority over to the East Germans, the Soviets told us they would no longer issue visas for any travel whatsoever in East Germany. We would have to get permission from the East Germans, which of course we could not accept. That ended our travel in East Germany. It was unfortunate because we were reporting on a country we couldn't enter. All we could do was go over into East Berlin. Of course we read their press voluminously. That was one of the daily challenges: to wade through 10 pages of "Neues Deutschland" every morning. We began to have a few problems getting across the border toward the end of my stay there - that is, sector-sector border in the center of Berlin. As part of their efforts to turn things over, the Soviets would occasionally authorize East German sector border guards to stop us and ask for our papers. Our instructions

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were to deal only with Soviet soldiers. There were maybe nine sector-sector crossing points at that time and sometimes my wife and I would go to the opera in East Berlin at night and it would be dark coming back so you had to go slowly as you crossed over so they could read your license. There was not any formal checkpoint like what Checkpoint Charlie was to become a year later. There was simply a group of East German guards standing out in front of Brandenburg Gate and you had to slow down for them. Sometimes they would make you stop and we would point to our license plate. They would play dumb and say, "Well, I need to see your papers." And we would say, "Oh, no, you don't and if you have any problem with this just call the Soviets about it." Which they never did. This was just a curtain raiser of a much bigger problem that came up after I left Berlin.

Q: Well, in 1961, you had to leave Berlin and move on and that too you to the Department if I'm correct.

JOHNSON: As I indicated earlier, probably because I'd had some contact with people in the Secretary of States's office during visits to Berlin, instead of going to the mid-career course I went to S/S for a two year assignment ('61-'63). There are a couple of interesting things that can be said about that from the standpoint of organization and development of the State Department. When I entered the office it was called S/S-RO (Reports and Operations). There was no such thing as an operation center then. This was at the beginning of the Kennedy administration. The function of S/S-RO was to move staff paper from the bureaus into the principle's office (mostly the Secretary or the Under Secretary). The State Department organization was somewhat underdeveloped at that particular point. You had watch officers in the telegram unit and they were charged with following certain subjects by duty officers in the bureaus. They were the men who were running shifts in the telegraph branch of the department who would be responsible for alerting the bureaus in the middle of the night about some really important development. They were the ones who exerted judgment about calling bureau officers in the middle of the night. It was beginning to dawn on us, when I joined S/S-RO, that this was not adequate for a situation where you had a White House very actively interested in foreign affairs and possessing a well

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staffed situation room. The military had their counterpart. All we had was a small group of staff officers from whom we furnished a single departmental duty officer for a week at a time. This rotated among us officers in S/S-RO. About every three months, one of the operations officers was given the job of being the departmental duty officer, going up front, taking over from the Executive Secretary when he went home for the day, clearing out paper on his behalf and staying as long as anybody else was up there. My colleagues and I dreaded this because it was very long hours and you felt like you were holding up the walls of the department.

Before the old system was abandoned, I was the departmental duty officer during the Cuban Missile Crisis. I practically lived up front (i.e., the Executive Secretary's office), we were there all night, and we watched the sun come up over the Potomac. It was before midnight that we had a note delivered from the Soviet embassy and we immediately summoned a fellow by the name of Akalovsky, who was the principal Russian interpreter and translator in the Department. We gave him this message from Khrushchev to President Kennedy on nuclear weapons in Cuba. Just after he finished it, another Soviet letter came in and it was quite different in tone. The first one was the belligerent one. The second one was more civil and reasonable. I was watching Akalovsky from afar. He said "These are two different telegrams - I can't quite understand it." It took a lot of very high ranking people (i.e., the President) to try and figure out what to make out of that. We all know the story of how we decided to respond to the positive one. That was perhaps the most interesting few hours I spent in S/S, much of which was taken up in the routine staffing of papers. During that period, they finally decided to create the operations center needed as a focus for a high level watch operation. It was very modest in its beginnings and it was hard to get people to come in and staff these operations. We were quite happy they came into existence because we were relieved of the late night duty operation.

Q: Then came your reward in 1963 when you were made officer in charge of the East German Political Affairs.

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JOHNSON: There was some sensitivity to setting up a unit within the Office of German Affairs that implied we were concentrating on East Germany as an entity. The West Germans were very sensitive to anything that had to do with the status of the GDR, as were we, too. This was a new position in the Office of German Affairs and before I arrived in the office, the director at that time (Bob Creel) went to the German ambassador and told him what they planned to do and why. We thought it would be a useful division of functions in the office with absolutely no political implications. The new section also included Berlin affair, too. It was under those auspices that I returned to the German circuit. By that time the office had become smaller than it was when I left it seven years before. A lot of effort went into dealing with all the problems posed by the East Germans who were always attempting to obtain recognition. It was the sort of issue you don't think about from the outside, but the East Germans were continually striving to attend international meetings; or strive for observer status; or pass themselves off as Soviet advisers at international meetings. The situation in Berlin changed dramatically in August 1961 when the Soviets, perhaps at the behest of Walter Ulbricht or perhaps they didn't need much prompting, decided to stem the flow of refugees that were leaving East Germany. This had been a problem for the East Germans from the earliest post-war years, but it got to the point where 50 or 60 thousand people a month were departing East Germany. This was perhaps the worst episode of flight that had occurred since the split of Germany. Something had to be done. A decision was made by the Soviets that they would permit the erection of a wall that ran through the center of Berlin and divided the Soviet sector from the three Western sectors.

In response to construction of the wall and the fact that a tremendous number of people in the department were having to focus full time on the Berlin crises - the decision was made in the European Bureau to set up a Berlin task force. It was a unit closely related to the Office of German Affairs but a different location and separate staff, many of whom were drawn from German office. Some of the returning people from Bonn and Berlin were put into it and a senior officer was in charge - Martin Hillenbrand. My work tended to overlap

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with them quite a bit because I was dealing with Berlin on the eastern side of things. We were then moving into a period of intense planning which was called "Berlin contingency planning." This was an effort to pull together and sharpen what had been on paper in general terms, but never in a focused form since the nature of the threat was less clear in earlier days, and concentrated on interruptions to access between West Germany and West Berlin. In short, there had always been a general plan but when the wall went up it was clear they had to do some fast and thorough work. The Berlin Task Force staffed what became known as the quadripartite group in Washington. It was composed, of Assistant Secretary Foy Kohler on the U.S. side, and the ambassadors from the U.K., France, and the FRG. The Germans were now brought into the military planning for the first time in depth. We all became part of this planning operation and part of my job was dealing with countermeasures. What kind of action could we implement in response to Soviet/GDR harassment? Some of these counter measures were in the field of controlling travel of East Germans. We didn't recognize East German passports, so we issued Allied documents called TTDs (temporary travel documents). That was an allied function carried out in West Berlin. As an example of countermeasures in response to Soviet pressure on us in Berlin, we threatened to cancel these visits of East Germans to the West. We weren't interested in discouraging travel by the ordinary person at all. This had to do with East German cultural figures and sometimes East German trade officials because some of our allies did have unofficial trade relations with the East German regime. The U.S. never did. Controlling travel was one part of it. Controlling trade was another aspect of countermeasures, but this was primarily for the West Germans because they were the principal trade partners of the East Germans. This trade was known as "interzonal trade" and it was carried on between the two parts of Germany in an unofficial way to avoid diplomatic recognition. The West German negotiator was not a ministerial person. He was known as a trustee for interzonal trade. The East German was designated in the same manner. In the realm of interzonal trade, we from time to time tried to push the West Germans to cut off certain essential supplies when the East side was acting up. East Germany was not blessed with natural resources outside of brown coal and

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therefore they were vulnerable to pressure from the West German side. In any event, trade countermeasures, travel countermeasures, and detailed military countermeasures were all part of the contingency planning effort.

One of the interesting events that occurred during my two year assignment in the Office of German Affairs was the visit of President Kennedy to Europe. This was a multi country visit and toward the end of it he went to Germany. Of course he went armed with all the briefing books in the world, which we had designed and composed. Before he went to Berlin he had at least one day and maybe a day and a half in Frankfurt. In Frankfurt he gave an important speech on European unity. In the briefing book we had prepared talking points which covered what he might say in Berlin, but no speech text. What we gave him was very antiseptic I'm sure. They were going to Berlin the next day and we received by telegram from the consulate general in Frankfurt the text of a speech someone in the party had drafted for the President to deliver at his principal appearance in Berlin. Bob Creel and I read it and I have to say it was pretty bad. It had absolutely no "Kennedy" flair to it whatsoever. We were wondering "Well, who in the hell wrote that because that's not what we put in the book." The telegram asked for comments and that was what was embarrassing because we didn't know what to do. We hated to step on anyone's toes, not knowing whose toes were involved. Bob got on the phone with somebody who was with the party, somebody from the State Department, and he was very frank with him and told him to do a little better. Bob was told there was already an effort underway to redo the speech. Overnight, what was really a bad speech was converted in some magic way into the speech that was given by the President the next day at Rudolph Wilde Platz, the town hall for the West Berlin government. This speech became history - "Ich bin ein Berliner." I remember when we started hearing about the speech the next day we were just flabbergasted. It was like taking a show out of town into Boston that's really a turkey and somehow converting it into a smash hit. That is what happened here. It was a very rewarding thing.

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The last event I'll mention about my tour in GER was a sad event because this was November 22, 1963. We were in the office and began to hear these dreadful rumors about the President being shot on a visit to Dallas, Texas. It was a strange scene, people were wandering around the halls of the department. It was a sense of terrible disorientation. We still didn't know whether he was alive or dead and then we saw the flag outside going down and we knew the President had died. One only has a limited amount of time for reflecting and now this is all a part of history. As it turned out, all the desks in the Department had to furnish escort officers for the visitors who were coming to the funeral ceremonies. With regard to the Germans, they sent the President of Germany, who was Heinrich Lübke. By that time, Adenauer had retired and the Chancellor was Ludwig Erhard. The two of them came and in our office it was decided that we had to have escort officers for them throughout the day. We did it in shifts and I was on the first shift which involved picking up the Germans at the Shoreham Hotel. We met them there with vehicle, the driver, and protocol escort. It was my function to accompany Lübke and Erhard through the first part of the day's schedule. The first part of the schedule involved going to the funeral mass at St. Matthew's. There wasn't room for the escort officers inside, but we had the reflection of a moment in history. At a certain point after the funeral mass and after the solemn parade down Connecticut Avenue to the White House, our vehicle moved to someplace down by the ellipse. We again picked up the German President and the Chancellor and drove to Arlington Cemetery for the very moving graveside ceremony. I remember both the Germans were very short so I could look over their heads and see what was going on. Right next to me was the tallest man of all - DeGaulle. Months later the National Geographic Society magazine ran a spread on the ceremony. There was a photograph of everyone standing around the grave side and I could see myself looming over the Germans but overshadowed by Charles De Gaulle. The enduring memory of that day was the vision of Mrs. Kennedy across the gravesite like some Madonna of Sorrows and the excruciating sound of Taps sounding over the ceremony.

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Q: Finally we get to your reward for all your hard labors on German affairs in 1965 as you go off to be number two at our Consulate General in Milan.

JOHNSON: In 1965, Milan was one of seven consular posts in Italy, an unusual number for a country of Italy's size. The reasons were historical. Most of these posts had been established before Italy was united. Our oldest consulate was created by George Washington in Trieste in 1792 which was then in Austria-Hungary. You could find the same thing with Naples, same thing with Palermo, which belonged to the Spanish Bourbons. We always considered that Milan was the most important one since Milan was the second largest city in Italy. It was widely regarded as the economic, financial, and banking capital of Italy. It was also quite clear it was the cultural capital of Italy, with the opera, the theater that functioned there, as well as the presence of most of the major Italian publishing houses. A varied metropolis of a million and three quarters people.

When I got there in 1965, Italy was governed by a center left coalition which had only been in existence for a few years. Up to 1963 the Socialists had not been in any government except, briefly, the Unity Government that was set up right after the liberation in 1945. The subject of socialist participation in the government in Italy was a controversial issue prior to '65. Primarily because the socialists had chosen to associate themselves with the Italian Communist Party in 1948 in the unity of action arrangement. It was a long time before the Socialists became sufficiently disillusioned with the communists to break off and move over toward support of the Christian Democratic Party, which was really the focal point and the foundation of every government in Italy from '45 on.

The entry of the Italian Socialist Party into the government was controversial. There was a lot of infighting in the Department of State and the White House on the issue. The people who opposed bringing them in were very negative on the Socialists. We were still fighting the Cold War and the opponents were skeptical that the Socialists had put enough daylight between themselves and the communists, particularly on issues like NATO. Pietro Nenni was the leader of what was called the autonomous group of the Socialists. Autonomous

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signified autonomy from the PCI (communist party). Once Nenni got control of the party apparatus and got 75 percent of his people behind him, then it was easier for the Christian Democrats to bring them into the government. My assignment coincided with the first years of their cooperation in running the government.

In the mid-'60s, Italy was a country which was beginning to show a tremendous recovery and already had one of the most developed economies in the world. They had also gone through, in the early '60s, a major political transformation. This was usually called “the opening to the left” but what it involved was bringing the Socialists into the government coalition with the Christian Democrats. This had been an issue which had been very divisive for many years, going all the way back to the famous American ambassador, Claire Booth Luce, who fought like a tigress to keep the Socialists as far away from the halls of government as she possibly could. The battle continued long after Mrs. Luce and there were remnants of opposition in the State Department up to the early Kennedy years. One of the things that happened at that particular point was that historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. joined the NSC staff and became, for whatever reason, a great partisan and arbiter of the center left, fighting what he perceived to be the “reactionary” European Bureau. The position of the ambassador, Freddie Reinhard, seemed to be in the middle of this issue. Bill Tyler was the Assistant Secretary of EUR and he had a very reasonable view. If I had been around at that time fighting that battle, I would probably have been on the side of the center left. I didn't see any point in forcing the Socialists to say they had always believed in NATO and swear on a stack of Bibles. I thought the mathematics of the thing was such that you just had to accept them and have confidence they would change their views. History has shown that not only was there a great transformation of the socialists, but Heaven forbid, there was a transformation of the communists in Italy. This is witnessed by the fact that one of them is now Prime Minister of Italy.

That's the background. What did a big consulate like Milan do in the mid-'60s in Italy? Probably less interesting things than it could have done, because of the attitude in the embassy in Rome that they didn't want these consulates getting out of hand. They didn't

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really want us to do political reporting, and not much economic reporting. We had some freedom on the latter because we were located in what everyone conceded was the economic and financial capital of the country and we were surrounded by the area which was making for this so called Italian miracle. While we were conceded some economic reporting, anything that was political had to be constructed in the form of a draft air gram which was sent down to whoever was political counselor. They would decide whether they wanted to send it or not. Sometimes they would take all of our names off and send it out as if they had written it. Other times they gave us a little credit. The big thing for an American mission at that time was commercial promotion. We were getting into this balance of payments problem period. We were very sensitive to balance of payments deficits and we were trying to promote, promote, and promote American business, particularly first-time exporters. So I suppose I spent fifty percent of my time in Milan on this. We had our U.S. Trade Center there, a Commerce Department establishment, which was located at the fairgrounds in Milan. That was a major operation which ran a seven or eight months long series of exhibitions of American products, usually items new to the Italian market. These American exhibitors who might number as many as 30 or 40, would come in with a hope of gaining a partnership or some sort of relationship with Italian importers. By and large, I think it was a successful operation. The Commerce Department trade center operation was in its heyday in the 1960s when I was there and we did what we could to help the operation. The centers were staffed by State Department FSOs, although the director was usually someone hired by the Department of Commerce. Altogether, there were perhaps five or six Americans whose office was at the Milan fairgrounds. We had our own commerce section in the consulate general, too, which did a lot of trade promotion. All of which was designed to move forward our objectives in exports.

During the three years I was in Milan a remarkable situation was unfolding in Rome. The Italians had the same Prime Minister the entire three years. In fact, he had already been in office a year before I got there and he was to last a year after I departed. That man was Aldo Moro. I think you would have to go a long way to find anyone who had held the job

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that long consecutively. Perhaps the Socialist Craxi in the '80s. Craxi's long tenure proved the walls didn't come down - the coliseum still stood and U.S. policy interests were not in any way damaged by having socialists running the government of Rome. In Milan, we were the largest consulate. Our consul general was the dean of the consular corps and had already been there six years when I arrived. I had been promised he would go home and retire after a few months. He stayed on a year and a half. This was Earl T. Crane. He was a person who believed you never turned down an invitation to anything. Since he had been there so long everybody knew him and he was Dean or "Decano" of the consular corps. I found myself going to some strange functions. I'll relate one thing that suddenly comes back to me. If he didn't want to go or couldn't go to something, he would always send the invitation in to me with a handwritten "represent me please." So one time I got this card and there was a memorial ceremony for a very controversial man who had founded an entity called ENI, which was the national petroleum trust. The man was quite controversial because he was trying to break into "seven sisters" society of big oil and gain some concessions on behalf of Italy. He kept complaining to Americans about the fact that Italy was being shut out. Controversial though he was, he was very able, was a supporter of the Christian Democrats, and for the most part a spur in our hide. He died in a plane crash off the shores of Sicily. This was perhaps the third or fourth anniversary of his death, and I was dispatched to some little church to attend this. I'll never forget the strange looks I drew from all the officialdom there. They couldn't figure out why in the world an American had come to this affair. It was known he was not our favorite Italian, and his methods were not our preferred. Sometimes discretion did not guide where I ended up going. I was very glad to get back in the car and drive back to Milan after that one. But we continued to "show up" and show the U.S. flag in whatever way we could.

Q: Then you had a chance to see everything from the other side, as you went back to Washington.

JOHNSON: Leaving Italy in a rather calm period in 1968, but there wasn't calm everywhere in Europe at that time. This was the period when the French students were

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beginning to stir. Eventually in 1969, that movement infected the Italian students. This led to a certain amount of political instability, which combined with nationwide strikes over contract renewals gave the appearance of crisis, even though the situation was less than critical. So the students were first. Then you began to see the beginnings of what the Italians call "contestazione." What that really means - it doesn't translate very well - is something like political confrontation. The theory behind this was hatched among a group of sociology professors at Catholic faculties of several universities in the North. Trento was one of the universities that gave birth to these theories. There were others in Padua. This was the beginning of the Red Brigade movement. People didn't know exactly what to call them at this stage so sometimes they were called "Maoists." It was the beginning of a manifestation which was hatched in '69. I came back to Italy in 1979. We were still dealing rather dramatically, in some ways, with the Red Brigade. But back to the Department in 1968. Secretary Rusk had decided that the basic organizational unit in the geographic bureaus should be country directorates. What this meant was cutting back the size of the offices so that instead of having a grouping of five or six countries, you might have two or three or maybe just one. Back of this was the thought that when the Secretary wanted to know something about Italy, for instance, he knew he could call the country director for Italy on the phone and he would be able to respond to him directly. I'm not sure it worked out all that well. On the other hand, I'm not saying we had any problems with it. Italy was grouped with Austria and Switzerland at that particular point, and the Country Director of my grouping was Wells Stabler, who had a lot of experience in Italy and had been in Austria, too, and was a superb person to work for.

This form of organization endured until about 1972 or '73 and then a decision was made to re-amalgamate the offices. There was a reconstitution of the old Western European Affairs, which included our countries as well as France and Benelux. My position became deputy director of that office, although I continued to keep my hand in a lot of things of Italian interest. The early '70s were not the calmest days of government coalition of Italy. There was a lot of interparty scrapping and socialists kept worrying

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that they were losing votes on the left. But while appearance was otherwise, Italy was not unstable and this is the point I think always needs to be made. In general, people understandably assumed that the existence of 35 or 40 governments since 1945 indicated great instability. Well, that's not really true. Through all those periods of government shuffles, basically the same party, up until 1980, was the center of the whole show and that was the Christian Democratic Party. Sometimes they had the socialists and sometimes the socialist democrats or the republicans with them in coalition. If they were going to the right, they would have the liberals in. Basically there was more storm about this than substance. The economy continued to expand while all these great political debates were going on. It continued and there were differences over personality, and there were differences between factions within parties like fault lines in these parties. If something shook a little bit then somebody had to be sacrificed and somebody could no longer be defense minister. So cabinet portfolios were shifted, but often the issues were not that serious. Basically, the Christian Democrats had accepted certain things to get the socialists in the government, like nationalization of electrical energy, and institution of the regional form of government. They had accepted some of the major points of the socialist agenda in order to get them into the government and to protect the left flank of the socialists against the PCI (the communists). The picture changed a bit from government to government. Sometimes you would find a minority government. Sometimes you would find a reconstituted center left. During this period we had a change over in ambassadors in Rome. Graham Martin, as most ambassadors, was granted an audience with the President before he embarked for Rome. In most circumstances the assistant secretary from the appropriate bureau or sometimes the office director would accompany. But in the case of Graham Martin, he insisted on going alone. So we only knew from Martin what the President's marching orders were, but we subsequently heard often from Martin about the President's hope to see the Italians move back to the middle of the political road. This would reflect the President's lingering suspicions of the socialists. When Martin got to Rome, he constructed in his own mind the ideal situation in which the socialists would be

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totally out of the majority. Thus began his efforts to encourage the centrist elements in the Christian Democratic Party.

During this period, the Socialists were undergoing one of their identity crises caused by fears that they were losing supporters through collaboration with the DC. So they chose to stay out of the government, and this meant the conservative elements of the DC emerged to take over the reins of government. Premiership went to Giulio Andreotti, one of the most durable of the DC politicians. He had been all over the left wing-right wing spectrum in the Christian Democratic Party. At this point, he was in the conservative spectrum and succeeded in forming a minority government. His reward was to be a visit to the White House. The problem no time slots were open in a calendar tightly scheduled by Protocol and the White House - at best, a real squeeze. But Martin, who was never one to sit on his hands, had been on the phone with whomever he dealt with in the White House pushing for this symbolic recognition that the Italian political spectrum was back to the middle of the road. We of course were making our own efforts in State Department channels to obtain White House approval, but weren't getting any answers out of Haldeman and the White House gatekeepers. At one point, I got a call from one of the deputy assistant secretaries in EUR, who at that time was Margaret Tibbetts. She said "I think we've got a slot for Andreotti at the White House. Would you call Rome and see if Andreotti could come March 17." I passed this message on to the DCM, Wells Stabler, and in due course we got a message back saying Andreotti would be delighted to accept the invitation. Silence from the White House, and the realization that the "invitation" was only "exploratory." There was only a potential open slot for Andreotti. The problem was - the fat was in the fire in Rome - an invitation had been issued and it was going to be very embarrassing to back off. Martin played this to the hilt to squeeze out a visit, and if it failed to materialize, there was a fall guy handy - me. Nothing happened for what seemed ages. We decided to go ahead and prepare the standard briefing book for the visit even though there was still no approved visit. In the end, the White House came up with a slot - it must have been the first time in State Department history that a briefing book was completed before the visit

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was approved. So in the end, Andreotti and Ambassador Martin got their time at the White House. The White House gave him a big dinner and we had all the Italo-American football players (Franco Harris) and football coaches (Joe Paterno) there. The real prize was the after dinner entertainment. There was a time when Frank Sinatra was not exactly socially acceptable in Washington because he had gotten into a public brouhaha with a female correspondent at the Ritz Carlton. We were a little surprised to see that Sinatra was to be “rehabilitated” for the Andreotti White House dinner. Whether the somewhat bookish Andreotti cared about Sinatra was dubious, but we enjoyed his program thoroughly. The big irony: the White House visit was no help to keeping Andreotti in office. Ten days after Andreotti returned to Rome, his government fell. Then we went back to the center of the left. So much for “centrist” government. We were back to the center left.

Within a year or two, there was a vacancy at the embassy in Saigon and Graham Martin was chosen to be ambassador in Saigon. He departed the Italian scene and we had a solid strong Italo-American candidate to follow up in Rome. This was the former Governor of Massachusetts - John Volpe. He was a genial man. I briefed him, escorted him to a lot of his appointments through Washington. Of course he was well known already because of his active political career. He was one of the Italo-Americans who came from the region of Abruzzi in central Italy, which is not too far from Rome. He was Secretary of Transportation before he was appointed to Rome. He had found ways to make several special trips to Italy in his Coast Guard plane even before he was thought of as a replacement for Graham Martin. I think the only problem coming up with him was his Italian. As is so often the case, Italians who come from Italy bring to this country their own regional dialect and pronunciation. Quite frequently it is something different from the standard Tuscan Italian that most Italians speak and that became, after World War II, the standardized national language. I recall him speaking at the Chamber of Commerce in Milan, a very prestigious Italo-American body, and insisting on using Italian. I remember well businessmen coming up to me after the speech, asking, “What did he say? What did he say? I can't understand a word.” As ambassador, he initially preferred to go alone on

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calls on the Foreign Minister. The embassy would sometimes receive calls from the foreign ministry afterward asking, "Just exactly what was he talking about?"

I had a chance to go be Political Counselor in Rome about 1973-74 when Bob Beaudry, old friend and colleague, became DCM. It was an assignment that I would have liked very much. Unfortunately, there was considerable illness in my family at the time and I was unable to leave when the opening came up. So I never got to Rome as political counselor. Another place I didn't get to was Cyprus. Wells Stabler, by that time one of the deputy assistant secretaries in EUR, took an interest in my onward assignment and one day introduced me to Roger Davies in NEA. Davies was going to become ambassador in Cyprus and was looking for a DCM. Wells introduced us and I had a long session with him. He seemed like a marvelous guy; everybody had only the finest things to say about him. He asked me if I would come as DCM and I said, "Yes, I would be very pleased to do that." So we began to make plans to go to Cyprus. I was in some sort of limbo - taking Greek lessons at the FSI and winding down my job in EUR/WE. One day, word came through that Davies had been killed by right wing Greek terrorists. The DCM, whom I was to replace, had just left the country en route to Washington. So what to do - the decision was to find the just departed DCM and send him back to Nicosia. By this time, warfare had broken on Cyprus as the Turks invaded the northern part of the island.

Meanwhile, I worked on the Cyprus task force while efforts were made to select a new ambassador as fast as possible. Management told me to stand by while this process went on. In the end, a new ambassador was found. He had his own choice for DCM, and I was temporarily out of a job.

But not for long. EUR and Personnel had been hassling over selection of a new political counselor for the U.S. mission to the European Community (now European Union). I became the designated hitter for this assignment. I knew just about zero about what the EC did, except for what you would pick up being in the EUR in putting together country briefing papers. At first, I was very surprised to learn they had a political counselor and I

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wondered what in the world a political counselor would do. I found out. I got there in the fall of 1974 as head of a four man section, including one officer who was a labor specialist who was the liaison to several European trade union organizations headquartered in Brussels. What this section did, in addition to steady contact with the European Trade Unions there, was to report on meetings of the Council of the EC. When the Council met at ministerial level, and it was usually the foreign ministers who convened every three to four weeks in Brussels, a special meeting might be convened at the level of agricultural ministers when they came to talk about aspects of European Common Agricultural Policy. These meetings were strictly like an inter governmental organization. The ministers came there in the guise of representing their countries, not as European officials. Of course the United States was not a part of this European community and this was the big challenge our mission as a non-member was to make sure we found out everything they were doing. But we weren't under the tent so to speak. Certainly, it was very important to our interests because of the economic factors involved. Our trade with Europe, our exports, particularly in agricultural products, were important national interests involved in dealing with the European Union. The Political Section reported on the meetings of the Council and the officer who did that was usually a junior officer. He operated much like a newspaper man, hanging out at the Charlemagne Building in the press room trying to find out what was going on inside, usually by talking to national spokesmen. This was perhaps one of the most needed and important reportorial responsibilities we had because there were a lot of customers back in Washington who were interested in the decisions that would be made by the European Ministers there. The body we dealt with in Brussels, to a great extent, was the European Commission. These were European civil servants for want of a better way of describing them. They were representing the EC rather than the countries from which they came. These were our day-to-day contacts in trying to find out what the EC had in mind, what they were up to and what they might be projecting for next year on the economic front. The other point of contact for us there was the so-called perm reps (the permanent representatives of the EC member countries) in Brussels. They were all very large outfits. We tried to cultivate all of them to broaden our knowledge of what was going

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on. The most interesting part of being assigned to the political side in Brussels was the opportunity to go to meetings of the European Parliament. These normally took place in Strasbourg, but every once in awhile they were held in Luxembourg since Luxembourg was still the titular home of the parliament. Everybody liked to go to Strasbourg because of the excellent restaurants and the delicacy of white asparagus in the springtime. I thought one of the more interesting developments in the EC at that time had been a study commissioned by the member countries to define what is European Union. What should a European Union look like and in essence - where do we want to go with all this? By that time they had nine members. An expansion was coming but I'll take that up in a little bit. There had not been any momentum toward a greater degree of integration among the member countries for quite a while. What were they going to do with all of this, and where did they want to go? That was supposed to be explored in this report. A former Belgian prime minister, Leo Tindemans, headed the project and his report was delivered about a year after I arrived there. We examined it carefully for how it might reflect on U.S. interests. There were a lot of cynics around who thought it signified very little. I remember our ambassador at that time had a favorite expression to describe what he considered flights of ideological fancy and pie in the sky - "eurocrap." This was Joe Greenwald, who was an excellent but realistic ambassador. His successor probably had more hopes for what the European community might become. That was Dean Hinton who was the ambassador during the second half of my stay. One of the things I remember about this report - tucked away in a rather long treatise - was a rather medium sized paragraph about defense cooperation. Obviously, this was way ahead of its time, but the American military was very sensitive to anything breathing the idea that the European Community might somehow engage in defense cooperation. This, they thought, could only lead to a diminution of the importance of NATO, and that bothered them. I'm not sure whether we specifically rapped anybody on the knuckles at this time over this but I'm sure later European visitors in Washington heard a lot along the lines of, "You know, this is great but what does this mean for NATO?" This issue is there, right down to today, because I get the impression that the U.S. military right now is still as opposed to having the Europeans

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cooperate militarily in any organized, effective way as they were 25 years ago. I find this incredible but that's the way things are.

Another thing that developed in Brussels at this time, which also made the political section's work interesting, was what they call political cooperation. This was a budding foreign policy coordination device which the Europeans developed after an earlier report drafted by a Belgian foreign ministry official, Devignon, who was looking for ways to deepen European cooperation and came up with the thought of coordinating foreign policy. So political cooperation - i.e., foreign policy coordination - became a rather standard part of the landscape there. At a certain level the political directors of all the foreign ministries would meet, either in Brussels or in member country capitals. They would discuss whether they could work out or express a common EC-9 policy on current issues of importance to them. As this EC practice developed, we decided it would be to our interest to keep in close touch with them as a means of avoiding surprises and perhaps influencing their policies before they were finalized. Also at the time I was in Brussels we saw the beginning of the Greek accession to the EC. This was the first step in expansion in the community since 1972 when the U.K., Ireland, and Denmark became members. By the time I arrived, the Brits, the Irish, and Danes had been pretty well integrated into the operation. With Greece, you had a country which had come out of the period of military rule by army colonels and there was a feeling among EC-9 members that they wanted to do something for Greece. They might be able to contribute some measure of political stability if they encouraged Greece to move towards a closer relationship with the EC. We followed this brief closely, and were very much in favor of Greek association because we thought it contributed to stability in this area of the Mediterranean. Another country in the Mediterranean became a focus of EC attention. This was Portugal. With the disappearance of the Salazar regime there was an interim period (three years or so) when the government seemed to slip into the hands of left wing generals. We were getting very concerned, as we read telegrams coming out of Lisbon. The EC had a role here, which we encouraged, of urging moderation in Portugal and holding out the possibility

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of closer relations with and eventually membership in the EC. That period of instability in Portugal played out pretty much during the time I was in Brussels. It had a happy ending of course and the Portuguese are members. The EC countries right down to today express their concern about the lack of democracy in European countries as witness their refrigerating their relations with EC member Austria when Haider's right wing party entered the government.

Q: Well, you got a well earned rest after Brussels and you were assigned to Senior Officer Personnel. Do you have any overall comments on that period?

JOHNSON: I think I can sum that up in a couple of sentences. Anybody who has done that sort of work in the last 40 years would agree that it's thankless work. One would try to do the right thing to help people out and to enforce some sort of discipline over the process of assignment. Almost invariably you are defeated by either the White House or the Bureaus who asserted their primacy in the assignment process and wanted to call most of the shots. One of the things we did was make the first-cut ambassadorial nomination lists and send it up to the director general. It never ended up looking much like what we started out with. But then sometimes you would get some nice surprises. Every once in a while you were able to do something to help somebody. That would make you feel good.

My return to Italy had its rancorous side. In this case, it was the Department versus the ambassador - a class battle over prerogatives in the assignment process. The post at stake was that of consul general in Milan, where the incumbent had been there no less than six years and everybody was agreed on moving him out. The ambassador, however, had his own choice, an officer in the embassy's Political Section. However, the problem was his status as a political officer. The post was a commercial interest post, meaning that the Department of Commerce had veto power over the assignment. The Commerce Department opposed sending a political officer there. So this tug-of-war began and went on and on. I recused myself from the whole process, but one of my colleagues looked in my file and saw I had been in Milan. He said, "I bet you would be acceptable to the

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Commerce Department because you were there before and did all those good things for them while you were there.” Before I knew it, they had called the Commerce Department and the answer was, “Yes, indeed. He'd be great. We approve.” This was all done before Ambassador Gardner had a further chance to weigh in. He considered this an attack on his prerogatives and refused to accept anyone but the man of his own choice. So the whole affair resolved into a duel between the ambassador and the Director General, with each insisting on his own prerogatives to fill the position in Milan, with me in the middle. It sputtered along through the summer, with no one giving an inch. At a certain point the DCM in Rome came back on home leave. His first stop was my office and he said, in effect, “You've got to come. Gardner is happy with your assignment. He realizes now that the Department isn't going to relent. He wants someone good in Milan and is satisfied that, although he doesn't know you personally, you would fill the bill. So please give it a shot.” So that's how I got there. I must say that after I got to the post I developed a very good relationship with Dick Gardner. Some people in Rome found him difficult to work for but my contacts with him were very favorable and I thought he was an ideal American ambassador in Italy. He spoke Italian well, he was prepared to go anywhere for speaking engagements, you give him an audience and he would go out and answer all sorts of tough questions from whomever, even when it involved a group of communist-oriented students in Parma. He carried it off. He had a public relations concept of an ambassador's role. That was a real plus at that point in Italy.

Gardner was succeeded by Max Rabb as ambassador in Rome during the time I was in Milan, perhaps a year or so later. Max Rabb had been in the White House during the Eisenhower administration. I think he had been involved in some sort of foreign policy coordination. After that he had returned to New York where he was active in Republican politics - the liberal wing of the Party. The fact that he was a Rockefeller Republican did not deter him from cooperating with the Reagan folks in New York City. In fact, he turned out to be quite helpful. So when the Reagan administration began looking at ambassadorial appointments, they saw Rabb as somebody they would like to do

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something for and so they appointed him to Rome as ambassador. Aside from the fact he had probably traveled in Italy at various times, when he arrived he really didn't have a great deal of background on Italy nor any language. But he was a very decent man. He made two or three visits to Milan while I was there. He was quite willing to accede to invitations by American groups in Milan to address them. He was generous with his time. And if there were an invitation to come to the opening of La Scala in Milan, he liked to do that. We liked that, too, since if the Rabbs came, my wife and I also got to go to the opening. He was usually willing to do anything I suggested when he came up there. He would appear at anything and this was very helpful. Just the fact that you can produce an American ambassador means a lot in a city like Milan, which is big, international, and is not necessarily impressed by everything in the world. Still its nice to be able to introduce city councilmen to the American ambassador. The local politicians were always very happy for a chance to talk to him. The Socialists in Milan were very much on the upswing and they were happy to have attention showered upon them.

The Socialists under the leadership of Craxi, a Milanese, had been gaining in National elections. They had a majority in the city of Milan and while Craxi spent most of his time in Rome, I got to know in Milan what was called the "Craxi Mafia," including his relatives and other close collaborators in the Socialist Party. I could get a pretty good fix on where the socialists were going by keeping in close touch with these Milan types. In fact, I tried to keep in touch with all elements of all political parties. The consul general usually had no problems with access in Milan or I outside. I certainly spent a lot of time visiting all of the Provinces in the consular district. By this time, many former American consulates in northern Italy had been closed, such as Venice, Trieste, and Turin. We were effectively the only American representation in Northern Italy. There was a lot of interesting territory. One of the things I really enjoyed about the job was the ability to go around and talk to Italians and get some idea where they thought the country was going and what they thought their future was. By this time something had changed about who we were allowed to see. When I was in Italy in the '60s we were forbidden to call on any communist mayors or

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communist provincial presidents. That policy had finally been laid to rest, thank goodness, by the late '70s-early '80s. Every time I would go to wherever, I would always schedule a visit with the Prefect, the Province President, with the leaders of the principal parties, which would be the DC, the PSI (the socialists) and the communists. The communists were pretty interesting. They were bright. They didn't have horns. Sometimes they were a little surprised that an American would come calling on them. They didn't expect it. I found on a number of occasions that these guys were actually quite nervous. You could even see their hands trembling a little because they had never met an American before in this circumstance. Another aspect of Milan was the fact that it put you in touch with the linguistic minority area in the Alto Adige. Anybody who spoke German had an advantage in communicating there because the official infrastructure was all German-speaking there. I never found it a very interesting part of Italy but certainly the Italian government in Rome had pretty much finessed the problem of absorption of a German-speaking area. They did it largely by all the tax benefits they extended to these people. They got more money back from Rome per capita than any province throughout the country. This was designed to keep them quiet and they were quiet. Other things that had changed from the 1960s. In the '80s, the embassy in Rome was delighted to have the constituent posts do all sorts of reporting. There was no longer that attitude. Now it was "We know best" and "We know it all" attitude toward the consulates. Now it was, "We're happy to have your contributions and please keep them coming." With this encouragement, we did quite a lot of political reporting based on our contacts in Milan. We had a longer leash in many ways in the 1980s and closer cooperation with the embassy in Rome.

I suppose this is the best time to mention one aspect of life in Italy at this time that became, if not overwhelming, at least very important. This was the existence of the Red Brigade movement plus another parallel organization called "First Line (Prima Linea)." Since their birth in the late '60s, these groups had gone through various organizational changes; they had certainly been the target of all the security forces efforts to throttle them. But they weren't throttled at all. They were very cleverly organized and Milan was

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a focal point of a lot of Brigade activities. The Red Brigades were organized in groups known as "columns" and there would be a column in Milan; there would be a column in Padua; there would be a column in other cities, and one column was not supposed to know anything about the next column. It made it very hard to crack. They were so very secure themselves. During the time I was in Milan, the Brigades were still attacking journalists; one heard of kneecapping - they were kneecapping industrialists in Turin and they were murdering journalists. There was a young fellow on the Corriere whom I had called on a number of times and I was shattered to read about his murder on the streets of Milan a month after I had seen him. One of the reasons that these groups were difficult to penetrate or to combat was that the population in general was disinclined to get involved. They were disinclined to express suspicions to the police about a suspicious person who had just moved into their apartment building. The way these people operated was they all rented apartments on the peripheries of the cities they were operating in. They had people who supplied them with food. They were there, but fellow residents were disinclined to get involved. In a way, this is a manifestation of a larger Italian characteristic. When it comes to dealing with the authorities, they are very reluctant to cooperate. The Italians have had problems with authorities over the centuries, including Spanish authorities and Austrian authorities, they just don't like authorities, particularly their own Italian authorities. So the idea of going in and telling the "Carabiniere" (Public Security Police) that there is a suspicious guy down the hall I don't trust" - they wouldn't do anything. Toward the end of this period, there was the beginnings of some public attitude changes. We began to witness events such as occurred in the streets in Siena when 50,000 people marched to express their horror over the fact that one of their fellow citizens who was a policeman had been killed by the Red Brigade. So this was one of the things that began to happen that marked the beginning of the end at this period. During the Red Brigade period, up to a certain point there had never been any attack by the Red Brigade on a non- Italian. This seemed to be a tabu, so while we all had our security measures and devices in our apartments, no one really thought they would ever attack an American citizen, an American official, an American businessman. The American business

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community looked to me for advice on what they should do. That all changed when in December 1981. An American general attached to an Italian Army command in Verona went jogging on the banks of the Adige River and returned to his apartment and found the Red Brigades waiting for him. He had been told he shouldn't go out alone and jog by our security forces but he did anyway. This was the beginning of a period where we all had to examine what our lifestyle was and what we must do to protect ourselves and our staff. Suddenly, somebody had taken the ground from beneath us. While the investigation of the kidnaping was taken over by national police authorities, we in Milan kept in close touch with local authorities, including General della Chiesa, commander of the Carabinieri Division stationed in Milan. The general had a national reputation for combating terrorism. Tragically, he was subsequently named prefect for Sicily to combat the Mafia there, and fell victim along with his wife to a Mafia ambush in the streets of Palermo. The search in Milan was General Balakiasa, who was well known as a fighter of Mafia and Red Brigades and was ultimately murdered by Mafia when he was made prefect of Sicily after I left. There are a lot of important people in Milan whom one kept in touch with. The search for clues to the fate of General Dozier continued. One night the police recovered a list of targets of the Red Brigade and the police told me that my name was on it. Once that happened, our security got even tighter. I had a bodyguard 24 hours and 24 hour guards at the family apartment. The wooden shades on our apartment windows had to be locked every night to forestall breaking and entering. We still had one son with us at that time in Milan and he was attending the American School of Milan some 12 miles away in the south part of the city. He liked to play sports and sometimes there was the question of coming home late - no activities bus. So he had to take a public tram home. We let him do this a couple of times but went through agonies worrying about him. Fortunately, the Red Brigades never targeted family members.

During the time I was there they did locate and liberate General Dozier. Because of improved police work and increasing use by the Italian Judicial Authorities of plea bargaining (which permitted reduced sentences to terrorists who would talk). Some of

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these captured Brigade people began to talk and from leads police were drawn to the north. The Rome Brigade people surmised that the hiding place might be in northeast Italy. Through good police work, the Italians concluded that Padua was the likely place. They tagged an apartment and in a well-executed operation captured an apartment filled with Brigadists - and General Dozier. So Dozier was freed and we all drew whatever lessons we could from that but certainly the tight security kept up long after I left there. Bit-by-bit the Brigades lost their force. A couple of years after my departure they were no longer viable. The Italians love to commemorate just about everything - anniversaries, births, weddings, deaths, and famous Italians. One of the organizations in Milan wanted to do honor to Christopher Columbus. They sought my help and asked if I could possibly induce the ambassador to come for the event set for Columbus Day. We managed to put together a major event celebrating the legendary Italian explorer. Ambassador Rabb was happy to attend and I also arranged for the attendance of Egidio Ortona, now retired from Italian diplomacy but for many years one of the ablest ambassadors in Washington. Ortona spoke, Rabb spoke, and I spoke. My speech was actually very carefully thought out. On Columbus Day, I wanted to say something constructive about the Italians. In fact, I criticized their tendency to be self-critical and downplay their natural profile. I was astonished at the reaction. They really loved it and since it came close to the end of my assignment there, it was in a way a nice way to say "Goodbye."

End of interview