

JOHN H. ADAMS

Interviewed by: September 28, 1992

Initial interview date: William D. Morgan

Copyright 1998 ADST

SUMMARY: As the present ranking State Department official responsible for visa matters, John Adams views, factual accounts and personal projections in migration affairs are particularly valuable for this oral history series. Mr. Adams, a career Senior Foreign Service officer, gives us both a chronological history of recent immigration laws and practices as well as a topical run-down of issues considered most fundamental to the field. He traces clearly how Congress moved from a restrictive view at the end of World War II of what and how many aliens could immigrate to the U.S., to more equitable and generous immigration legislation. He outlines carefully and in detail the present 1990 Act, how it came about, and what it means to consular officers in the field and in the State Department who must implement its terms. He similarly describes the forces in Congress and American society, as well as foreign interests, which play important roles-often with contrary agendas-in formulating immigration policy, or lack of it. His anecdotes and personal experiences give valuable insights into the process and enable the reader to have first-hand examples of how the visa function really works. Finally, Mr. Adams is most explicit and straight forward in his predictions of possible future migration policies, underscoring what forces will bring the most important leverage to bear. In sum, he is not at all sanguine that a clear, equitable set of principles will meld nor that any leadership in the Executive or Legislative branches will have the courage or interest-or will power-to reconcile the various conflicting elements that make up our so-called immigration policy.

BIOGRAPHY: John H. Adams was born in 1939, and entered the Foreign Service in 1966, after graduating from Dartmouth College, serving in the U.S. Army and working for a few years with a heavy construction firm. He has served largely in consular positions in the State Department and overseas. He previously worked in the Visa Office as Director of the Office of Coordination-concerned with examining the entry or refusal of aliens into the U.S. who were disqualified, usually for security or political reasons. An equally demanding Consular bureau assignment was as Director, Citizens Emergency Center, where among other things he was responsible for liaison with the families of American hostages and others in and out of the government concerned with this most sensitive period of our history. Rounding off his domestic assignments, he worked in the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs and was a Foreign Service Inspector. His assignments abroad included initial postings to Marseille and Tel Aviv, followed by tours as Consul General in Port of Spain, Trinidad, and most recently as the principal consular officer in Hong Kong.

INTERVIEW: This oral history interview of John H. Adams, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of Consular Affairs responsible for the visa function, is under the auspices of the Abba Schwartz Foundation. But I'll let John give you his full title, how he got there, as well as his background before we get into a fuller explanation of his work today. We aren't necessarily going to limit ourselves to the visa function, but that will be the thrust of this interview. John and I are old friends and have served in many similar assignments. As a matter of fact, and this is the greatest test of all friendships-he inspected me once, and I survived. One of his previous jobs was an equally interesting and responsible one: in charge of protecting Americans overseas, close to the equivalent of Deputy Assistant Secretary in that responsibility. But, John, let's stop my introductions and get on.

Q: Tell us something about your present responsibilities and how you got to be in the Foreign Service.

ADAMS: Thanks, Bill. You're correct. My present title is Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Visa Services in the Bureau of Consular Affairs. I'm the director of the Visa Office and I've been in this position slightly over two years, having come from a delightful three year assignment as chief of the consular section in Hong Kong. I came into the Foreign Service in 1966 and I have been doing consular work most of the time that I have been in the Service. I have had some other experience in the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs. I was also with the Office of the Inspector General, as you indicated, and I did a year of senior training at the National War College. But by and large I've done consular work, both in Washington and overseas and I've done it out of choice. From the beginning this is the area of Foreign Service work that seemed the most appealing to me and one that I've focussed on. I've enjoyed my assignments and my career pattern. I've now reached the grade of Minister-Counselor, which is about as far up the slippery slope as, I guess, one is expected to get, and I consider myself fortunate to be there.

Q: Well, speaking of the slippery slope, it has to have a foundation, and that foundation, if I'm not mistaken, was somewhere in New England. What schools prepared you for the Foreign Service?

ADAMS: I am a graduate of Dartmouth College, but I majored in economics in a liberal arts curriculum and really had no thought or interest in the Foreign Service while I was in college. It was the last thing in my mind. I knew at the time that the Vietnam War was heating up and that I would have to do military service as an able-bodied male, so I opted to do that as an officer and a gentleman, rather than as a conscripted enlisted person.

Q: You mean that you were in the Navy, John?

ADAMS: No, sir, I was an Army intelligence officer, which some say is an oxymoron. But it was a very pleasant way to do my military service for a little better than two years, most of which was spent in Southern California. During the time that I was in the military I had a couple of occasions to travel abroad, specifically in Japan.

Q: What years are we talking about here, John? When did you, for example, graduate from university and leave the military?

ADAMS: I graduated from Dartmouth in June, 1961. I had nine months of freedom before I had to report for active duty in the Army. My active duty didn't start until March, 1962. It was a delightful time to do pretty much what I wanted to do. I worked at a resort hotel and on a freighter. I saved some money on the freighter and ended up in Liverpool, England, and then traveled throughout Europe for about three months on my own.

Q: That was your first taste of foreign affairs?

ADAMS: That was, indeed, my first real taste of foreign affairs. In traveling about Europe I ran into people working at embassies and consulates when I stopped in to visit them in several cities. I thought that this was kind of a nice way for people to live. They were enjoying an American standard of living, working for the American Government, doing jobs that appeared to be important, but living abroad. They were subject to change every few years, which appealed to me. I liked the variety and the adventure which goes with foreign travel. So it was always in the back of my mind after that trip that I might like to do something that got me abroad. I wasn't clear exactly what I wanted to do. It wasn't even clear that it was going to be the Foreign Service.

Q: You were all of 23.

ADAMS: Yes, about that.

Q: Very young, not committed?

ADAMS: Yes, not committed to anything other than coming back and getting into the Army, which I enjoyed, and doing my military tour of duty. Even when I got out of the Army, I still thought that, perhaps, private industry in international work would be appealing, so I went to work for a large, engineering and heavy construction firm, Morrison-Knudsen. They offered me a job out of their Los Angeles office, but it was actually for a project at Cape Canaveral, Florida.

Q: But they have overseas operations?

ADAMS: They have extensive overseas operations. It's a great company. I had a good time working for them for two years in Florida.

Q: What did you do?

ADAMS: Well, I was initially a security officer and later a safety engineer. But the administrative side of that kind of a company offers limited potential, because by definition advancement in an engineering company is going to the engineers, and I did not have an engineering background.

Q: Your background was in economics, your major was in economics?

ADAMS: My major was in economics in a liberal arts curriculum, but I actually had no plan of developing it as a marketable skill. So during the time that I was in Florida working for this large, heavy construction and engineering firm I started to think more seriously about the Foreign Service. I decided to take the Foreign Service written examination, which, at that time, was given in Jacksonville [Florida]. Mind you, by then I had been out of college about five years, so I was a bit rusty on American history and just the process of completing an all-day written examination. Nevertheless, I was lucky enough to pass the written exam. Then I was invited to take the oral exam some months later in Key Biscayne, Florida. It occurred to me then that the Board of Examiners that trooped down there had wisely scheduled their examinations in Key Biscayne in February. That, to me, reflected well on Foreign Service officers' intelligence and judgment. They seemed to me to be a group of people that I wanted to be associated with. I was therefore delighted at the end of the exam when the examiners left the room for a few minutes to make their decision and came back and said, "Mr. Adams, we're very happy to offer you employment in the Foreign Service. You now will simply have to pass the security background investigation and the medical examination. We would expect to have you on board some later this year."

Q: And you came on board...?

ADAMS: I came on board in June, 1966. Backing up, I think that one of the things that particularly turned me towards consular work was that, in the course of my travels around Europe I had sufficient money and I had passage to get home. But I also had seaman's papers, and I went into several consulates just asking about the possibility, since I had gone to Europe on a freighter, whether I could find employment on a ship to go back. In Barcelona I asked about the possibility of getting employment on an American ship. They said, "There are very few American carriers now in the Mediterranean, but if you head up to Northern Europe, you'll improve your chances if you get to Antwerp or Rotterdam." I had a Eurail pass and ended up some weeks later in Rotterdam. I went into the American Consulate and asked the same question. I said that I was not destitute, but I was curious if, perhaps, they had a request for a crewman on a ship sailing back to the States. I remember to this day the Foreign Service national employee working there who said, "If you have seaman's papers and can get your bag packed in a couple of hours and be down at such and such a dock, we'll put you on an American freighter that's heading back to New York." I produced the papers in an instant, and the consul signed me on. I went back to my hotel, put my bags together, and headed for the dock. I ended up on an American freighter that was returning, absolutely empty, in February, when the North Atlantic is not a very pleasant place to be sailing, particularly without ballast. Nevertheless, about that are not issued cause problems. If you issue the visas, you don't have problems.

Q: But that brings us back to the State Department, where the bosses of all those ambassadors are. What kind of support do you get at home, here in the State Department?

ADAMS: Basically, the same sort of support that you get in the field. There are some who feel, again, that it is an irritant, and when in doubt, issue the visa, because if you don't, you're causing a problem.

Q: Maybe we should get rid of that and put it off some place else, where the State Department doesn't have to face all of those intolerable pressures.

ADAMS: Well, there are those who argue that the whole ball of wax should simply be handed over to the Department of Justice in the form of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. It is very much, as you know, a bifurcated process at the present time.

Q: With reason.

ADAMS: This is the way the law was written. Consuls have the basic responsibility overseas for visa adjudication and visa issuance or denial, and the Immigration Service picks up at the port of entry and decides whether the person, even those bearing valid visas, will be admitted into the country and what to do with them once they're here.

Q: Would you change it? Today you probably would.

ADAMS: Well, I have mixed views on that. In general I think that visa policy overseas should be left to Foreign Service officers who like to do consular work and are professional about doing it. I think that process in general has served us well to date. We can fine tune it, but I do not think that we should assign a cadre of civil servants to perform this function who are not necessarily very keen about living in foreign countries.

Q: Is there any movement in that direction now, or is it, as it has been most of the time, quiet?

ADAMS: There is a movement afoot to place INS officers overseas in what they call a "pre-inspection function." I see this, frankly, as the camel's nose under the tent, taking on more and more of the overseas visa function. At some point, if the trend continues, there will be wise heads in the Congress who will say, why are we, in effect, duplicating this effort? Why not give it to one agency? Since the Immigration Service has the primary responsibility back here, let them do the vestigial remains overseas.

Q: This INS pre-inspection does exist now in Canada. In how many countries now does this pre-screening exist?

ADAMS: Well, it's in Canada, and they have it in Bermuda, in the Bahamas, and, to a limited degree, in Ireland. There's an experimental program at Shannon Airport where they have, I think, something like three flights a week that come into the United States. Q: But it hasn't gone beyond that?

ADAMS: It hasn't gone beyond that. There is a proposal before us right now that would put a very large Immigration Service contingent in London at the airport-over 100 INS officers would be assigned there. This is, in fact, supposed to happen in the coming months. There probably will be more INS inspectors in England at Heathrow and Gatwick Airports than we have consular officers in all of Western Europe, which says something about the clout of the State Department.

Q: Did we have any one country where we had, what, 20 consular officers at most?

ADAMS: We do, but not at comfortable European posts. Now, there are two, putative gains from having the INS inspection process overseas. One, it provides travel facilitation, because travelers who have been pre-cleared before getting on an airplane to the United States don't have to go through the immigration process once they arrive. That will, in theory, reduce the backlog and the hassle of getting through international airports such as JFK in New York. Two, mala fide travellers will be screened out before getting to the U.S. where they can claim asylum.

Q: But it still costs immigration officers' resources. I mean, they still have to supply immigration officers.

ADAMS: They will have to supply a lot of immigration officers. Furthermore, you still have to go through customs inspection when you get to New York, so there's still "an entry requirement." You simply do not walk off a plane and out of the airport from an international flight, even when you have been pre-inspected in London. So how much travel facilitation will be gained is very doubtful.

Q: Is this something that's been approved over your head in Congress and by the powers that be?

ADAMS: Yes. There are proponents, particularly in the airline industry and in Congress who have been pushing this idea, and it has now gained a certain amount of support and is supposedly going forward in London in the very near future. The airlines like it because the non bona fide travelers will be screened off before getting to the United States, whereas, if they carry them this far, they are subject to very heavy fines by the Immigration Service. So they feel that it's in their interest, of course, to have the Immigration Service make those determinations before the traveler gets to the United States.

Q: Some years ago when I was to Paris, and the INS approached the French on the same subject. The French turned it down and said that would be a violation of their sovereignty. How do the British feel about their sovereignty-having law enforcement officers carrying out decision-making on their territory?

ADAMS: At least so far the British seem to agree that they can accept some U.S. law enforcement authority there in England. But you're quite right. The point is very well taken. As soon as the principal rings smuggling aliens into the United States realize that by routing their travelers through London, they're going to be subjected to that sort of close examination, they will simply route them through any number of ports of embarkation for the United States where we will never have pre-inspection. I cannot, in my mind, envision the French, or the Swiss, or the Japanese ever agreeing to a large, U. S. law enforcement agency presence on their soil. That being the case, rather than route your travelers from China or Bangladesh through London, you simply put them through Zurich or Paris. The pre-inspection in London will be nothing but an effort to facilitate legitimate travelers, which, as I said, is dubious in its own right, so...

Q: Well, this underscores how much consular issues are involved in bilateral and multilateral diplomatic relationships. In this case it's the importance of the visa function as it involves the movement of people-aliens from a foreign country to the U.S.-and how it impinges on the State Department's principal responsibility: the conduct of foreign affairs. What other functions do you see where the State Department's visa function relates closely to foreign affairs beyond just the simple movement of people? For example, terrorism, security questions, other relations with foreign countries?

ADAMS: Clearly, relations with certain foreign countries are tied into the visa and the migration issue. In the case of the civil war in El Salvador, for a recent example, Salvadorans who have been up here by the hundreds of thousands, in so-called temporary, protected status, now predictably do not want to go home, and their government does not want them to come home, because they repatriate millions of dollars in hard currency back to the El Salvador each year, through whatever work they're doing in the United States. The same is true for the Philippines and many relatively poor, Third World countries where, if their citizens can get here, they repatriate money back to their families in the other country. It's very much in the interest of such countries to keep that flow of people coming to the United States.

Q: John, as Director of the Visa Office, are you and/or some of your colleagues in the Visa Office asked for your views on such things? Do you have input into how this might affect foreign policy issues?

ADAMS: To be candid, we are not, and I think that this is one of the frustrations when you're in a position back here in the Visa office. You realize that, in point of fact, the State Department and most of the other government agencies, the Department of Justice as well, really have very little to say as far as immigration policy is developed and evolved. It is essentially a policy, and I use that term very loosely, that sort of evolves in the congressional process.

Q: But you have a voice in that? You have a whole element in the Visa Office which speaks with congressional policymakers, as you do yourself?

ADAMS: Well, that's a good question. On certain issues we will occasionally be consulted or asked our views, and they may or may not obtain. In point of fact, whatever has evolved in recent years-I frankly do not think that we have a coherent U. S. immigration policy. We have immigration that is largely driven by the would-be immigrant and his or her sponsors in this country. There are various groups competing for that ear in the Congress.

Q: But this always has been...

ADAMS: It always has been, and this is nothing particularly new. Happily we live in a participatory democracy. It's just that, as new groups have achieved increased political muscle here, they have exercised that muscle and generally gotten their way.

Q: Are these lobbies? Are we talking about the lobby phenomenon?

ADAMS: Yes. I'm talking about the Hispanic groups, I'm talking about the Asian groups, I'm talking about organized labor. In this latest Immigration Act of 1990 it's considered sort of a joke that for each garland that was put on that Christmas tree of basic legislation there was a name attached to it. There was the "McDonald's" provision which provided for students being able to work part time off the college campuses. That provision was put in because McDonald's lobbied for it and claimed they needed people to sell hamburgers. There was a "Citicorp" provision which was lobbied for by Citicorp and other American companies doing business in Hong Kong in order to get their employees some sort of assurance, as the colony gets closer and closer to reversion to China, of getting a green card for entry into the United States...

Q: And the immigration lawyers must have had some little baubles hanging on the tree?

ADAMS: There was the "Disney" provision which permitted exchange visitors to come and work at Disney World in Florida. I mean, it goes on and on. So all of these groups had their own, specific agenda for what they wanted out of immigration, and virtually every one of them got a piece of the pie.

Q: For that, read "Legislative Branch." But the Executive Branch also has a very important role to play. You've named three of the agencies, the State Department, Labor, and INS, the Justice Department. Under our foundation sponsor, Mr. Schwartz, I am told, single-handedly, led Congress at times in ways in which the President and the Executive Branch wanted to go, particularly the President's brother, Robert Kennedy. My own experience under, say, Barbara Watson showed the art of knowing how to deal with Congress. Are you saying that our input is less than it used to be, that the situation is different, or what?

ADAMS: I think that, if in fact, State ever had such influence, there is less of it now for a host of reasons. I don't think that it is necessarily the Department of State, sitting back on its oars, or the Department of Justice, but that it is simply a fact that more potent forces have been brought to bear on the congressional process. And Congress listens to those potent forces and bends to applied pressure without considering a grand design that's really in the national interest.

Q: Well, maybe Congress doesn't want to be involved with it, maybe it's too political.

ADAMS: There's no question that it is very political. Clearly, these groups got what they wanted, in that Congress eventually paid off these various groups. I think that they look increasingly to the Department of State and the Department of Justice as implementing arms of the legislation, but not particularly significant voices to be heard in developing the legislation. That's my view.

Q: Although it isn't your direct responsibility, at least for the record we should review a related area: refugee matters. I know that the Visa Office does not issue refugee status, but it is part of the interrelationship of foreign policy and migration. Haiti, for example.

ADAMS: Well, that's a very good example. Again, it's largely a political issue. Nobody, to my knowledge, sort of stands back and says, "What's in the U. S. national interest?"-either as far as legal immigration or as far as refugee policy goes. It is a hobgoblin of different forces coming to bear, so that we have the ironic situation now, and I use the term in quotes, of "refugees" being processed in their own country, including Haiti.

Q: That, I find mind-boggling, a contradiction in terms...

ADAMS: A contradiction in terms, if you use the UN definition of a refugee as someone who is outside of his or her own country.

Q: He's fled.

ADAMS: Who has fled his or her own country and has well-founded fear of persecution in that country if he or she returns because of political or religious or ethnic reasons.

Q: And therefore cannot go back. And yet we help them back. We take them back in ships...

ADAMS: In the case of the Haitians we take them back in ships and they process their claims as "refugees" in Port-au-Prince. Others, Chinese, Iranians, get their status here and go back on legitimate travel. Absolutely no persecution has been shown in any of those instances. People are processed in Moscow by the tens of thousands every year as so-called "refugees." Well, it seems to me that the honest thing to do is to call it what it is. It's another form of legal migration. If we really want to take in, say, 50,000 Soviet Jews a year, we should call it an alternative form of legal immigration and stop pretending that this is a refugee program.

Q: Even though you don't have direct responsibility in refugee policy making or even in operational terms-although some consular officers are involved-do you see refugee policy changing? Do you see, now that communism has largely fallen from power, which was one of the main basis for granting refugee status to those who fled it, that the Haitis of the world might change our way of thinking about refugees?

ADAMS: It's too early to say yet. One would have hoped that, with the fall of communism, we really no longer need a refugee program in Moscow. In point of fact, this year the administration is asking Congress for the same number of Russian refugee numbers as we had last year. The problem appears to have a life of its own regardless of changed political conditions.

Q: For political reasons? Political election reasons?

ADAMS: Political reasons. I think it goes beyond even the election year. Again, this is driven by political forces in this country that see it in their interest to keep this going.

Q: Is this the old thing of once a program begins, you can't stop it?

ADAMS: It's very hard to stop. Even when there is, in theory, a cap put on the number of refugees which the administration will agree to accept on a world-wide, annual basis, special situations develop, and the cap is lifted. Haiti, this past year, was a good example. The boat people got as far as Guantanamo [Cuba] and we took in over 30,000 Haitians with alleged refugee status, or the refugee status was to be determined once they got to Miami. Well, if they got to Miami, they got where they wanted to be, and they're not going back, regardless of how their claims are eventually decided. I talked to a very high-ranking INS officer recently who had been down there. I asked him candidly how many of these people were true refugees according to the UN definition. He said that, out of the 30,000, maybe 100.

Q: Of course, again, it's the definition of a true "refugee," because in that case political and economic considerations become terribly intertwined.

ADAMS: But if you go to the original definition of refugee-someone who has a well-founded fear of persecution for his or her political beliefs-that's not what we've been talking about in terms of the people coming out of Haiti. They either were avid supporters of the Aristide Government or not. If they were, and if the present government is going to do them harm if they return they might be true refugees, but in fact they find that there are very, very few who make such a claim.

Q: I think we'd better tell the reader, in case he or she is not familiar with the record, that when Abba Schwartz was the Administrator of all Consular Affairs, his responsibilities included refugees. Responsibility for refugee policy was separated out some 10 or 15 years ago, and now, John, your responsibility is "zero" or near to "zero"?

ADAMS: Yes, I would say, "zero." In the Visa Office we're really not involved in refugee matters, but consular officers at some of our overseas posts do some of the pre-screening of refugees. The final determination there is made by the Immigration officer who comes to that particular country on a periodic basis and makes the final adjudication.

Q: Now, in our conversation you have alluded and spoken directly to what you have identified as a "sister service". Let's take it on directly. What are your impressions and your working relationships with that very important body, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the counterpart, if you will, to the visa function?

ADAMS: Our day to day, working relationships with the INS are fine. We understand each other, we have a commonality of interest, and I think that we are working in a very collegial manner, both in the United States and overseas. The larger direction for the Immigration Service is something that I've already commented on briefly, including this effort to get pre-inspection, which is driven by some forces within INS, but they also have support from the airline industry and some supporters in Congress. So it's not entirely of their own doing that they are trying to expand overseas. I see that effort, however, as something that, as a taxpayer, I would be concerned about.

Q: I've understood from others that they continue to suffer from being both adjudicators-as are visa officers, judges in many ways of a person's future in entry or not into the United States or not-and a border patrol officer, somebody who is in law enforcement and says, "Keep out of my country." Is there still a dichotomy in how one looks at an immigration officer's professional attitudes?

ADAMS: Yes, I think there is. It's not one that we encounter very much in our own, day to day dealings with the service. But there's no question that there is that dichotomy in their role and their function of providing immigration and naturalization service, underline "service." Well, on the one side it is supposed to be service to the public, as is our function as visa officers. But, on the other side, you're quite right, they have the enforcement authority and responsibility.

Q: A conflict of approach?

ADAMS: Clearly, there is a conflict of approach, and they often switch their roles. During one particular tour of duty they're on the enforcement side and on the other side they're in an adjudicative or service side of the business. I have a lot of sympathy for the Immigration Service because they're up against an extraordinarily difficult task. We have, by anyone's definition, very porous borders. The public will, so far, doesn't seem to be there to take the necessary restrictive measures to control the borders. And we are not simply talking about the situation along the Mexican border with California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. It's at our major airports. I think that the average American citizen is totally unaware now, on a daily basis, of the hundreds of aliens who are arriving at our international airports. They boarded the planes with either counterfeit or, perhaps, bona fide documents, destroying the documents on the plane and arriving at the airport and demanding asylum. Once they do that, they get into a legal process in the United States and are frequently not detained. The Immigration Service does not have adequate detention facilities, so they are often turned loose on the street and told to come back in several weeks for a hearing.

Q: After they get themselves a good lawyer?

ADAMS: Well, they generally don't even bother, because they have arrived and often have given a fictitious name that has no documentation to support it. There's absolutely no credible record of who they are, and they're gone. Why should they return to the judge?

Q: This is something that the immigration officer faces. It's out of the hands of a visa officer, so now it's purely the technique and way the Immigration Service can handle it. This is perhaps a good place to talk a little more about ways in which modern devices help us. We've got computers, we have improved management and training techniques. Would you compare INS and the State Department's hopefully parallel systems?

ADAMS: We're trying to coordinate and unify at least the Lookout System. The Immigration Service has derogatory information on certain aliens. That information should be shared with us and, vice versa, so that we're reading off the same sheet of music. If an alien comes before a consul for a visa or appears at a port of entry for admission into the United States, a computerized system should be in sync...

Q: Is it?

ADAMS: It's getting to be. Heretofore, it was not. There have been parallel systems, and they were not necessarily in synchronization. It's getting better. The machinery that provides non-immigrant visas is increasingly computerized and the visas are machine readable, often with digitized photographs, so it's much more difficult for the very sophisticated counterfeiters out there to duplicate them.

Q: How many posts issue such visas?

ADAMS: At the moment we're in excess of 30. I think the number today is about 33.

Q: Aimed at the worst posts?

ADAMS: These are at the high volume, high fraud places, where you would expect to have problems, Manila, Mexico, Kingston, Bogota, places of that nature.

Q: And then the INS side of it-all INS entry points could read these things?

ADAMS: Well, that's been part of the problem, too. While we were issuing machine- readable documents overseas, INS was lagging behind in getting the machine- readable capability back here at the ports of entry. That's improving. There are more readers now at the airports, so that we're getting into better harmony on that. But there's still a lot to do.

Q: All of the officers and employees of INS are civil servants-Civil Service employees?

ADAMS: That's correct.

Q: Whereas in the Visa Office it's what, 50-50 Foreign Service and Civil Service?

ADAMS: In the Visa Office in Washington about 50% of the employees are Civil Service people who remain here permanently-that's right.

Q: Do you sense a problem if INS, completely staffed with Civil Service employees, were to station, for example, 120 Civil Service employees overseas-positions which State would lose? Is this the same issue in the Visa Office: Civil Service versus Foreign Service? There is, by definition, a difference: one has to serve overseas, the other does not.

ADAMS: I think, from my perspective in the Visa Office, it's a very healthy mix. I am very grateful for the dedicated, long term Civil Service employees that we have, because they ensure the institutional memory of the organization. But because our work is primarily abroad we also need that infusion of Foreign Service officers who have actually done the work in the field and who are brought back periodically to work in Washington. It is that marrying of ideas and experience between the Civil Service and the Foreign Service that makes the State Department system work, I think, very well.

Q: And you are the minister of that marriage. You make sure that that marriage works well.

ADAMS: (Laughs). We try, and I think, by and large, the Visa Office works very well. It's a collegial place to work, employee morale is good, and I'm very happy with the staff that we have there.

Q: Now you've given, I think, plenty of examples why the morale should be very bad, overseas as well as at home. How do you keep it so good?

ADAMS: I think that there's a basic interest in consular work to begin with. People who were drawn to consular work, as I was some years ago, like working with people. Even with the frustrations and failings of human nature it's still satisfying to work with people and be faced with real problems and real issues, so that at the end of the day you have a sense of having dealt with tangible issues, and sometimes you actually solve some problems. That provides a certain amount of work satisfaction.

Q: Is the word you haven't used, perhaps, "challenge." In other words, in the face of that insoluble problem, just working on it gives you satisfaction?

ADAMS: For some people, but clearly not for everybody in the Foreign Service. There are a lot of people who are very frustrated in working with a problem which doesn't seem to have the support or interest of the American public or the American congress. People don't seem to understand what is happening in regard to immigration and don't seem, from the perspective of many officers, really to care. Whether the visa is issued or the visa is denied, the attitude is, "Who cares? They're flowing across the Mexican border on a nightly basis, and nobody is doing anything about it. What difference does it make whether I issue this visa to this Turk or this Thai or this Filipino or not?" And yet, the law requires, and we're sworn to uphold the law, that you presume every person who applies for a visa to be an intending immigrant until he or she establishes that that is not the case. So it is completely contrary to American jurisprudence where you're presumed innocent until you're proven guilty. In this case you're presumed guilty of immigrant intent until you prove to the contrary that you're not, and that is unique to immigration law. Q: You, as the principal orchestrator of this hodge podge, and your boss, the Assistant Secretary, are the key people responsible for making sure the troops understand this. You can't, you two, possibly do it single handed. Therefore, you have to put it down to a lower level of managers. How do you do that?

ADAMS: You rely on the Foreign Service Institute training programs, both the Basic Training program and then the Middle Level Officer training program. We do have contact with officers as they're changing between overseas assignments...

Q: You meet with them personally?

ADAMS: They come to us on consultation, and I try to see them-certainly the managers-and reiterate our concern about those responsibilities for the younger officers, to ensure that they don't suffer what is euphemistically called "consular burnout" and that they rotate them and keep up their morale and try to encourage them.

Q: Do you receive ideas from "down below" that you can use?

ADAMS: Oh yes, there are some very bright young Foreign Service officers, some of them very idealistic, some of them very naive, who frequently come in and offer some very good ideas. Managers should always be alert to those fresh ideas and how you could do the job better. But the bottom line remains the same: visa work can be very difficult and frustrating. I'm not sure that I would be so enamored of consular work if my first assignment had been in one of the so-called "visa mills," such as Santo Domingo or Kingston or Manila, doing nothing but non-immigrant visa work on a daily basis for two years.

Q: But if they had told you that some day you'd be Deputy Assistant Secretary, you'd say that you'd hang in there? But you can't guarantee that to everyone in the house.

ADAMS: You certainly can't, and one would have to say, "Is it worth that price?" Because it can be extraordinarily difficult when you're working in some of these Third World countries where, as I said earlier, highly sophisticated as well as very crude fraud is coming at you from every direction. You're often working in an environment where you're not very much at ease. You often don't speak the language particularly well, and the pressure just doesn't let up.

Q: That's where you need the strongest leaders, the best local managers, in Kingston and Port au Prince. But Personnel perhaps doesn't always do it that way. How do you get involved in that?

ADAMS: Well, we try to get Personnel to give us the best people that they can identify for these difficult places, for the very reason that the weakest are not going to do well at all.

Q: Do you have some voice, can you exercise some pressure?

ADAMS: We do, we do. The Bureau of Consular Affairs has a good deal to say, particularly about who goes to our key management jobs in these difficult places.

Q: That's really the bottom line. How the young officers with their feet up against the wall can face it?

ADAMS: I would say so, but there also has to be something at the end of that tunnel that they can strive for. As we increasingly consolidate our operations overseas and cut back on posts where consular officers used to have the opportunity to serve as a principal officer running a small consulate such as Nice, France, or Genoa, Italy...

Q: Or London.

ADAMS: Well, I'm talking about the smaller places to begin with, before you ever get as far as London. Those places are closed now. They don't even exist. The large, desirable places, the London's, the Stockholm's, the Brussels', and all, will have fewer and fewer consular officers.

Q: You can't go there for a breather?

ADAMS: You can't go there if you're going to be faced with a consular career where the work requires that you shift from Karachi to Kingston to Santo Domingo to Manila...

Q: You can't do it.

ADAMS: It's going to be increasingly difficult as a consular officer.

Q: John, let's take you back a little now, in your career. You've given us a very good tour d'horizon, as we used to say in Marseille, of the visa function today. But let's step back a little bit in history and, not necessarily chronologically. Give us some of the high points of your overseas career, some of the things that turned you on and kept you interested in consular affairs.

ADAMS: That's a very good question, Bill. I think that, having the experience of starting out as a vice consul in Marseille, where the consulate has responsibility for most of the south of France, is probably one of the more idyllic assignments in the Foreign Service. It was a relatively small post, so I was able to do a little of everything. I did non-immigrant visas but I also handled immigrant visas. I did American citizen services work all through the south of France, so it was a great experience and I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Q: You even took care of sailors, maybe?

ADAMS: Occasionally, but there weren't that many shipping and seamen problems, as I came to find even during my more recent assignment in Hong Kong. That really is very much passe in the life of a consular officer.

Q: With all those ships?

ADAMS: Sad to say, there are very few American merchant vessels now plying the world. I think that my first assignment certainly helped to reinforce my attraction to consular work, doing it in a place like Marseille where I performed a variety of jobs. The next overseas assignment was in Tel Aviv, Israel, a larger post but not an overwhelmingly large embassy. There I had, again, a wide range of responsibilities, having worked in all units of the consular section, which was very busy, in both visa and American services work. It was an interesting time to be there. We had the Lod Airport massacre in which over 20 American citizens were mowed down. I was very much involved in that particular incident. The Yom Kippur War [1973] broke out while I was there, so it was a devastating time for the State of Israel. In the latter part of the war, when the Israelis rolled back the attack, there were some dramatic moments for everybody who was there.

Q: Sounds as if these are examples of the intimate role you play as a consular officer in the total foreign affairs relationship. You don't escape it.

ADAMS: There was that, and even as a consular officer there, I was part of the cadre that supported Secretary Kissinger's "shuttle diplomacy," which went on for a good part of the remainder of my assignment in Israel. That's quite right. That's quintessential foreign policy, even if you're just on the fringes of what the Secretary was involved in trying to negotiate settlements with the Egyptians, the Syrians, and the Israelis. After Israel my next overseas assignment was as consul general in Trinidad, which was more of the typical, Caribbean visa operation. There was a lot of typical Third World pressure to emigrate and get to the United States.

Q: You went as consul general, which is normal progression or...It sounds pretty "ranky" to me for a third tour [overseas].

ADAMS: Well, I was running the consular section. It was not a huge section, but it was fairly large. It was also at a time when the law had just changed, permitting more immigration from the Western Hemisphere. Heretofore, there had been a limit on Western Hemisphere immigration. We had to deal with that initial surge...

Q: What period of time-1975?

ADAMS: It was 1976 to 1979 when I was in Port of Spain, Trinidad. But by then I was also not working on the non-immigrant visa line. I was managing people who were working the line. So my career has really not, at any time, put me in a situation where I was likely to have consular burnout that results from working in these hopeless situations where you're faced with a daily onslaught of visa supplicants as a line officer in a real visa mill.

Q: But Tel Aviv has a lot of pressure in terms of both political pressure and interest pressure-but also volume.

ADAMS: Both. But only part of my tour was working on the visa side of the Consular Section. The second part was in charge of the American Services side. So there was that balance.

Q: You didn't feel that invasion into your survival?

ADAMS: No, and I think that that's the key now with consular managers, even in the visa mills. That's to keep your perspective and rotate the vice consuls out of the visa lines before they burn out, to the degree that's possible.

Q: Had Trinidad become a visa mill?

ADAMS: At the time I was there we were very busy but it wasn't a mill in the sense that Manila, Mexico, or Santo Domingo are.

Q: So how did you lead it?

ADAMS: I think, by example. You try to project an attitude of caring, responsive public service. You keep the officers informed, you take them into the decision making process, you have regular meetings with them, you show them that their ideas are as valid as those of anyone more senior. You know, it's a team effort and you delegate responsibility. I find that, by and large, junior Foreign Service officers are very bright and motivated people who will do a good job. But you've got to give them the responsibility and confidence to do it.

Q: Did you have support from above in this effort?

ADAMS: I did. The ambassadors that I had there were both very supportive, and we had good, two-way communication between the Front Office and the consular section. Yes, I have no complaint about that at all.

Q: So that was a good, "learning" management job for four years?

ADAMS: It was an excellent management responsibility for me. I learned a lot in the process. I then came back to Washington for a period of time, to the Visa Office and then to the Inspector General's Office, where I traveled around the world and inspected close to 50 different operations.

Q: You went back up to VO [Visa Office], because that's where we worked together for a brief period. Your job there was something you haven't talked about yet, perhaps because we don't emphasize the responsibilities as much as we used to. Give us a brief idea of what was done in that job you held in the Visa Office.

ADAMS: Well, when I returned from Trinidad, I went to the Visa Office as Chief of the Coordination Division. That Division was responsible for coordinating particularly sensitive visa cases from all over the world, not just from one geographic area. These involved people who were involved in espionage, terrorism, or subversive organizations, including the communist party. There was political sensitivity, if and when one of these individuals was applying, for whatever reason, to come into the United States. As often as not it was for a meeting at the United Nations or something of that nature.

Q: Was there pressure for you to let people in?

ADAMS: There was, on occasion, and we had frequent and regular contact with other agencies of the government because of the sensitivity of the cases we were dealing with.

Q: Sensitivity in the sense of the source of the information behind the case?

ADAMS: Some times the source of information behind the case-the CIA, DEA, FBI, NSA, etc-and in some cases the sensitivity was because of the high level involved in bringing a particular person in. There was interest at the White House, or by some one in the Congress, or in the United Nations.

Q: Sounds like a job where you had a lot of visibility. You weren't called a bureaucrat.

ADAMS: No. No, there was a lot of visibility, there was a lot of interaction with other components of the State Department. You'd be meeting with people at fairly high levels in the geographic bureaus because of the nature of the work. It was also the time when the American hostages were taken at the embassy in Iran, and we had very strict procedures put in effect for Iranians applying for visas from any where in the world. So there was considerable pressure brought by various groups who wanted certain Iranians brought into the country and otherwise expedited through the process that existed for all Iranian applicants.

Q: And this pressure was applied for political reasons, not really for legal reasons?

ADAMS: Not for legal reasons and not necessarily for national security reasons but primarily for political reasons. That's correct.

Q: So what you were caught in, as I understand it, a situation where you had to defend keeping a person out, perhaps under some extreme pressures, from political groups or universities or religious groups or whatever. And yet, the reason for keeping them out was very sensitive, because it might involve people's, source's, lives, not simply because it was classified information. How did you handle that?

ADAMS: Well...

Q: You passed the buck?

ADAMS: [Laughing] No. Well, with circumspection and gingerly, I would say. It varied from case to case. But you're quite right. To take just one example. There were, caught up in that mess in Iran, a number of ethnic groups that were genuinely subjected to persecution and mistreatment. We had to be sensitive to their supporters in this country and give special consideration.

Q: The Bahai.

ADAMS: The Bahai, the Iranian Jews, the Zoroastrians, there were a number of groups like that who did, indeed, merit special consideration. We had to be sensitive to it.

Q: So this was 10-plus years ago, at a period during which communism was still alive and well, at least alive, not like today. Iran, Lebanon, some of these other very sensitive places. South America, Mexican philosophers-all out there. Now you look at it some years later. Communism has fallen, we don't have any hostages there-we don't have any hostages anywhere, I hope. How do you see it now as Director of the Visa Office-how it's changed, what the pressures are, and what the realities are of less, perhaps, political pressures in this "coordination" area?

ADAMS: There are probably somewhat less political pressures, but there are also some hard realities in the world that we still have to contend with. Terrorism is one example, the increase in drug trafficking is another. Ten years ago drug trafficking was not anywhere near as major a concern of the administration as it is now.

Q: But I would think that that would be easy. There would be no opposition to keeping a drug trafficker out of the United States? Or a terrorist?

ADAMS: It becomes much more complicated, because sometimes there are people who are indeed "dirty" because of their previous involvement with narcotics, but who are now turning and who are of value to certain government agencies. While they are legally ineligible for visas, there are sometimes pressures for us to bring them in on an exceptional basis with a visa waiver, for whatever reason. We still get that sort of sensitive case and intervention from other players in Washington. Yes, nobody is enamored of terrorists, but yesterday's terrorist may now be a peace broker, as has happened in Central America-El Salvador, for example. Some of the bad guys of a few years ago are now being brought to Washington and New York to engage in peace negotiations.

Q: But, as I remember it, the basic way in which a person is kept out of the United States is that he is found ineligible for entry. He is on a "Lookout List,"-has already been identified as an ineligible alien-or is found to be ineligible on the surface in his application for a visa or entry. Then it's a matter of getting an exception to let that alien in.

ADAMS: An exception or what is known as a waiver of the ineligibility which can only be granted by the Attorney General at the Department of Justice through the INS. We have to go to them with whatever case we have we have as to why this someone should be granted a waiver. We carry the water for other elements in the Department, making the case that a particular person should be granted the exception, the waiver, and brought in...

Q: But it does sound a little bit less political than it used to be. It sounds like more, really bad guys that we're keeping out, versus controversial, political figures.

ADAMS: Yes, that whole Watch List process that had been in effect for so many years is really a thing of the past. There is no longer a Black List made up of people who espouse controversial ideas or belong to certain organizations. The Congress made sure that was stopped. We were ordered to get those names deleted from our extensive lookout system, which we are, even as we speak, in the process of completing.

Q: I think this bears repeating, because this is such a part of our history. Many readers, I am sure, vaguely remember this fleetingly, having read this one day in the newspapers. I think it bears repeating that you have been told that the Visa Office must, and INS as well, I presume, do away with a lookout list, what do you call it, a Black List?

ADAMS: That's right.

Q: But that doesn't stop our keeping a list of ineligible aliens.

ADAMS: Oh, no. We have an extensive, computer-based lookout system of people who are ineligible under the law, who were before the law changed, who continue to be, and who continue to be found ineligible on a daily basis.

Q: Such as members of the Communist Party?

ADAMS: Members of the Communist Party are no longer ineligible for non-immigrant visas. They remain ineligible for immigrant visas, depending on certain circumstances, but these are limited circumstances and waivers are even then often available.. Membership in the Communist Party has very little relevance, even for intending immigrants since the Immigration Act of 1990.

Q: It must be very hard to adjudicate in the field. It can't be done in the field, I presume. A person who was a communist and was ineligible...

ADAMS: No, in fact it can be adjudicated in the field, and it's relatively simple, if membership terminated a certain number of years ago in a non- communist country or even in a communist country. If membership terminated within a certain period of time, the ineligibility no longer applies. Even if they are currently a member but have a certain, familial relationship to the sponsor in the United States, they are eligible for waivers.

Q: The law stillholds that immigrants are ineligible if they are communists. Any time?

ADAMS: No, but with the family relationship, the waiver is available to any intending immigrant, provided that the membership terminated two years ago in most countries, five years ago in communist countries such as China or Cuba. In that case, they're not ineligible. It's very clear and very easy to adjudicate. The practical effect of it is, communist party membership really doesn't render a person ineligible for any kind of a visa, except in very limited circumstances.

Q: Any other, comparable exclusions? Homosexuality? I know that has always been...

ADAMS: That's been taken out as well as a ground of ineligibility.

Q: And yet I read that conferences are not held here because...

ADAMS: But that's a different matter. This is the medical ground of a person being HIV positive or suffering from full-blown AIDS.

Q: Versus homosexuality. That's a medical question.

ADAMS: It's a medical question. There, too, waivers are available. The larger issue for the medical ineligibility is, if the waiver is granted, will the person be able to meet the cost of the particular condition. And, of course, AIDS and HIV are extraordinarily expensive, so if a person can't show means to support himself and pay for those medical expenses, they'll be found ineligible, not because of the HIV infection or the AIDS disease but because of the public charge probability if they are admitted to the United States.

Q: Now, this isn't an occasion for us to bash the media unnecessarily, but I do personally remember being left with the impression that that conference, for example, in San Francisco or Boston, had to move to Holland, and we suffered, as we did with the environmental conference and so on, because of our policy. But you're telling me that that policy wasn't that severe.

ADAMS: The policy wasn't that severe, and it's not really the policy. It's the law, as written by the Congress. There are medical grounds of ineligibility and, to date, if you are HIV positive, you are considered to be ineligible for...

Q: But that's a medical thing, it was not a...

ADAMS: Nothing else.

Q: Nothing else. Why didn't it come out that way, I wonder?

ADAMS: I presume that's the way the media wanted it to be played.

Q: Or the group wanted it to be played that way, this particular, interested group. I had particularly wanted you to focus on the Coordination work in VO to give us an idea of how much it has changed, or has it? Then you went on to the Inspection Corps. My, that sounds formidable.

ADAMS: I did inspection work, primarily in the consular field, for three years and thoroughly enjoyed the assignment. I guess I visited over 50 countries around the world and learned a lot in the process, learned how things are done, how they should be done, and how they're not being done. I hope, as a result, I may be a little better manager myself. After that I did a year...

Q: Before you leave the Inspection Corps, I have to throw in one personal note. Perhaps you know, I was the very first inspector with consular experience, because the Inspection Corps, extraordinarily, allowed that maybe it could use someone that had had consular experience, rather than a administrative auditor, examining the consular function.

ADAMS: You make a very good point. I recall that in my first assignments, in Marseille, Tel Aviv, and Trinidad, the posts were inspected in each of those tours. Not once did I see anyone who had done consular work look at the consular section. Happily that's changed now.

Q: That was the only reason I was talked into going to the Inspection Corps. I heartily agree it is a tremendous experience, as a learning thing, to carry with you to your next job, which was in your case...?

ADAMS: Well, the next job, actually the next year, was spent in senior training at the National War College. It was a wonderful year at Ft. McNair. I came out of there and was assigned as director of the Citizens Emergency Center in the Consular Affairs Bureau.

Q: Well, I promoted you in that job to Deputy Assistant Secretary. In any event, tell us of the excitement and the responsibility. You were there with the hostages on the front burner.

ADAMS: I was there at the time the arms for hostages deal in Iran took place. I had frequent contact with [Lt Col] Ollie North and the White House.

Q: Wow!

ADAMS: I was told that I would be the principal point of contact between the families of the hostages held in Lebanon and the Department. I would be the contact. I did that for a year and a half. There were some very disappointing times, when we thought that hostages were going to be released, and some sad times when hostages were murdered. I recall attending the funeral of Peter Kilburn, the librarian who was murdered in Beirut. His remains were brought back, and his funeral was held in San Francisco. But I also had some very exhilarating moments when it actually worked, and hostages were released. I flew off in the middle of the night to Wiesbaden, Germany, to greet the released hostage, reunite them with their families, and bring them back to the United States.

Q: I think you should correct the record in case anyone is hearing something different. You and Ollie North did not work this out together.

ADAMS: No, no. Whatever Ollie North was doing to release them happened way beyond my pay grade. My responsibilities included regular liaison with the hostage families. When the hostage was released, we would take the immediate family to Wiesbaden for the reunion and ensure that that part of it went well.

Q: You actually stayed with them when they came off the plane and went through the hospitals and met with their families-an incredibly rewarding...

ADAMS: Yes, incredibly rewarding. And then come back to Washington and, in two instances, went to the White House with the released hostages to meet the President. The two cases I involved with in that way were with David Jacobsen and Father Jenco, a Catholic priest.

Q: Whom I worked with quite a bit in Beirut. A marvelous man. And Ben Weir. But, enough.

ADAMS: That was an extremely interesting two years for me. Not only the hostage liaison and the work that involved-very high level meetings in Washington, at the White House and the NSC [National Security Council], in the State Department, with the press, and so on. But also, a lot of other things were going on in the Citizens Emergency Area, including terrorist incidents in various parts of the world. There were the particularly bloody incidents in Vienna and at Rome Airport, involving Americans who were murdered.

Q: What would you actually do as John Adams? I mean, you talked to families and...

ADAMS: In Washington we would be primarily the point of contact for the family here and the liaison link with the consular offices overseas, who were handling the problem on the ground. These were generally individual cases, but this expanded to an enormous degree with the huge earthquake which devastated part of Mexico City, which also occurred on my watch. We had a major task force going during that time as we did with major disasters and evacuations. That was essentially what we were doing-dealing with emergencies large and small. With all of these State Department task forces, when an emergency occurs, you are the point of contact with the emergency overseas and the distressed relatives here in the U.S., just as we did on an individual basis daily in the Emergency center.

Q: And there were a lot of complaints, I am sure-and grief, grief! Knowing that it means, "Why don't you solve my problems for me. It's your fault! You broke the news to me, and you're not bringing my loved one back; you can't find the ring."

ADAMS: Of course, of course. A lot of that.

Q: Or you have to make sure that your subordinates understand how to handle all of that. How do you do that? I've heard that, as in the case of Pan Am 103, which was, I hope, after your watch...

ADAMS: That was after my watch, I'm happy and relieved to say.

Q: But again, there was that complaint. Understandable.

ADAMS: Well, the Department has gone into a lot more crisis management training for officers who work on the task forces, and I think it's to the Department's credit that people are much better prepared to do that sort of thing now than was the case before the Pan Am 103 tragedy. Handling the highly emotional and often hysterical relatives at the other end of the phone is never easy but officers can be trained and sensitized to do it in a professional manner.

Q: Understandable.

ADAMS: Although under great pressure, they are much more compassionate, understanding, and responsive because of the new training program. It's never a perfect world. These are extraordinary circumstances, when disasters occur and mistakes will be made. But, I think, to give everybody full credit, the Department is doing a much better job than used to be the case. I recall, going back again to my assignment in tropical Trinidad, being on the other end of one of those disasters. At the time of the Jonestown tragedy in Guyana, I was ordered by Assistant Secretary Barbara Watson, who was back here in Washington, to get on the first available flight from Port of Spain, because I was relatively close to Guyana, and get down there. I spent one night in the hotel, arriving in the evening. The following morning I was put on a light plane and was one of the first two American officials to enter Jamestown after the mass suicide. [four words indistinct]...

Q: This was after the murder of the congressman?

ADAMS: After the murder of Congressman Ryan and several journalists and after the suicides. We were the first two Americans into the commune where these 913 people had committed suicide.

Q: Something you will never forget.

ADAMS: I will never forget that sight as long as I live. The suicide occurred on Saturday evening, and we were there on Monday afternoon.

Q: What could you do? What did you do?

ADAMS: There was not much we could do other than make an assessment of how bad the problem was, because, mind you, the commune was 100 miles away from the capital city of Georgetown, right in the middle of the rain forest.

Q: How did you get there?

ADAMS: There was a light plane provided by the Guyanese government that flew us to the crude airstrip where Congressman Ryan and the newsman had been murdered Saturday night. We landed on that airstrip and flew from there on a Guyanese military helicopter to the commune itself, which was about five miles away.

Q: We usually need, for obvious reasons, the help of the local government. But you didn't have much support.

ADAMS: No, of course, but in this case the problem was so enormous and the Guyanese Government was so...

Q: Avoiding?

ADAMS: Well, simply not up to the task, and I'm not sure it's fair to fault them. Logistically, the location of the commune and the dimension of the disaster were such that there was no other organization that could cope with it, aside from the U. S. military. And that is precisely what was brought in to deal with the issue. Our initial recommendation...

Q: What did we send in?

ADAMS: Well, they sent in a graves registration team from Ft. Bragg, NC. They sent in helicopters and short haul aircraft, along with C-141's to bring the coffins from the airport in Georgetown, Guyana, back to Dover, Air Force Base in Delaware.

Q: Did you stay for most of that?

ADAMS: I was there for several days.

Q: On the site?

ADAMS: No, we went up that day, took a look at it, and came back to Georgetown to make our recommendation to the ambassador and to the State Department. Our recommendation was that the bodies be buried at the site, because decomposition was already setting in, as the tropical conditions were serious-heat, humidity, and rain. It was rapidly going to get worse and was going to be a serious problem trying to move the bodies out of there. We had the capability to bury them at the site. There were a couple of bulldozers and tractors there, and that seemed to be the logical way to go, particularly as there were relatively few relatives who wanted remains returned.

Q: I was going to say that the pressures on Pan Am 103 were enormous.

ADAMS: It was an entirely different kind of situation, because most of these people [at Jonestown] were without families. They would now be considered homeless, in many cases. So we made that recommendation to the ambassador who, in turn, passed it back to Washington. But the following day the Guyanese Government said that it didn't want any such common grave there, and stated that the U. S. Government had the responsibility to take the remains of its citizens out of the country. So at that point the [U. S.] military was brought in as there was no other way to cope with the problem. It was a major effort and it went very well. The Army and Air Force deserves great credit for doing a very difficult and unpleasant job very well.

Q: You have given us a superb example of the need to be flexible, as a consular officer, to move from one thing to another, but also what keeps you motivated is the sense of challenge. Now you've got the supreme challenge, one of the most fabulous and loveliest posts in the world, Hong Kong.

ADAMS: Well, yes, after the two years in the Emergency Center job I was given my choice of what was available, and Hong Kong certainly seemed very appealing. To this day I consider it probably the most pleasant assignment I've had in my years in the Foreign Service. It's a delightful place to live.

Q: You were chief of the Consular Section. Now the Consul General, that's someone special...

ADAMS: Tantamount to the ambassador. Since Hong Kong is still a colony, we don't have an ambassador there. But the first day that I arrived in Hong Kong the Consul General-de facto ambassador-welcomed me in his office and he said, "There's one person in this building that the people in this city want to know, and it's not me, it's you. These Chinese are very pragmatic. They know you control the visa operation here, and it's really all they want out of this building."

Q: All they want out of the colony, perhaps.

ADAMS: They generally don't want help with trade opportunities or invitations to the USIS [United States Information Service] film showings, etc...

Q: What was the population then?

ADAMS: About 5.6 million.

Q: And you're dealing with millions.

ADAMS: While fraud heretofore had been a serious problem among Hong Kong Chinese, it was relatively insignificant during my time because Hong Kong is an extremely prosperous place nowadays. It's considered one of the four "Little Dragons," along with Taiwan, Singapore, and Korea. The economy is booming. People are generally very happy with their life style, and they're often making a lot of money.

Q: Was this before Mrs. Thatcher agreed to 1997 and....

ADAMS: No, this was after, but the economy was still going extremely well, and Hong Kong residents, by and large, have a good track record, as far as visas go, so our turndown rate was only on the order of 10-12%.

Q: Legal immigration, in the sense of those that really fessed up to the fact of their desires, could be satisfied, or was there a tremendous waiting list?

ADAMS: Well, there was a waiting list that has now been ameliorated through the Immigration Act of 1990, which increased the ceiling for Hong Kong legal immigration considerably. The situation is no different from elsewhere in the world. If you have a kinship relation with someone in the United States, you qualify under a certain category, and you have to wait until your date comes in turn.

Q: But the Chinese in Hong Kong traditionally, to my knowledge, have had five to 10 years, whatever, waiting for many of the different categories. ADAMS: Yes, but that has changed now, dramatically, because of the increased numbers available due to the new legislation. The potential to immigrate puts them on almost the same footing as the rest of the world. You're quite right-a few years back the number was limited to hundreds, not thousands, hundreds. Now, as we speak, up to 10,000 are available annually and that will increase to over 25,000, just like any independent country in 1994. So it will be significantly better-from 600 to 10,000 to over 25,000. This is a big change.

Q: Which, in turn, significantly reduces the pressures...

ADAMS: The fraud now in that part of the world is coming mainly from mainland China. These are people who get bogus documents and try to get into the United States through circuitous routes.

Q: Out of China or not from China?

ADAMS: They're from China but they're smuggled out and then they come up through the subcontinent, through Eastern Europe, or...

Q: By boat?

ADAMS: Often by ship. They generally never go near a visa officer. They're smuggled in in large numbers, particularly with the price on each head being something, we are told, close to \$30,000. That's a lot of money, particularly for people from a communist country where annual per capita income is measured in hundreds of dollars.

Q: Now it sounds to me as if, as boss of the Consular Section, your management demands of the pressured visa officer weren't as extreme as at some other large posts.

ADAMS: The pressures were not as great as they would be if you were in Manila or Santo Domingo, or even in Warsaw, where the refusal rate is something in the order of 35, 45, 65 percent.

Q: Those were the refusal rate in Hong Kong when I inspected there.

ADAMS: Now it's way down, as it is in the other Asian countries where heretofore it was up. Korea is another example, Taiwan is another, and Hong Kong fits into the same pattern. The refusal rate is relatively modest. It's only around 10 percent. So consuls, in most cases, are saying, "Yes," and issuing the visas, and that takes a lot of the heat off them. They're under pressure to issue and they issue visas to bona fide travelers and businessmen and students and the visas are usually not abused. You're not seeing much fraud. If the visas are readily available, people don't have to resort to sophisticated fraud. It's not such a big problem. But the volume is there. People like to travel to the U.S. for tourism, business, and study.

Q: Yes. Could you do it by mail? Could you accept...

ADAMS: Some. But there was always a large and daunting line of visa applicants outside the consulate. So that pressure is there-just the volume of work. But at least it's satisfying because in most cases we're issuing the visas and both officers and applicants prefer it that way.

Q: And in quite a pleasant setting.

ADAMS: In an extremely pleasant setting. A wonderful place to live. The quality of life is very good.

Q: John, now let's pull this all together, if you will, and ask you to extend yourself into the future. You've gone to considerable lengths in identifying historically what the issues are that cause migration to the United States to go one way or the other-or go in circles. How would you see the year 2000 in terms of future migration? What are the principal forces that will be at work on future migration to our country?

ADAMS: I'm not at all optimistic about the future of migration or immigration policy. I do think that the pressures which lie ahead, and which I have identified, of East-West and South-North movement of people-both in Europe and in this hemisphere-are going to count very heavily in the shape of migration, of immigration to the United States in the years ahead. I would like to think that we will have a coherent, national policy on immigration. As I said, much earlier in the interview, I don't think that we really have an immigration policy. It's been an evolution of various pressures brought to bear resulting in a hodge podge of competing interests which we call our immigration "policy". Unfortunately, there is no national, strategic view of what is in the U. S. national interest, as far as immigration goes.

Q: Why do you think so? Is it because of these multifarious forces or...

ADAMS: Yes. I think that the multifarious forces are continuing to put pressure on the congress to get what each group wants. Even though we have had a 300% increase in employment opportunities through immigration, under the new legislation, the overwhelming majority of people continue to emigrate legally to the United States because of what I call an accident of birth. They happen to have a blood relative who is close enough to confer immigration benefits on them and they come in whether they have any particular skills or qualifications that are of use to our economy or not. That, to me, seems wrong in this highly competitive, global economy, in which we have to survive. We should be looking, more and more, to what's really in our best interest and not just increasing the number of immigrants who can come because they have relatives who are here. Clearly, immigration begets immigration. You can see that. The change in immigration is a reality, and the fact that the Third World is generally not prospering and is not expected to prosper to any significant degree in the years ahead would suggest that there's a large pool of potential immigrants out there who will, indeed, follow their relatives who get here by whatever means. You really can't blame them given the economic realities.

Q: One characterizes these realities as the "push-pull" effect: how the U.S. relates to the Third World or other nations that are suffering economically or politically. They "push" their people out, and we are a magnet: we "pull" them in. One answer is, "Well, let's be less attractive." Obviously, we're not going that route. We don't want to be less attractive and, hopefully, we can't be. So we will always be pulling people to our country. We seem to be pulling, as you said, in the South-North or the East-West direction, because there are comparable pushes from countries in the South and East, although, hopefully, less, now that communism has fallen in many countries. But the Third World is going to "push" people out, in the sense that they understandably want to better themselves. And we're going to say, "Hey, we've got a great country." John, I'm not posing something different from what you've said. I'm suggesting that it almost seems inevitable that things will continue in this way.

ADAMS: Yes, but we have to ask ourselves, "Is it really in our national interest to have this happen? Is this what we want?" There is the impact on the environment and our demographics. In 1972 a study group recommended that we should stabilize the population at about the level where it was then. It recommended to two Presidents that we do that—take measures in our own interest, and yet we have failed to do so. Immigration now accounts for about half of our population increase. The population is rapidly increasing, as we know, and the issue is the quality of life, environmental concerns, the economy.

Q: Is immigration affecting those things?

ADAMS: Well, the experts contend that it is, and I don't think that you have to be a rocket scientist to see the clear effect in states where immigration has had its heaviest impact, California being the most cited example. There is no question that we cannot continue to absorb the hundreds of thousands of immigrants from all over the world who want to live in California. California now is suffering a major budget crisis, as we know. Some of it has to be traced back to the fact that it is considered such a desirable place that too many people have wound up there including refugees as well as legal and illegal immigrants. That has put an enormous strain on the state's resources and infrastructure.

Q: You raise this geographic issue of California in terms of those coming from Mexico, Central America. There is a similar influx to Texas and the Southwest. What about to the rest of the United States? The Mid-West. It could take more immigrants?

ADAMS: It's not just Hispanics who are drawn to California, it's also Chinese, Indians, Vietnamese, Iranians and others.

Q: The Afghan, the Ethiopian...

ADAMS: As well. There are, obviously, a lot of wide open spaces in this great country, but there aren't many people being drawn to Wyoming, either from New York or from China. People are not settling in Wyoming or Maine or North Dakota or many other parts of the country.

Q: Should we do something about encouraging them to go to the Middle West?

ADAMS: Being a big free market economy, how can you really do that?

Q: Jobs.

ADAMS: Well, but that gets very complicated. In theory, yes, but we have a hard enough time coping with our inner cities, in providing jobs there, let alone trying to build incentives for people to move to underpopulated states. Right now, I'm told, there are five or six states where most of the immigrants, legal or illegal, end up: California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois...

Q: And Northern Virginia.

ADAMS: And some others. Even though it appears to be the case in Northern Virginia, it is far below Florida, Texas, California, and New York.

Q: Let me take a slight divergence from that for a moment. Do you see social or ethnic issues that could become very serious: the riots in Los Angeles between Koreans and American blacks-American Koreans?

ADAMS: I think that the riots in central L. A. were indicative of some serious problems, yes. The melting pot no longer melts and there are real racial tensions which are exacerbated by immigration. The Attorney General announced, when they made the first 6,000 arrests in Los Angeles, that at least one-third of them were found to be illegal aliens, illegals mainly from Central America...

Q: Illegal, in the sense of undocumented? They had smuggled themselves in?

ADAMS: Yes. They had come up by whatever means, or else they had come in legally with visas and then overstayed their visas. But they were illegally in the United States.

Q: John, I hear every word that you're saying as head of the Visa Office. But your facts, views and estimates take me to two conclusion. One: stronger, bigger barriers-I mean, physical barriers-across the Southern United States and perhaps Canada. I mean, physically barring people from entry. And, secondly, the Congress-it has to make the decision also since it means resources-must decide to tighten the quota, reduce the numbers. The two have to operate together because you can't just say there will be quota numbers and not have the border better sealed. My short hand conclusion to what you've said is we've got to seal the border more tightly (I ask you how that can be done) and Congress must consciously reduce future immigration into the United States.

ADAMS: There's no question that if we really want to put our minds to it, we can greatly improve the control over the Southern border.

Q: Can we?

ADAMS: We can. Certainly with technology and increased border patrols you can do it. It won't be perfect but you have to have the national will to make it better than it is now. You also have to have adequate detention facilities to hold these asylum seekers who come in-most of them totally bogus-who destroy their documents on the plane, and provide for prompt hearings so that legitimate claimants will be admitted and the others will be quickly returned to where they came from.

Q: You have to get the agreement of the Mexicans, too, because they can put up barriers to our barriers.

ADAMS: Well, the North American Free Trade Agreement, in theory, is to encourage the development of the economy in Mexico, keeping people there with jobs. This is a valid concept which might eventually work. But you also need to dry up the "pull" factor here, by making it much more difficult for people to find employment in the U.S.-that was the thrust behind the 1986 immigration reform legislation. It provided for sanctions against employers who hire illegals, but it has not worked very well. INS has limited enforcement capability for the task at hand, and counterfeit documents are readily obtained in this country. There's been a national outcry over any sort of counterfeit-proof national identity card, so employers have to rely on Social Security cards and drivers' permits which can be readily counterfeited and obtained in any major city.

Q: All of this was anticipated when the law was written and rewritten and rewritten.

ADAMS: So there are all of these conflicting forces at play. Do you want to stop illegal immigration? If you do, you might consider, at least as a realistic option, a counterfeit-proof, national identity card. Now, how much that is going to infringe on one's civil rights is a subject of interest to the ACLU and others. But perhaps the time has come if we want to be serious about illegal immigration. After all, other democratic countries have national IDs without dire consequences.

Q: We almost have it now.

ADAMS: We almost have it now, and...

Q: For other reasons. It evolved.

ADAMS: Exactly, but decisions like that have to be made at the national level and debated openly. In addition, we have to get away from the "accident of birth" right to immigrate. Simply because you have a brother who is an American citizen, and you're an adult living in another country, this should not give you an entitlement to immigrate. That's not to say that reunification of the immediate nuclear family-spouse, children, and parents of U.S. citizens-should change.

Q: But it will be hard to rewrite our history, our immigrant history, our open armed history.

ADAMS: But the country has changed, times have changed, space is much more limited-we do have serious problems with the environment and the economy. It's time for us to make those tough decisions. There's no frontier and it's not the 19th century any more.

Q: All right, it's 1992, and we're looking at an election. Have you heard of either of the two parties or the two principal candidates talking about immigration policy for the next four years in their campaigns?

ADAMS: There's been very little talk about it. I think that's sad. Pat Buchanan, in his brief candidacy, talked about it, and he hit some responsive chords, particularly in California, where people are aware of what he's talking about. But, no, the principal parties don't seem to address immigration at all. They either don't consider it a major problem or they feel it's too hot politically and they would rather not grapple with it.

Q: Does Congress now consider it? I understand that the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, Mr. Brooks [Democrat, Texas], said, "Don't you ever raise that again while I'm in Congress." The subject of immigration is something that he doesn't want to touch.

ADAMS: Well, that's right, and Senator Simpson [Republican, Wyoming] has said on several occasions how extraordinarily thorny the immigration issue is.

Q: And they went through it.

ADAMS: Because it touches on all the human emotions including job security, xenophobia, family values, racism, you name it...

Q: Good, solid bigotry in there, too.

ADAMS: It's somewhere there in the immigration issue. If you start to question, as Senator Simpson did, the issue of adult brothers and sisters of American citizens having the legal right to immigrate in this day and age-he was castigated by the Hispanic and the Asian groups as not being for family values, if you will. They contended that in their culture that close family cohesion is extremely important and they should be able to bring in those relatives. You're no longer talking about spouse and children and parents but you're now getting into the married brothers and sister and the married sons and daughters, of whatever age-it's quite a different issue.

Q: So I think that if I were in a policy making position, I'd say that I want to step away from it. I just don't want to get involved, for all of the above reasons. But at the same time you've given reasons to get involved. But which route do you think we'll go? Avoid it or take it on?

ADAMS: I think that clearly, for the foreseeable future, people who are in a position to do so-specifically in the Congress-will not take it on, for the reasons I've stated.

Q: And you'll go on to a new assignment?

ADAMS: [Laughs] Hopefully.

Q: John, thank you very much. Any other words, any last things before we end this interview?

ADAMS: No, Bill, thanks for the opportunity. I've enjoyed talking with you. It's clearly an issue that one could talk about for several more hours.

Q: And the readers are getting it from the horse's mouth, from the authority. Thank you very much.

End of interview