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

AMBASSADOR ANNE LEGENDRE ARMSTRONG

Interviewed by: Ann Miller Morin

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Q: Could we begin with your place of birth? You were born in New Orleans?

ARMSTRONG: In New Orleans, in 1927.

Q: Would you tell me a little about your parents' backgrounds?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. My father was from an old Louisiana family. Some of the earliest settlers had been sugar planters on the Mississippi River and moved to New Orleans in the 1800s. His father was a lawyer, James Legendre. My paternal grandmother was English, Cora Jennings, with strong English ties. So it was a mixture of the Gaelic and the English.

My father grew up in New Orleans, was educated there, except for going away to Princeton. They used to go to Maine in the summer. For the first time this summer I went to Camden, where they used to go, and it's just lovely. The better-off people in New Orleans, to get away from the summers, often used to go to the Carolinas, or to Maine in this particular family.

Q: That's a long way.

ARMSTRONG: That's a long way. I gather they had long summers, too, like three months or something. So my father was a coffee importer. In World War II, he went into the Naval Reserve, returned, had emotional problems, unfortunately, was very miserable and upset for years, and committed suicide.

My mother was from Texas, and so I had early Texas ties. She was from San Antonio; her name was Olive Martindale. She grew up in the little town of Martindale, Texas, which is west of San Antonio-a tiny little town. When she was in her early teens, her family moved to San Antonio, the big city, and her father was in the mortgage business. She went away to a school that doesn't exist anymore in Pennsylvania-Ogontz.

Q: How do you spell that?

ARMSTRONG: O-G-O-N-T-Z. Ogontz had a summer camp in the White Mountains; she went there. I would say that was her experience of being away from home from Texas when she was young. She met my father at a Princeton weekend, I think, and they were married-I think it was about 1923 or '24-in San Antonio. Mother had never had a career. She did a little writing after she was married, but, you know, free-lance for the Junior League or some travel magazine or something. She was interested in politics. It was the era of Huey Long. It is the political era I remember. She was a member of the women who wanted a clean sweep. But really my family was not very political.

As you remarked, in college and in my teens, I was a Democrat. I was quite liberal; I studied in the Marxist study group in Vassar. I wrote a little bit for the papers at Vassar. My major, first, was drama, and then I decided that wasn't for me, so I changed to an English major. I went away to boarding school in Virginia, at Foxcroft, which was a very social kind of boarding school but, luckily, gave a terrific education, I think. I never thought I'd have a career; didn't plan on it.

Q: Traditional?

ARMSTRONG: Very traditional.

Q: Did you ever write for your school paper?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. I wrote a lot. I wrote at summer camp, I wrote at school. My jobs in New Orleans-my paying jobs-were as a reporter for the New Orleans Times-Picayune for a couple of summers.

Q: And then you also were an editor for Harper's Bazaar?

ARMSTRONG: No, no. That's lifting me up. I had been offered the assistant to the literary editor of Harper's Bazaar, beginning in January of 1950, and that was when I got married.

Q: So you didn't take that job?

ARMSTRONG: I didn't take that job. No, Carmel Snow, who was the editor in those days of Harper's Bazaar, had known me, and offered me this job on the literary end of Harper's Bazaar, which in those days was very good. They published good stuff then.

Q: And you met your husband . . .

ARMSTRONG: I had met my husband earlier, in 19-oh, approximately 1942. I visited a schoolmate, Helenita Kleberg, she was then. Her father was the head of the King ranch, Bob Kleberg. I went to visit Helenita at the King ranch, in Kingsville, Texas, and Tobin was there. The Armstrong ranch borders on the King ranch. He was visiting, too, but at that point, four years was a big difference, because he was in college and I was in high school. So I noticed him, but he didn't take too much notice of me.

Q: From all I've heard, he is a very attractive man.

ARMSTRONG: He is, indeed. Then he went away to war; he was a fighter pilot in World War II. When he came back, he'd made a list of people he was going to ask on a weekend in Texas, and I was, I think, about three-quarters down that list, but the rest had been turn-downs. So I went on that weekend with him, not having seen him in a couple years, and it was a whirlwind courtship. He asked me to marry him right away; told me if I went and took this New York job, forget it, that he wasn't about to afford to court me in New York. And so we were married about five months later.

Q: This was shortly after you graduated?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. I went to Europe the summer of '49, saw Tobin again in November of '49, and we were married in April of '50.

Q: He knew what he wanted! Then is this correct? You had five children in five years?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. First child was born in '51, and then we had twins in that five years, which partly explains it.

Q: They must have been a bit of a shocker since they were the last.

ARMSTRONG: Yes. Well, if they'd been the first, it would have been a worse shock, I guess. By then I was an old hand, and it turned out to be great; not that I was happy at the time. But living in a remote place on a ranch, it turned out to be the best thing that could have happened-having them all so close.

Q: Oh, yes. They must be-

ARMSTRONG: Very, very close. I've never been so tired in my life. Anything after that seemed easy. They lived right there on the ranch and were educated there, in a one-room schoolhouse. I taught for a year, but I was a flop, so we got the county to let us put in a schoolhouse, a school for the ranch children, including all the ranch hands and our kids. It turned out to be a very fine education. The children did well.

Q: The older ones probably helped the younger ones?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

Q: It was a one-room schoolhouse?

ARMSTRONG: One-room schoolhouse, and one teacher. It averaged about fourteen kids.

Q: So you didn't send your children away to boarding school?

ARMSTRONG: I did when they were very young. Generally, when they were in the seventh or eighth grade, we sent them to San Antonio, which had two good schools-one for boys and one for girls. And unlike most boarding schools, there were a lot of young children in those schools and quite a few from Mexico, which was good. Our children are bilingual.

Q: Is this because of ranch life?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, it's only eighty miles from the border.

Q: It's to get the children to be with other children, perhaps; is this why so many young ones go to boarding school?

ARMSTRONG: Oh, I would say a lot of it's because of the proximity of Mexico; people from Mexico want their children to come up and learn English and get an American education, so there are a lot of children from Mexico. Then a lot of ranches-that's changing in Texas, but in those years, there were many more children living on ranches than do now. Increasingly, ranchers live in town and commute to the ranches.

Q: Yes, but there can't be many ranches the size of yours?

ARMSTRONG: No, well, I guess in Texas more than any state, but still, percentage-wise, that's small. In our county, for instance, the average holding is 50,000 acres. We have a half-a-million-acre ranch next to us, and the King ranch is a million acres.

Q: A half-a-million acres. Imagine!

ARMSTRONG: Yes, that's the neighboring ranch. The King ranch is a million. Our ranch is 50,000. Our ranch is a family partnership. My husband is now the majority shareholder; for years he wasn't, but he's worked. He decided he wanted to be a rancher, and he's been on the ranch ever since he came back from World War II.

Q: Has he really? I wondered if I could go back just a little bit to when you were a young girl. I want to ask you a couple of things about your growing up. Did you have any brothers and sisters?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, a sister, who lives in Houston, and a brother, who's dead.

Q: Would you tell me what position in the family you are?

ARMSTRONG: I was the oldest. A sister, eighteen months younger, and a brother, ten years younger. Really, I think I was fortunate being the first born in that my father always treated me and my sister as if we could do anything-more as if we were boys in those very traditional times in a well-off, traditional family.

Q: Not having a son, you mean, for ten years?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, not for ten years.

Q: I see. That's very interesting.

ARMSTRONG: We even played football. My father was a football hero, and he'd take my sister and me out to the park and play football with us on the weekends.

Q: You enjoyed this, of course?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

Q: What kinds of games did you like?

ARMSTRONG: I liked dodge-ball; I liked high jumping; then, later on, I played field hockey. I loved sports-tennis, basketball.

Q: Team sports?

ARMSTRONG: I liked both-individual and team. I liked track.

Q: Would you categorize yourself as having been a tomboy?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

Q: You mentioned that your brother died. Was this when he was young?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. He died. He, too, committed suicide-tried to, failed; jumped off the same bridge that my father did. He was in poor health after that, and he died of a heart attack. Goodness, it's been about ten years now. He never was well after that horrible thing.

Q: No, no. When you were growing up, was he a sickly child?

ARMSTRONG: Not a bit, no.

Q: Your sister wasn't either? You were all healthy?

ARMSTRONG: All of us were very healthy.

Q: No illnesses?

ARMSTRONG: No illnesses.

Q: You weren't kept out of school for any bad accidents?

ARMSTRONG: No, no illnesses whatsoever. One operation for a cyst when I was about six, and that's the only thing I ever remembered.

Q: Oh, well, good. You have a lot of energy?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

Q: Always did have?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. I've never much thought of it till I got older and people would remark on it.

Q: That is something you have in common with all of your sister ambassadors.

ARMSTRONG: Really? That's interesting.

Q: It is; it's very interesting. I'm sort of stumbling upon these things as we go along.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, it must be fun to see some patterns coming.

Q: What sort of reader were you?

ARMSTRONG: Excellent.

Q: And early?

ARMSTRONG: Early.

Q: Any special books you remember when you were little? The kind of thing you liked?

ARMSTRONG: Oh, the Oz books, the Bobbsey Twins, Nancy Drew, Kipling, simple poetry; later on, Stevenson. I adored Robin Hood. Later on, I guess about eleven or twelve, Gene Stratton Porter, who you never hear about now: Girl of the Limber Lost. Then I remember I read Gone With the Wind, because my mother had it when I was about ten, I guess.

Q: You mentioned Gene Stratton Porter. Did you read the Anne books, the Anne of Green Gables books?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, loved them.

Q: You loved those, too?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. The Secret Garden, that was Frances Hodgson Burnett.

Q: Obviously, these must have made a big impression on your imagination?

ARMSTRONG: Well, I did love to read. I read a great deal.

Q: You said you wrote for your school, too. That is a very early indicator, apparently. You can see why that would be very important.

ARMSTRONG: Yes. I loved school, except math. I got to like math later. I think it was I had a scary teacher. But English has always been my favorite.

Q: What about languages? Did you study languages?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. I took French. New Orleans is heavily slanted that way, and luckily, the school I went to taught it at a young age. Then at Foxcroft, I took a year of Spanish, which, of course, turned out to be very helpful later on. I've always liked languages.

Q: And do you speak Spanish?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. The French is rusty; the Spanish is good.

Q: You were a good student?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

Q: You graduated Phi Beta Kappa, didn't you?

ARMSTRONG: I always led my class. I think I must have been competitive, too.

Q: Did you have any influential teachers who became role models for you?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. I think the most influential teacher was an English teacher I had at Foxcroft, an Irish woman, who taught us to see good writing in all sorts of things. She'd take the shopping portion of the New Yorker magazine and make us understand why that was marvelous writing, and she introduced me to the modern poets-modern for that time-T.S. Eliot and Pound. So I guess she was the most influential. I had a splendid chemistry teacher on the other hand, at Foxcroft, who was more by the numbers, and made me see the joy of thinking in different ways. I'd never thought in the way that science demands, and I loved it and went on to take physics and biology and some other science, which I didn't naturally star at, but I worked very hard at, and liked thinking that different way.

Q: That's very interesting that you are aware you were learning to think in different ways.

ARMSTRONG: Even at the time; that's not a retrospective thing.

Q: No, that's what's so unusual. What about World War II? Did that impact much on your life?

ARMSTRONG: Well, my father left and my mother was very upset that he left. So I'd say it was first awareness of family battles and unhappiness-and young men that I went out with. But there was no terrible tragedy that impacted on my life from that; nobody close to me killed. I was quite isolated-off in a boarding school forty miles west of Washington, never went into town except to go to the dentist, and so it was like being in a cocoon.

Q: So, of course, you couldn't do any war work?

ARMSTRONG: We did at the school. The head of the school was a remarkable woman who did have an impact on me, Charlotte Noland-quite an activist, a traditional Virginia lady in many ways, but a fearless woman and full of zest. Whether it was fox hunting or-she's unusual; she turned out decisive girls if she had an impact on them. She respected learning. She wasn't an intellectual by any matter of means, so she helped me in non-intellectual ways. She made everything fun. Whether it was a school game, she always would have the pizzazz and the fun and the team spirit and the tradition. And she made you decisive.

Q: That's an interesting point. I gather she was a definite role model for you?

ARMSTRONG: Very much. Also, she never married. I think that was good for us girls, that we saw a very attractive woman unmarried. She had white hair, but the men obviously liked her; she had premature white hair. So you began to think, "Well, there is life after spinsterhood." [Laughter] "You don't need to get married to be a wonderful woman."

Q: In other words, you can be a whole person?

ARMSTRONG: You can be a whole person and a great woman and not be married.

Q: Still, you conformed to the mold?

ARMSTRONG: I was still very much a traditionalist, but she taught me some of the first inkling that a woman can have a marvelous life and be just herself, and not somebody's wife.

Q: And that is something that one doesn't see too often.

ARMSTRONG: No, very rare, very rare. And yet she had all the graces that made her acceptable to your parents.

Q: What about your first interest in foreign affairs? Can you recall when you became interested in the world beyond the U.S.?

ARMSTRONG: Well, yes. Time did a good thing; at least I thought so. They gave a prize in the high schools for the best essay on foreign affairs, and I won that. My history teacher made me think about it, I would say, other than just personal feelings, emotional feelings of people in the war; that really this was the first analytical thinking about foreign affairs I'd ever done. That would have been second or third year of high school.

Q: So you would have been around fifteen?

ARMSTRONG: About fifteen. I don't think I'd had many serious thoughts. I'd always liked the papers and the weekly magazines, say, since thirteen or fourteen. My family was well read to that extent; was not an intellectual family. They were interested in current affairs. Q: You were home until you went to Foxcroft?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I was home until I was twelve, at two different schools, both private; one a rather progressive school, Metairie Park Country Day School. It was more follow your interests. If you don't like multiplication tables, play checkers or chess.

Q: Montessori?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, more. I didn't know what Montessori was then. Maybe a little bit of John Dewey; and I loved it. But my father decided I wasn't being taught my basics well enough, so he changed me to Newman, which had been a school for the children in the Jewish orphanage, and had about half Jewish children, I'd say, and highly motivated children. They were a lot of poor orphans, and education was the way to a better life. It was a very, very fine education, less imaginative by the numbers than the first school, probably a good combination.

Q: Very good combination. Did it bother you boarding out at that young age?

ARMSTRONG: Oh, I didn't board. These were day schools, these two.

Q: But at the age of twelve, then you did?

ARMSTRONG: I wanted to go away.

Q: You wanted to go away?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. My mother, I would say, was the pushy one in my life, both for education and what she felt was social advantage.

Q: That brings me to the point of asking you, were you close to one parent more than the other, or did you feel close to both?

ARMSTRONG: I had more fun with my father. I think I was closer to my mother.

Q: You looked up to both of them?

ARMSTRONG: Both of them.

Q: Was your mother a role model? Or was your father a role model?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I think they both were.

Q: They sound like positive people.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, they were. They were both positive, bright, attractive, very loving. I had a very good early family. Then after the war, it went to pieces. It didn't hurt me so much because I was married, but I think it was very hard on my sister and brother, because they ended up getting divorced before my father committed suicide.

Q: Did they? Which did not really have any impact on you?

ARMSTRONG: Not much on me. I was over in Texas. Though it made me very unhappy and I traveled back home a lot, trying to fix things, but it didn't take the toll on me. I was grown and had my own life.

Q: You say they were both positive people. Were they domineering at all?

ARMSTRONG: Not too. I think they had a very good balance between discipline and giving you your head.

Q: But they expected certain things of you?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, they did. They cared a lot. I mean, you knew they were watching you, and caring, and measuring.

Q: Were you compared to your siblings at all? Were the others made to live up to Anne?

ARMSTRONG: I think it probably would have been tougher on my sister. My brother was out of it as far as being so much younger, and the boy, versus two girls. My sister, not being good in school, but being prettier and maybe more appealing, I think things were-you know, they evened out. They were careful to do that because I always had it so easy in school. But I think they were fair. My sister, I don't think, thinks they were.

Q: You wouldn't categorize either one of them as authoritarian?

ARMSTRONG: No. We were corporally punished, we were spanked, but I don't think ever unfairly.

Q: That by your father or your mother?

ARMSTRONG: Father.

Q: You made the comment that things evened out because your sister was prettier.

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

Q: Was your mother the kind of woman whose goal for her daughters was that they should marry well?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

Q: And therefore being pretty was very important?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. I think so.

Q: Which was at that age-I mean-

ARMSTRONG: That age, yes. She's much more that way than I am, but on the other hand, I don't think it ended up hurting me. When I got married, she would have much preferred I married somebody richer, but, you know, it didn't make me unhappy, and she didn't try to change things.

Q: She was a product of that Victorian idea, "Daughters marry well"?

ARMSTRONG: Daughters marry well, that's right. And never thought I would be doing anything on my own, so your avenue to success in life is through your male choice.

Q: After you were married and off on your own, did your mother have any influence on you at all? Did you turn to her for-?

ARMSTRONG: In a helpful way, she would-when I was having the twins, for instance, I had to live in the city in a hotel for a month because they threatened to come early, and she came and stayed with me. I would say I was definitely never a mama's girl, though.

Q: Were you Daddy's girl?

ARMSTRONG: Well, not in later life, because he was, you know, all messed up. I don't think particularly in young life; maybe more. I'd say my mother was more exacting than my father. Like so many fathers, you'd see your father at the fun times. Your mother was all day long, and having to do the tough things as well as the nice things.

Q: That's true. I'm getting a feeling of a very lively family and a caring family, and one where the children were encouraged.

ARMSTRONG: Until I was in college, I would say it was just an ideal situation; it was wonderful.

Q: You were encouraged to use your abilities?

ARMSTRONG: Very much so.

Q: Spread your wings?

ARMSTRONG: To stretch and try things, and work in the summers. There was a good work ethic, though we were well off.

Q: What sort of work did you do in the summers?

ARMSTRONG: Let's see. During the war, I remember, I worked in Touro Hospital as a nurse's-well, it wasn't really a nurse's aide; I was too young for that, but I remember it was the burn ward. It wasn't pleasant.

Q: Oh, no.

ARMSTRONG: And then two summers, when I was a junior and senior in high school, I worked as a reporter. It was hard work.

Q: That was on the Picayune?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

Q: So you were in that field even before you graduated from Vassar?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. Now, wait a minute, wait a minute. I'm giving you wrong times. No, no, no. The Picayune was-let me think. It was in college. I'm wrong. It was my first two years in college. My third year, I went to Tulane and took courses in the summer, which made me appreciate Vassar.

Q: Really?

ARMSTRONG: Not very demanding. There again, my mother pushed me into the jobs and paved the way. She knew the editor, George Healy. I was never made to feel-I didn't feel badly that Mother had used her influence. I learned later that she had.

Q: But you didn't know it at the time?

ARMSTRONG: I didn't know it at the time.

Q: You married. You were very busy with your family and everything. Did you have help in the home, I hope?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, a lot of help where we live, and still have a lot of help. Here it's mundane, but it's one of the reasons I can do what I do. I don't know how anybody does it without it. Mexican-Americans are particularly lovely with children, so I had a full-time nurse and a full-time cook.

Q: This was the beginning of your interest in Hispanic-Americans, was it?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I had no interest before, really.

Q: When did you first become interested in Europe, that is, visiting there?

ARMSTRONG: Let me think. I guess it was just when I went myself, really, summer of '49.

Q: Tell me about that.

ARMSTRONG: I tried to get a job there and I couldn't. It would have been a typing job, and I wasn't good enough.

Q: Where were you?

ARMSTRONG: In Paris. I stayed over-I was supposed to come home in September; stayed over an extra month trying to get the job, failed, and came home after a summer.

Q: So you remember going back and forth on a ship?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I do.

Q: Don't you wish those days would return?

ARMSTRONG: Oh, it was wonderful and it was smooth; didn't get seasick; had a heavenly time.

Q: Can you recall which ship you went on?

ARMSTRONG: I can't.

Q: I just wondered if it were American or one of the great French-?

ARMSTRONG: We were in steerage, and I went with some college friends and my sister. We had a ball.

Q: I'll bet you did. This was just to go visiting?

ARMSTRONG: Oh, it was my graduation present.

Q: Oh, wonderful! And you used your French?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. I went to Italy and England and France and Switzerland.

Q: The next thing I have on your write-up in Who's Who is that you then became trustee of the Kennedy County, Texas, school board.

ARMSTRONG: Yes. That isn't much of a job; it's an elected job. But in our county there are a total of 600 people in our entire county. It's got trustees of this school board, but it's a small job.

Q: It's an elected job, though?

ARMSTRONG: Right.

Q: It shows you how to run, I suppose. In between that and the-you were busy with children, but at the same time, you were interested in politics, weren't you, because these were the Eisenhower years?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. I got mildly interested in the Eisenhower years and did a little bit of political work in one of the towns near us, Raymondville, poll-watched there. I would say my big interest didn't come until the sixties, though. I kept the ranch books. Tobin and I really were at the ranch 99 percent of the time for the first ten or twelve years that we were married and the children were growing up. Then as they went off to school when they were about twelve, well, I began to have more time. Tobin got a secretary instead of me, and so in the sixties I began to be interested on the state level.

The Republican party was very small then, so it was an ideal time to make strides in politics. They really needed everybody they could get, and it was a very good group of people, too, a bright group of people. I've seen since then that the norm of politicians is not that good, but at that point, the people that were getting the Republican party of Texas started were exceptionally able and bright and of high integrity.

Q: They were all very idealistic, were they?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. They were effective in little increments. Idealistic, yes, they were idealistic. They were also practical. John Tower was elected the first Republican senator of a Southern state in years.

Q: Yes, I remember when he was elected.

ARMSTRONG: I rose through the state Republican party, became state vice chairman. Started off as precinct chairman, which, again, was scarcely anything to do because there were about five Republicans in our precinct. Became a district committeewoman; that means congressional district committeewoman representing the congressional district on the State Republican Executive Committee (SREC). And then became state vice chairman, then became Republican national committeewoman for Texas. That took me to the national scene for the first time. You are then the state's female representative on the national committee. The state has two-a male and a female.

I liked it, and so when-then it was called vice chairman of the Republican party-when that became vacant, I said to Tobin, "I would like to go for this." He was not happy about it, but he agreed. So I came up to Washington and I called on Bob Dole, who was going to be the chairman. We knew in advance; Nixon had given his blessing. Of course, I didn't realize then how much influence a sitting president has on the party. I mean, it would have been Nixon's call; I didn't realize that. Dole agreed to take me as co-chairman, and then it was made an elective office. Before that it had been appointed, which was a tiny plus.

Q: Am I right in thinking that the name has changed from vice chairman to co-chairman?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, it changed to co-chairman with Dole, and was elective for the first time. I asked for that and got it. Because before then, the woman had just been the "critter" of the chairman. The male chairman appointed the woman he wanted. This time they agreed to let the committee vote on the vice chairman, too, and make it elective.

Q: I see. How many members on the committee?

ARMSTRONG: Oh, well, it was about 100 then. Well, how many states did we have back then? It's two from each state, whatever the number of states was.

Q: I don't know whether perhaps there were extras from-

ARMSTRONG: I don't believe so.

Q: From the Washington group or whatever?

ARMSTRONG: No, they had observers from the Women's Federation and the Young Republicans and the College Republicans, but they weren't-

Q: What about Puerto Rico or the District of Columbia?

ARMSTRONG: No, not voting members.

Q: I see. Voting members are just from states. When you first started out in politics, what did you hope to accomplish? Because it's a lot of work.

ARMSTRONG: That's right. By that time, I'd say my philosophy had solidified, and I had come to the conclusion that, in general, government interference was not healthy, that the more things that could be decided by the individual and the county and the state level, rather than the federal level, the better. I had also begun to believe in a strong national defense. I had become highly skeptical of communist intentions. I'd become a conservative, in shorthand. What I hoped to do was to put forward more of these ideas.

Q: I see. And this was when you first started. You weren't interested in paving roads in Texas or that sort of thing?

ARMSTRONG: Local things did not interest me.

Q: That's what I wanted to know. You were looking at the big picture right from the beginning.

ARMSTRONG: Well, there were certain things that were highly personal, and I don't think this is very good because it's kind of selfish. But the school, for instance, interested me; our children were there and the ranch kids were there. But in general, it was national and, increasingly, international issues that interested me.

Q: Your rise has been nothing short of meteoric.

ARMSTRONG: It was possible, because I used to kid Sissy Farenthal, who was a Vassar friend of mine, and she was a very liberal Democrat and was nominated for-I guess it was president by the Democrats-Sissy and I used to kid, because Sissy had to go through a big entrenched bureaucracy of the Democratic party of Texas with many males in place who weren't about to want her to rise. I didn't face that. I was in a highly fluid situation where there was opportunity for rapid rise.

Q: Very similar to what Eugenia Anderson encountered.

ARMSTRONG: Did she?

Q: Yes. Of course, it was the opposite party.

ARMSTRONG: You could get leadership opportunities quickly, rapidly, and you had challenges just thrown at you, you know, as fast as you could handle them.

Q: How did you balance this with your family life?

ARMSTRONG: I'd say I didn't notice any problems, because these were my-just about-only time-consuming activities. I didn't do the things that I might have done as a wife in a big city; I didn't do symphony this day, USO another, Disadvantaged Children another. I had two big things I was doing-my family and politics.

Q: Did your husband have to fill in for you at home?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

Q: He did?

ARMSTRONG: He liked that. Having lived on the ranch since he was a little boy, he adores it. It's everything, from his family tradition and the way of life he loves, to being the only person who knows where the plumbing pipes are. I mean, I didn't fix anything. If a cook had to be hired, he was used to hiring the cooks. He was in charge. That is his family's ranch and had been for generations. It wasn't so much my home as with most wives; it was his family's place.

And he's a wonderful father; that's the other thing. Besides feeling this is his home, it's just-he's just a terrific father in every aspect of his kids' lives.

Q: And nurturing?

ARMSTRONG: Nurturing. Very much.

Q: That's very important. Well, let me ask you, when you moved to the ranch, was it difficult for you to get used to that kind of life? You had come from a big city.

ARMSTRONG: I've often thought that that's one reason I got so interested in politics; there would not be enough there to interest me.

Q: You're not yourself a ranching-type woman?

ARMSTRONG: No. I think if it were my responsibility, I could do it.

Q: You could do it.

ARMSTRONG: But my husband wouldn't welcome my getting in the way, and I wouldn't want to. I mean, it's his job. And he hasn't chosen-I mean, we talk about the ranch and things. No, there isn't enough for me to do on the ranch.

Q: Is he interested in what you're doing?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, he's interested in politics.

Q: And shares your convictions?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. He's more conservative than I am. We have some arguments, but not major ones; it's a difference of degree.

Q: I see. Sounds like a marvelous marriage.

ARMSTRONG: Oh, it is. I mean, I couldn't have done what I've done if I'd had another kind of husband. And also, if Tobin had been the one to be away a lot or to aspire to things other than what he has, there might not have been time for me to, or desire on my part, to do these other things.

Q: Everything came together; you were the member of the National Committee from Texas, you were co-chairman with Dole. Would you mind, for the record, telling me a little of the things you did in that position?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. Traditionally, of course, you had the women to organize. It was the only ticklish thing, that there was a thing called the National Federation of Republican Women, which is a pretty autonomous organization made up only of women, unlike the Republican party. You needed to get along with them because they, too, were organizing the women for campaigns, for the long pull, for teaching the women. It was a very interesting time for women, of course. My predecessor had been an activist woman; Ellie Peterson was her name.

Q: Oh, yes, yes.

ARMSTRONG: Ellie was terrific. When she went out, she spent a lot of time helping me. It was the time of the Equal Rights Amendment; it was a time of great flux for women, and that was of interest to me. It was disruptive to the Republican party; I mean, it was an old split way back then between the more activist women and the traditionalist women, who didn't want the Equal Rights Amendment. We had huge battles over that. But in those days, pretty much my direct responsibilities were with women's affairs. Now, in both parties, but even more so in the Republican party then, women were welcome, mainly because we did so much work.

Q: Yes. [Laughter]

ARMSTRONG: So our views on high matters of policy may have been hard to put across, but as far as the nitty-gritty of politics, I'd say 80 to 90 percent of that work was done by women. It was in an era when many fewer women were working. It was the old era of volunteerism of middle-class and upper-class women, so they had plenty of time to spend on politics. We did every aspect of politics. I was not given, at that point, any particular responsibility for Hispanics; I took a little bit, but that wasn't official. I liked working with the Young Republicans and the College Republicans. I did that, and nobody objected to it. Bob Dole was a very good chairman. He gave you a lot of autonomy and flexibility.

Q: In that campaign, the young were really getting out in droves, weren't they?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

Q: And the college students.

ARMSTRONG: They had the most ferocious politics of any part of the Republican party; it's really interesting. The College Republicans are always-well, of course, they like to be extreme; it's fun to be extreme when you're young. So the battles were really bitter.

Q: Did you have to travel a great deal?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, traveled a lot. I got to know the United States in a way few people ever have a chance to. That was one of the greatest things about that job; I loved it. Went all over.

Q: Did you travel with the president?

ARMSTRONG: Very rarely. In the campaign, somewhat, but it would mainly be ceremonial when I was with him, when the party was showing unity, etc., etc. In campaigns, usually, you disperse your assets to cover as many bases as you can. So Dole would go one place, I'd go another, the president would go another.

Q: You've been a delegate every time?

ARMSTRONG: Right.

Q: Except when you were ambassador. That must be very exciting-a national convention-isn't it?

ARMSTRONG: It is, it is. I always think, "Next time I'm not going to do this; I'm tired of this." And then you get revved up and it is-

Q: Is it just round-the-clock work, work, work?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, it is.

Q: And you emerge exhausted and-

ARMSTRONG: Well, now I've learned to pace myself a little better. As you get older, of course, you don't have the same intensity. You get more mellowness and balance. So I can't say I've been exhausted by the last couple of ones, no.

Q: Do you do a lot of lobbying of delegates?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. It hasn't been necessary, except on platform, in recent ones, because our candidate was pretty well known at the last go-round, to say the least.

Q: You were the first woman co-chair of the Republican National Committee?

ARMSTRONG: Right.

Q: And you were the first woman keynote speaker-

ARMSTRONG: Right.

Q: In 1972. Would you tell me about that? How were you selected, and so forth, to give that address.

ARMSTRONG: I don't really know, but a sitting president always calls those shots. So who else was-Goldwater was one, I was one, and who was the third? Was it Lugar? Maybe Lugar, Dick Lugar, who was then mayor of Indianapolis. I would have to say they were touching different bases; they had three keynoters, which is unusual. So Goldwater, I'm presuming, was the conservative wing; Lugar was the bright, young face-the president's favorite mayor, he was known as-and here's Armstrong, as a woman and the party leader. I don't really know how I was chosen, but if I were analyzing it, I'd say that's what it was.

Q: And you think it was Nixon-

ARMSTRONG: Nixon loved politics. So I'm sure-he was the kind of president that okayed every detail, and he was very conscious of television. He was ahead of his time in realizing the importance of that, so he picked it not only for the politics, the party, but also how are these people going to be on television, too.

Q: I must say, he certainly picked three winners.

ARMSTRONG: He did. I remember he called me afterwards. Nixon was not a very personable type person. He called me afterwards because he was impressed that it had gone well on television. He was very objective.

Q: You got good reviews at the time. I remember watching it and then reading about it.

ARMSTRONG: Right. Well, it was rare; I think most people were pleased it was a woman. I was fairly young at the time.

Q: How did you decide what to say? Was there input from, say, Bob Dole?

ARMSTRONG: Oh, there was input from the White House. And, too, besides being a woman, I was chosen to speak for the South. I guess I have a little bit of a Southern accent, not much, and so I spoke for the South in saying McGovern was antithetical to things that most Southerners believed in; of course, the South being much more conservative than the North and McGovern not being typical of his party, which the presidential candidates of the Democrats have not been. The party itself is more conservative than their presidential process allows.

Q: Isn't that curious?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. Well, it stems from the McGovern era. When they put in primary rules of representation-so many blacks, so many Hispanics, so many women, a quota system-that heavily leverages it toward the liberals. That's why they're having trouble getting presidential nominees who reflect the thinking of the country. I can't say Carter was that much more liberal, but they're going to have a hard time winning general elections.

Q: Well, I think that's become pretty evident to them, too.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, but they've still got-they've changed some of those rules and they've softened them. Bob Strauss and others, the more conservative elements, have worked on it, but they've still got a very strange primary system.

Q: How long did that speech run?

ARMSTRONG: I don't know. It was short; I'd say certainly not over fifteen minutes, probably ten minutes. I don't know, though. I don't even have a copy of it, I don't believe.

Q: Really? That must be on file somewhere.

ARMSTRONG: Oh, yes. The Republican National Committee keeps archives of those things. Whether they put that on tape in those days, I don't know.

Q: Were you frightened?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, but so were Goldwater and Lugar (I think was the other man). I guess it was one of the more nervous times in my life, but once I started to speak, I wasn't. I was shocked, because I didn't realize, having been in the noisy audience before, that the poor speaker-your heart goes to your feet, because I had not analyzed that nobody's going to listen to you on that floor. I could look down and see all these people lobbying and gesticulating, and it hadn't occurred to me before that the floor wasn't interested that I was speaking to the TV audience. So I thought I'd been a flop.

Q: [Laughter] Did you practice first?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. They had a trailer house, I remember, and some nice pros, and so I practiced three or four times with the little monitor so you could see yourself. I'd never been on national TV, but I'd done a lot of TV in my years as the co-chairman.

Q: But you had not actually spoken in that huge a hall?

ARMSTRONG: No, never had spoken in a huge hall, and had never done the easy thing of putting myself in the shoes of the person up there seeing all this commotion on the floor.

Q: Yes, my word! That must have been quite something. You could hear your own voice though, I hope, through all of the rattling-

ARMSTRONG: Oh, yes, yes. You could. That's hard. The mike was thoroughly normal. That wasn't the upsetting thing. It was just seeing everybody scurrying around.

Q: Did you read it or did you have the little cue cards?

ARMSTRONG: I had a teleprompter, which is a very effective thing.

Q: Is it?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. I had never used a teleprompter, so I had the speech, too, just in case.

Q: I would like, if you don't mind, to discuss how you came to be chosen to be first woman ambassador to the Court of St. James, which is a very big job.

ARMSTRONG: You've asked me about one of the few mysteries as far as my jobs go in my career, because almost every other job I've had, I've wanted and I've tried for. Certainly that was true of being co-chairman of the Republican National Committee; I asked for it. It was true of being a counselor for the president; I certainly hinted broadly to the president that I would like it. And President Ford knew I wanted to stay on after Nixon. This one is, really-I don't know, because I had been out of public life. I thought I owed it to my family to go back and be a wife and mother again. I was living that kind of a life in Armstrong, Texas, when I got a very surprising phone call in December from President Ford, asking me to be ambassador to Great Britain.

Q: What was your immediate reaction?

ARMSTRONG: I was totally thrilled and totally surprised. I knew I wanted very much to do it, but it took quite a while. I couldn't have done it, or wouldn't have done it, if my husband hadn't agreed that he would go, and that meant then we had to find somebody to run the ranch in his absence, because it's a family ranch and we had to find someone that the rest of the family would be happy with. That took about three weeks to get all those things settled.

We had our eldest son working on a ranch in Venezuela, and he had just started the job a few months before; adored it, but agreed to come back, and that was hard for him. My husband was so upset by the idea that he literally got sick and lost weight beforehand-in the months before we went over. But the happy end to that story is that although he said that he would try to be there for all the most important times that I needed him, he would have to go back every month to help our son with the ranch and other business interests. The way it turned out, he went back once from England to Texas and never went back again except when we both went on vacation. He was very happy, very busy; made the friends that truly are our best friends now. He agrees with me that was, if not the best time in his life, one of the best times.

Q: Was there any initial reaction on his part? "No, this is out of the question. We can't do this."

ARMSTRONG: There may have been, but he didn't say so to me. He listened to all my arguments. We talked to lots of people we both respected. We both talked to our son and the rest of our family, and he finally agreed, and agreed wholeheartedly, as far as what he intended to do. But it did make him very unhappy. When I was doing these jobs in Washington, he didn't have to be here. I mean, he rarely came up. I would go home on weekends. But for this job, he'd have to leave the ranch and be there. And there's no doubt that most males don't like the idea of being three steps behind.

Q: I know it. I can imagine, especially in such a visible job as that.

ARMSTRONG: That's right.

Q: Yes, but he did do it.

ARMSTRONG: And in a new milieu. I mean, neither one of us knew very much about England; had very few friends there. It would be strange territory.

Q: You say it's just a mystery; you don't know why-

ARMSTRONG: It is a mystery. I don't know. I think President Ford genuinely wanted to appoint more women, and he had worked with me for a number of years. And then, of course, most recently I was his counselor in the White House. I think he thought I could do the job, and he really was reaching out to find women to give them top jobs.

Q: You had left that job in the White House for personal reasons, hadn't you?

ARMSTRONG: I had really wanted to leave earlier than that, but then Watergate came. That was a horrible experience. And President Ford asked me to stay on, really to help get the White House and him through that period; plus, in a way, I wanted to sort of cleanse myself, as it were, so I stayed a few months with him. It was just a wonderful experience in every way. He was marvelous to work for.

Q: From the tone of the letters in your correspondence at his library, you seem to know him very well.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I do, and I have the highest regard and friendship for him. I see him, oh, almost every month; we're both on a board together. And I adore Mrs. Ford, so I feel close to them personally. He's really a very fine man.

Q: And she's a very courageous-

ARMSTRONG: Really. I'm just so proud. She's always been a lovable person and a dear, fine person, but what she's accomplished in recent years is extraordinary and commendable.

Q: It's remarkable. Well, you had the backing of many people, which you didn't even seem to be aware of, for this job.

ARMSTRONG: I didn't know anything about any campaign; and, in fact, if there was a campaign, this is the first I've known it. Maybe I should have shown more curiosity, but I never have known there was a campaign. In fact, it was embarrassing, because a fellow Texan, for one, and probably some other people that I don't even remember, but one man that I thought was a very good candidate, had enlisted my aid, and I had written several people in his behalf. But I never heard a word that anybody was backing me.

Q: Now, when you appeared before the committee-can you remember about the Senate committee? Can you remember anything about that?

ARMSTRONG: I remember that they were very reasonable and that I was asked very fair questions. I thought it was a good experience. I had been warned that not many would be there, so that wasn't a shock. I think most ambassador nominees think everybody's there; all are going to be turning out with great curiosity. The State Department had prepared me very well. I think they have a good program for their nominees, for the administration nominees. I felt well prepared and at ease.

Q: Very good. At the State Department, at that point, they did not yet have the program that they now have. I believe you yourself ran it for a while, didn't you?

ARMSTRONG: I participated in one with Ambassador Dean Brown.

Q: Yes.

ARMSTRONG: No, I was not given that. They didn't have that preparation then, which I think is a marvelous idea. No, but they had a very good person, a woman-I can't remember her name-who was in charge of shepherding through the nominees, and I felt that was very well handled.

But, true, it would have been even better had I known more about what was going to be expected of me later as an ambassador. I knew everything that-I mean, enough to know what was expected at the hearing, but at that point, no, there wasn't any cram school for what an ambassador should know.

Q: Which they have now, and which Shirley Temple [Black]-

ARMSTRONG: Fine addition.

Q: It is good.

ARMSTRONG: And it's good for the State Department, too, and for the former ambassadors. The one time I participated, I learned things. I was able to keep up with what's going on in the embassies. Also, you find out what's going on in the outside world through these nominees.

Q: Can you recall who was on your Senate committee at the time?

ARMSTRONG: No. I'd have to check that. I had known Mike Mansfield very well through a Commission on Foreign Policy in the Reorganization of the Government for the Conduct of Foreign Policy-what a name! I remember he was helpful. But I don't remember who was there at the hearing.

Q: Well, the next thing then, you were getting ready-I suppose you also went up to New York?

ARMSTRONG: Went to New York on that program.

Q: Now, this kept you very, very busy-running from one thing to another. I understand it's a very frantic time.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, but I think it's invaluable. I didn't feel that it was too hectic.

Going back to the program-the cram course-I've forgotten the proper name for it-that the State Department gives now. That would have been-or certainly part of it-very good to have given me before all these meetings at the CIA or with the New York business group, etc., took place, because you could have assimilated a great deal more. A lot of it hit you so fresh and strange that you really didn't take it in as well as you might have.

Q: It would have given you a framework?

ARMSTRONG: It would have given me a framework.

Q: When you were running that course, was that under President Carter?

ARMSTRONG: Let me think. Yes, when I participated, it was under Carter; and there were two of us. The main ones were Dean Brown, who was a true pro, of course, and then myself. Later, Shirley took it over, and I thought, it's good to have a mix of a political appointee and a career person. I think then everybody can relate.

Q: And it was Brown and Black for a good long time.

ARMSTRONG: Does Shirley do it by herself now?

Q: No, she doesn't do it alone now. I don't know whom she's doing it with right now. She was doing it with Tony [Motley].

ARMSTRONG: Yes, that's good.

Q: One of the ones that she was doing it with is now the head of the Foreign Service Institute.

ARMSTRONG: That's not George Vest?

Q: No, Charlie Bray. George Vest is still the Director General.

ARMSTRONG: Yes. A splendid man.

Q: Your swearing-in ceremony seems to have been rather a formal occasion.

ARMSTRONG: It was much higher-profile than those things usually are. And, again, probably several dimensions to this-I was close to the President and Mrs. Ford, and it did highlight a high role for a woman.

Q: Yes. There was a great deal of press coverage at the time, wasn't there?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

Q: It was very unusual.

ARMSTRONG: For such a, you know, big post.

Q: And our biggest ally. Other than Clare Boothe Luce, you were the only woman who had ever been to one.

ARMSTRONG: To a major post.

Q: To a major post of that caliber.

ARMSTRONG: That's right.

Q: And still are. Kenya has been elevated to a [class] one [post], but we don't think of Kenya in the same [light], as far as being allies, and so forth.

ARMSTRONG: That's right.

Q: Let's see, it was in the Cabinet Room. Now, where is the Cabinet Room?

ARMSTRONG: The Cabinet Room is actually right next to the president's office-to the Oval Office. It's in the west wing of the White House; it looks out on the gardens. It's a beautiful room.

Lewis Powell of the Supreme Court swore me in. He was a personal friend; somebody that I'd got to know up here and liked very much.

Q: Oh, really? Who held the Bible?

ARMSTRONG: My husband.

Q: This would have been in February '76. The time was 2:00 p.m. Here is a schedule routing memo. How many people were present, can you recall?

ARMSTRONG: No.

Q: Well, quite a lot of people. Do these ring any bells? These people all got notices. Did they attend?

ARMSTRONG: Cheney would have; he was chief of staff. Marsh, Dr. Connor, Dr. Hoops, Mrs. Yates-that's interesting. I can't remember who Dr. Connor, Dr. Hoops or Mr. Jones were. The White House staff, I presume.

Q: Must have been, yes.

ARMSTRONG: Yes. These are not people who were my invitees, necessarily. Scowcroft would have been; Cheney would have been, etc., but I think this is just the routing slip. It seems that Orbin-he's the one that wrote jokes, isn't he?

Q: Yes, he is.

ARMSTRONG: So he might have been in the speech writing. [Laughter] I don't remember that I had a good joke.

Q: You gave a little speech, did you?

ARMSTRONG: That's right; just a thank you, a short-

Q: It was prepared for you, was it?

ARMSTRONG: No, it was just a thank you. I think I probably-as I remember, I said something about this opportunity for women. It was an acknowledgment rather than a speech.

Q: Apparently, Secretary Kissinger was there, [Brent] Scowcroft, Arthur Hartman. Here you are-this is what was supposed to take place. They prepare this so the president will know exactly what he's to do, and so forth.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, right. Well, but it doesn't say that I said anything particularly. I think anything I said would have been in one minute.

Q: Of course, your counterpart from Great Britain was present.

ARMSTRONG: Peter Ramsbottam, yes.

Q: Peter Ramsbottam was present, yes, whom you already knew. Before you left, did you go again to the White House?

ARMSTRONG: No, not that I remember.

Q: But you had photographs taken at that time, didn't you?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

Q: Signed by Ford at the time?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

Q: This is something that not all ambassadors have.

ARMSTRONG: No. I realized at the time, novice that I was, that this was quite rare. I asked the president to do it, and he agreed to.

Q: The swearing-in, you mean?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

Q: And then the pictures.

ARMSTRONG: Oh, the pictures are rare, too?

Q: The pictures are rare, too-actually to have them with the president. Now, not under President Reagan-he's very good at ceremonial things-but under some of the others. They don't always-

ARMSTRONG: That's a pity, because think what that means on the ambassador's wall. Oh, that little symbol can just do-

Q: Exactly.

ARMSTRONG: Oh, we ought to see to that.

Q: A lot of them will send pictures of themselves and sign it, but it won't be with the ambassador.

ARMSTRONG: Oh, that's so important.

Q: It is, ceremonially.

ARMSTRONG: Surely. Oh, I understand.

Q: And Reagan, of course, has a very good grasp of what this means. But Carter never did it.

ARMSTRONG: Yes. What a pity.

Q: It was difficult for some of his people not to have that, because other countries always do it, I guess.

Now, you didn't have to worry about language training. [Laughter] And did you stop over? No, you would go directly.

ARMSTRONG: I went directly. We went directly; flew in, arrived at night, and Ron Spiers and the chief counselors met us.

Q: Did your children come to the swearing-in, by the way?

ARMSTRONG: They were all occupied at the time.

Q: Now, had you read much about the reaction of the British to your appointment?

ARMSTRONG: Let me think. Well, there was some-I'd say slightly unfavorable-at first, that I remember. The only really bad one-but it was so funny that it was all right-it was Punch. Punch did a devastating thing on-it was a takeoff on High Noon. I was the ambassador, and my husband was really the chief protagonist in this piece as the shoot-'em-up Texan. But if there was any other problem in the British press, I wasn't aware of it.

Q: Oh, good. Well, after all, they have a queen.

ARMSTRONG: Yes. And once I got there, I'd say the press-because then I did see it-was very favorable; I mean, unusually favorable, more so than I expected or probably deserved. They sort of thought it was a romantic thing-mainly the woman, and then I think the Texan, too, rather intrigued them. Texas was riding high then, you know.

Q: That's very true; it was. When you went there as ambassador, which is, as you said, an overwhelming idea, what did you hope to accomplish as ambassador?

ARMSTRONG: Well, it is our closest ally, or certainly one of the top two or three. I hoped to further cement those relationships. I realized there'd be some economic problems over there. At that point, I really didn't know what my role was, but England was in the depths then, as you'll remember; had to get an IMF loan, which just seems unbelievable today. As far as the issues, I didn't know that Croatian terrorists overhead in a plane, hijackers, would be an issue. That never occurred to me. I knew Northern Ireland would. It was not clear to me when I went what, if anything, an American ambassador could do. I saw England, too, with London as a hub of many of our activities-military, economic, NATO, otherwise-so I hoped to be able to be useful in areas that weren't even strictly London, as it were.

And I guess, drawing on my own past, I thought I'd probably be pretty good-and then this turned out to be maybe the thing I was strongest as-was portraying the United States through the ambassador to your host country. I'd had a lot of experience doing that. I had not had a lot of experience in negotiations or running an embassy. I had been able to run volunteers-thousands of them-but that was my limited managerial experience.

Q: Did the job sort of frighten you at first?

ARMSTRONG: It did, although I had had some of my fears assuaged even before I went by people assuring me of the caliber of people who'd be working for me. And that, of course, turned out to be exactly what it was. And no matter what job I'd had-and I guess the most demanding in a management sense had been co-chairman of the Republican National Committee-you certainly can't do it all, even when you know a field as I knew U.S. politics. So, as it turned out, that's what was there. Ron Spiers couldn't have been a better complement to me; I mean, the consummate pro. Poor Ron, he'd already trained Walter Annenberg, Elliot Richardson. As you know Ron, there's nothing put-on about him. He wasn't too happy about this job, but he gave it his all; he would never hold back. And although it wasn't the challenge he was looking for at the moment-and he told me so-I couldn't have asked for a finer DCM. At first, I thought he was awfully prickly, and I didn't particularly take to it. But as the weeks went on, I did appreciate him, and I wouldn't have changed him. At first I thought, "Oh-oh, I don't think that this flint and steel or oil and water is going to mix at all." But it did. And our counselors, with one exception, were very strong, and therefore that makes the ambassador strong. And they were not only professionally most able, but also the chemistry was right in these instances. It was just a top-flight embassy.

Q: Well, I guess London gets the best people anyway.

ARMSTRONG: Well, it's a plum assignment. People yearn to go there at some point in their career. And so we really had fantastic people. I mean, I was made a believer in the Foreign Service in no time flat. And their loyalty, too: the professionalism of being able to serve, to the utmost of their abilities, the person who's in place. It really is inspiring.

Q: Yes.

ARMSTRONG: The problems we would have were, I'd say-I've heard from other ambassadors-often happen in big posts, of course. Treasury and your economic ministers don't often get along. And there was some of that problem. The Henry Kissinger syndrome of conducting diplomacy behind the ambassador's back. And Henry kids me; he still hasn't got the story straight. We had a big blowup once. I picked him up at Claridge's, and I'd found out he was having some meetings with the foreign minister that I was not privy to, so I blew my top and told him, "That better not happen again." And Henry tells the story and claims I cried. Well, the last thing I was going to do was cry then. I might have bitten him, but I wasn't going to cry. So after that, that went better. But these were things that happen to ambassadors in many, many posts. In London, they're often glamorous because they involve a Henry Kissinger or a Bill Simon.

Q: Did Bill Simon come over, too?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, often. And he had an able person in Treasury there at the mission. He was extraordinarily able, and Treasury was the tail wagging the dog, as far as the economic section of the embassy proper.

Q: Really?

ARMSTRONG: It was hard to quarrel with, because it was a pretty able combination. But we had problems of them trying to send cables behind even the DCM's back.

Q: Treasury and Econ, you mean?

ARMSTRONG: Treasury, straight to Treasury in Washington. I quickly learned that that's a common ailment.

Q: And so the econ officer got all upset?

ARMSTRONG: The econ officer and Spiers got pretty upset. Simon was not exactly the most malleable soul. But no harm done. It all worked out well. In other cases, harm can be done. I don't think in these instances it was.

Q: Did you ever have to call people in and dress them down? Or did you leave Ron to do that?

ARMSTRONG: Dressing down is not usually what I do, no matter what. Correction, yes, in some instances. Mainly, Ron handled things so well that very little had to come to my attention. It would usually be such things as Cabinet heads or heads of committees that I'd have to handle. Ron would have been willing to try, but in many instances I was just the one to do it.

Q: You would have to be the one to do it, of course. They wouldn't take it from him.

ARMSTRONG: But he's so able that very little had to percolate up and cause scenes.

Q: I'm sure of that. Yes, he certainly is able, isn't he?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, and he's very straightforward. I mean, Ron calls a spade a spade. He would not have hesitated to say, "You do this," or, "You'll be no good with that." He did it. I mean, he's very honest with me, which I, once I got over my hurt feelings-

Q: You said you had a rough settling-in period there. Did you ever have words, the two of you?

ARMSTRONG: No, not words. I think I'm generally pretty controlled, but I certainly had misgivings. But I got over that.

Q: I understand that you had collegial staff meetings.

ARMSTRONG: Yes. It was a splendid spirit in that mission. I really enjoyed the work. It was something you looked forward to every day.

Q: Well, tell me, had you any idea that you would have to do so much entertaining and be involved in so many things?

ARMSTRONG: No. That was probably one of the few things that wasn't surprising, because not just ambassadors, but especially females are supposed [to be], you know, "easy on the head and hard on the feet." So really, it was not as demanding, particularly in a post like London. London is so sophisticated that the demands on the ambassador, as far as the formal calls, et cetera, are less than they would be in a smaller post. The other ambassadors have plenty to do, and they really care very little if the U.S. ambassador calls on them. Whereas in another post, you know, it's a very important matter. So the entertaining was not a surprise, and I didn't feel it was out of line. I didn't get exhausted.

Q: Of course, you were always used to entertaining a great deal anyway. You must have had a good staff running the residence?

ARMSTRONG: Excellent staff. Just as in the chancery, the residence was splendid. I didn't run the best residence in London. You know, it's funny. Maybe it's because you're so sensitive that you'd spend too much time on getting the right chef because you're a woman that you don't do enough. I didn't get a good enough chef. I had able help with the guest lists and the entertainment, and the entertainment was fun. It was not as elegant nearly, say, as I am sure Evangeline Bruce did or Lenore Annenberg, and so I could have done better there.

Q: Yes, but you had a full-time job to do.

ARMSTRONG: I know, but your full-time job is also to set one of the best tables in London.

Q: Oh, I suppose that's true.

ARMSTRONG: And that's management, too.

Q: Did your husband take on any of that?

ARMSTRONG: He's not particularly good at that kind of thing. Now, he was splendid at thinking up groups of people or who would be exciting in that group of people or who'd leaven the loaf in that one, but as far as menus and chefs, that's not his bag.

Q: Some husbands have done that.

ARMSTRONG: Oh, I realize that. But Tobin just-he'd have a good idea for a theme for a party or he'd hear somebody from the United States was coming, in politics or culture, and he helped a lot that way, and was a marvelous host. He was one of the reasons people had a good time and an interesting time.

Q: Yes, so I have heard, that he was an excellent host. In fact, there were even newspaper clippings that I've got about him at the post.

ARMSTRONG: Really? Good. Well, he deserved the praise.

Q: Yes. And I imagine this was so different from being on the ranch that it must have-

ARMSTRONG: But as I said, within about a month's time, he had fallen in love.

Q: Isn't that wonderful? And you say you met some very good friends over there?

ARMSTRONG: We did make wonderful friends. And we go back-Tobin isn't as interested in politics as I am by a long shot, so we don't keep up with the political friends that were more the ones I made. We keep up more with the social friends.

Q: Well, now, did you go grouse hunting?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. Tobin loves to shoot. I do, too, but I didn't shoot over there for several reasons, mainly because it is tough shooting. And since it's their livelihood, they sell the grouse or the pheasant or the partridge, whatever it is, and so when you miss, that's money flying out of the bank. So they're magnificent shots, and I'm not that good a shot to stand in a line. Plus, I never had a chance to be with the women except on the weekends, and so this was a chance to meet and get to know the women, the wives or their friends or whatever. So that was just fine by me. I shot a couple of times over there, and we would go on weekends when there was no shooting, just for country life or going to the American museum or doing this or doing that, sightseeing. We were gone many, many weekends.

Q: Well, I gathered the reason you were so popular and you were extremely popular, because most ambassadors-there are so many of them and they're so blasï¿½.

ARMSTRONG: Well, they're men and they wear gray suits, too.

Q: And they wear gray suits. But also they're so used to it that you were a novelty and were very popular. But I understand one of the reasons is that you met a great cross- section of the British.

ARMSTRONG: That was Ron Spiers' idea. I remember sort of your traditional, number one speech is the Pilgrims [Society] over there. And I remember him saying, "Now, you must say that you want to get all around this country and meet all kinds of people." Well, I did, but I wasn't necessarily going to say that. He made a point of pointing out to me that I'd probably do well at that. And I did, and I guess the people sensed that I was enthusiastic and thoroughly enjoyed that. So we did; we traveled a lot and met all sorts of people.

Q: You enjoyed the ceremonial parts of the job. Representational, I should say, not ceremonial.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I loved that. True, the most boring would be the cocktail parties in town. That's boring for most people. But at least when you're an ambassador, you have a mission usually to see a couple or three, or a dozen people, and ask this or that, so you're often there for a purpose.

Q: You and Ron would work out your little scenarios, would you, before you'd go to these?

ARMSTRONG: That makes it too precise. I'd have an idea from him at our almost daily staff meetings, counselors' meetings, of what was on the agenda for the embassy and what I could be useful in trying to pick up or plant, to get some ideas around, et cetera. But, no, Ron and I did not put our heads together before each party and say, "Now, I'll do 1-2-3, and you do 4-5-6."

Q: But would you ever do that when you were working on a specific issue?

ARMSTRONG: Maybe on a couple of occasions it would get down that precisely to that night what you did, but not generally; not every night of the week.

Q: It was more spontaneous than that the way you ran things?

ARMSTRONG: Or let's say it wasn't each party; it was occasional parties where you'd have an agenda that was pretty clear in everybody's minds.

Q: So you were quite definite in wanting to get around to see everybody?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

Q: As many as you could, because I understand that can be a trap in these Old World capitals, that you will only see the aristocracy. You were quite aware of this, I think.

ARMSTRONG: Yes. But again, you know, I think having been in politics in the U.S. was a big help. I mean, you wouldn't think of representing the Republican Party by going to see Madam La-De-Da and her pals, and quitting and thinking that was Chicago or Peoria or whatever. You'd know you wouldn't know a place or what was on people's minds if you were limiting it.

Q: But you know as well as I do, Ambassador, that many ambassadors go over there with the idea that they're just going to have a nice social time.

ARMSTRONG: Yes. Well, that's when, one, they've either picked the wrong person for ambassador, or two, the ambassador hasn't been enlightened on what's expected of him. And if they go over there and don't change, well, that's a disaster. That's a waste of everybody's time and money.

Q: Yes, indeed, it is. The principal problems at the time were economic, were they not?

ARMSTRONG: They were. And NATO, of course, you're always working on-the military aspects. But it was economic above all. We had Rhodesia going on then, and that's one reason Kissinger was in town so often.

Q: Well, after you got through scolding him, he didn't do that anymore? (Laughter)

ARMSTRONG: Not that I've ever learned.

Q: Yes, that seems to have been his way of operating.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, it was. And I'm not sure-he seemed so surprised, I'm not sure it was even deliberate. I think he'd just gotten in the habit.

Q: Were there any special humanitarian events that took place at that time? I mean, things that you had to help with. Were there any floods or any-

ARMSTRONG: Disasters, no. The only disasters were slow-like drought in the summer of '76. There was a bad drought, and the farmers suffered badly and there was water rationing and gardens died. But it was not a quick disaster.

Q: So it didn't have to call for U.S. help?

ARMSTRONG: No. There were just the humanitarian things, just things that are not of nature but-oh, I would go to things like for handicapped children or that sort of thing.

Q: You cut a lot of ribbons, didn't you?

ARMSTRONG: Cut a lot of ribbons; did a lot of the ceremonial, did a lot of the trade shows, which some ambassadors don't like to do.

Q: Was promoting U.S. trade one of your pursuits?

ARMSTRONG: That was one. I gathered from the embassy talk that a lot of ambassadors are averse to that. I'm not at all.

Q: You saw yourself as representing the whole of the United States, didn't you?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

Q: Which is, of course, what you are doing, but, unfortunately, not all ambassadors realize this.

ARMSTRONG: One reason I think, too, and I think you're right and I think I was a popular ambassador, was the Bicentennial. And so America was on everybody's minds, and here was the American lady.

Q: Well, now tell us about the Bicentennial. What did you do over there before you came with the queen over to America?

ARMSTRONG: To me, the most moving and impressive thing I did was at Westminster Abbey. They had me read the Thanksgiving service, and they had the service in honor of America. That was an absolutely magnificent ceremony.

Q: And you read the-

ARMSTRONG: I read the, oh, whose is it-Governor Bradford's. It's the famous description of the first winter of the pilgrims. I read that and I read a lesson, too. I read lessons all over England and Scotland and Wales. They liked ambassadors to do that.

Q: Yes. Well, I don't think we ever got into that the last time. We didn't get into religion. Are you a-

ARMSTRONG: I'm an Episcopalian.

Q: Episcopalian. Oh, well then, that's perfect.

ARMSTRONG: So that fits; but the Presbyterians had me in Scotland, too.

Q: Did they really?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. And I was interested in that. Prince Phillip would often read lessons. Prince Charles would. I don't think the queen would. That was a very pleasant ceremonial way, too-of combining the Church and the representation. And, of course, their beautiful church services. I just love them.

Q: Well, did you have a particular kind of entertaining? Was there some particular type of function you liked to give that you felt really served the purpose better and made good use of the money?

ARMSTRONG: Well, yes. It would have to be the good ol' drinks party, because really what people want to do is see that beautiful house. And that would not serve the purpose of making warm friends or conducting negotiations in a conducive social venue. It served getting a lot of people to say, "I met the ambassador and her husband and their children, and we saw that gorgeous house," et cetera. So we did more of that than anything, and that served that purpose of the huge numbers of Americans in London, of the congressmen that want their constituents entertained.

Q: You had to do all of that?

ARMSTRONG: We did a lot of that. It was only abused once, and he was very key to the State Department budget, so we didn't say anything, but there was one real problem. But those occasions, obviously, are not where the ambassador learns a lot or where the ambassador teaches other people very much about what's on America's mind. Then, the dinners are better. I did very few lunches, mainly because we did quite nicely at the chancery, and it was just easier for the counselors, rather than having to stop work and go-because it took a good fifteen, often twenty minutes with traffic back to Winfield House. We had many lunches at the chancery.

Q: When you had lunches at the chancery, Ron [Spiers] would sort of stand in for your husband? Or would he come over and join you, too?

ARMSTRONG: My husband hardly ever joined us. No, he was sensitive to that and I was, too. That wouldn't have been right.

Q: Just at the home, he was your host?

ARMSTRONG: The only time he had anything to do with embassy business was with agriculture, which he's thoroughly competent in. And Butz, who was then Secretary of Agriculture, had given him a commission to try to promote U.S. exports, which was wonderful of Earl Butz and useful to the country.

Q: Of course.

ARMSTRONG: And he wasn't paid, but he did it well. And he did it in England, and he went to Poland, some Iron Curtain countries, Greece. I think those were the main countries. And he would work occasionally, maybe a couple of days a month, with the agricultural attachï¿½; he'd try to go to the agricultural shows. It was a part-time job that maybe took a day a week. But otherwise, he did not have anything to do with embassy business, and would not have wanted to; he knew better than that. That was never a problem.

Q: A very delicate sense of what is fitting, obviously, you both have. When you had these drinks parties for all these hordes of people, did you also have British people at the same time?

ARMSTRONG: Oh, definitely. I could count on one hand, I think, the times we would have just Americans, and then it would not have been a big party. No, I think that's a key function of an ambassador's entertainment, unless there's a very good reason-you know, if you're having a caucus of congressmen who want to talk privately. But unless there's a good reason to have only Americans, no.

Q: Now, I understand that Elliot Richardson was given-, the Senate voted him special allowances when he was there. Did you also have the benefit of that?

ARMSTRONG: I never had to dig into my pocket, unless I wanted to do something exceptional, which was hardly ever. I mean, if I wanted to have a better champagne than we paid for, which was quite adequate, then I did that on a couple of occasions. It never occurred to me that was something special voted by the Senate. I don't know whether it was or not in my case.

Q: In your case, I don't know, either.

ARMSTRONG: Remember Larry Eagleburger?

Q: Yes.

ARMSTRONG: He'd know. And, of course, our excellent administrative counselor, Mike Conlin, who would say, "Now, we've got this much," and da da da. "Here's where you are in the budget." But I thought, "Well, isn't this a splendid thing?" because I asked before I went. Because my husband and I are well off, and had we been there for a short time, which we were, we could have handled several thousand dollars extra. Had we been there longer, it would have been hard.

Q: Of course.

ARMSTRONG: But they told me I was not going to have to unless I wanted to have, you know, yellow roses or champagne that was beyond the norm. So I did not have to dig into my pocket for anything over a couple of thousand-$3,000, something like that.

Q: That's a very good point. I don't know whether or not you were given the special allowance. I know Elliot Richardson was.

ARMSTRONG: Yes. We ought to find that out. I'd like to know, too. I'm going to make a note of that, because it never even occurred to me. I just thought that that was a general situation, and I thought, "How healthy; at last they fixed it so you don't have to be rich."

Q: I think Richardson said, "I just can't afford to take the job otherwise."

ARMSTRONG: Well, I never said that, so-I would be very happy if it was not special, because I can tell you, it's enough to do it very nicely. You'd never be criticized. We had California wines, but they were very good wines. And I was happy to do that anyway-the things American. We had a wonderful American art that year for the Bicentennial. I had a friend-you've heard of the famous Bass brothers? Well, they weren't that famous then. But Perry Bass, the father, was a friend of ours and lent us their marvelous Remington & Reynolds collection of bronzes and pictures, which for Texans, too, was just-and I always had a little trepidation: how will these things look in that Georgian house? They were absolutely stupendous. And in that foyer, those bronzes-it was sensational. And we got help from Art in Embassies; they were very useful, too.

Q: Did you select them yourself?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. So we had American art.

Q: Well, now Annenberg had just redone the house not too long ago?

ARMSTRONG: It was in the most beautiful shape. Yes, Elliot and Anne had been there since, and there was just scarcely a thing to do. I remember saying before I went, "Well, of course, I'll put my touch here and there." It would have been a mistake.

Q: Really, really.

ARMSTRONG: Upstairs we painted the library, and that was a little worn. That was the only thing we did. Put some music in and changed the pictures, because the walls were bare. But Wildenstein's pitched in. A friend who's a decorator, Betty Sherrill of MacMillan, which is with a very fine firm in New York, went over with us. The only disappointing thing was, all the walls were not only bare, but the alarms-because Annenberg had had that fantastic art, so the pictures were alarmed-so here were all these dreadful gadgets hanging out of the walls. But within a couple of days, Wildenstein's had lent us enough. We gave a dinner party within two nights, I think it was.

Q: Wildenstein's is an art gallery?

ARMSTRONG: It's an art dealer who's been, evidently, good to Americans around the world at times, and they were certainly good to us.

Q: A London firm?

ARMSTRONG: London firm. Well, they're in Paris, New York. And through our decorator friend, Betty Sherrill, who was doing this for nothing, they came up with magnificent art until we got pictures. Some of them weren't replaced for months, until everything came over.

Q: And you featured American art.

ARMSTRONG: Yes. That would have been much easier for us, anyway; and being the Bicentennial, it was appropriate.

Q: Let's talk about the queen. You came over to the United States with the queen.

ARMSTRONG: We did not actually come with her in the yacht, the Britannia, and really for a very homespun reason: my husband gets violently seasick. And as it turned out, they did have a horrible storm while they were-I think they were laying off Bermuda and got caught in the storm. We met them in Philadelphia and had a marvelous tour. We did ride the Britannia on inland waterways, across to Manhattan. I'm trying to think. I think maybe we then-did we go up to Boston, too, on the Britannia? I can't remember. Or maybe Connecticut and then to Boston. Anyway, we were on the Britannia, which was fun in calm waters.

Q: And did you spend all of your time with her during the day?

ARMSTRONG: That's right. We would go wherever-accompanied her everywhere, from the University of Virginia, Wall Street. We landed-she landed in Philadelphia. It was really interesting. It was so interesting to see the different ways the cities would manage it. And Philadelphia amused her. It horrified me. Rizzo was mayor, and Rizzo's idea of a proper greeting for the monarch was to have more policemen than I have ever seen in my life, arms akimbo like this, from the dock to downtown Philadelphia, with their backs to the Queen, facing the crowd, as if there were imminent danger of a riot any minute. It was really something. And, of course, nothing happened. They were happy crowds. The Northern Ireland problems did not cause much of a disturbance. And Boston did it magnificently. I think Dukakis was governor then. They had their police people-they weren't police people, but they were from the local towns, and probably sheriffs or other sorts of law enforcement people-done in Colonial costume. So it was attractive, rather than a downer. Everywhere, I was very proud of America. Other than the Rizzo meeting, I think everything was just perfect. [Laughter] And she was amused by that, so that wasn't bad.

Q: I suppose that your husbands got along well, did they?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, very well. They had known each other in England.

Q: They're both outdoorsmen.

ARMSTRONG: Both outdoorsmen, both horsemen.

Q: Did you actually see the Queen very often as Ambassador?

ARMSTRONG: No. Mostly at ceremonial occasions. She would always be gracious, of course, to the Ambassador of the United States and always have some words to say. But we did see her at Sandringham. I guess that was the most personal visit we had with her.

Q: You stayed at Sandringham, did you?

ARMSTRONG: No, we went to visit. We spent the day at Sandringham. We were with some friends nearby, and evidently her people called and asked us over. We were really sort of surprised, which was even more fun. And the Queen was there, the Prince, or what is he-King Constantine of Greece, the cousin, very attractive. Princess Margaret was there, the Queen Mother, Prince Phillip, and the Queen, and I guess that was it. We had a very informal, delightful time-luncheon. And then she puts on her bandanna and her low shoes and takes me out to the landrover, and off we go to see the horses and the corgies are piled all over. And we had just a delightful family time that time-Tobin and I and some friends, another couple who knew them very well indeed-that's the other ones that we were staying with.

A very different picture of the Queen, when we were close, was on board the Britannia, when she had President Ford and Henry Kissinger in conversation after a party. And for the first time, I realized how knowledgeable she is in foreign affairs; it really was an eye-opener. They were talking about the complexities of Cypriot politics, which, of course, is Byzantine; all sorts of subjects, and the Queen was an expert on all those subjects. She was terrific and, you know, couldn't have had sharper colleagues than the President and Henry Kissinger.

Q: I should say not. Now, this was right after the Fourth?

ARMSTRONG: That's right.

Q: You were not in New York for the Fourth with the tall ships?

ARMSTRONG: No, we missed them. We came on the sixth. We were not there on the Fourth; we stayed in London and then flew over, saw some friends for the weekend, and then, as I remember, the tour started during the week. I'm not precise on that. But we missed the tall ships, unfortunately, which is interesting. I was the liaison for Presidents Nixon and Ford to the Bicentennial, and we were desperately trying to get a central theme for that Bicentennial. Would each state do a kind of a festival? Or would each state dedicate a new Bicentennial park? Something that would tie the country together. We never could come up with anything that the states would all accept, and I wouldn't have dreamed that probably the most popular thing was the tall ships. I mean, we were all in on the planning for that; it sounded like a nice thing. But it's interesting how it came in.

Q: Yes, indeed it was. Well, I suppose it was felt it might be a bit of a gaffe to have the Queen of England at our Fourth of July party. [Laughter]

ARMSTRONG: That would ask a little much of her-although some of her talks were very interesting and quite direct. She opened in Philadelphia by saying, "I stand before you, the great, great, great, great, great granddaughter of George III." And she just lit right into the Revolution.

Q: Yes, fascinating. When you visited her at Sandringham, the people you were with, were they Americans?

ARMSTRONG: No, they were British.

Q: I would have thought she wouldn't have close American friends.

ARMSTRONG: No, they were two of our closest friends, Bryan and Carey Bassett is their name. They're a couple, ten or fifteen years younger than Tobin and I, who are, I guess, our closest personal friends over there.

Q: Oh, really. And is the Queen Mother as delightful as everyone says?

ARMSTRONG: Every time-, in fact, every year, I think-we've given a luncheon or a dinner for her in London, and we are very pleased to say we're close to her. She's astounding, just the warmest and very quick, very quick. Doesn't miss anything. And, of course, beloved by all. Tremendous energy.

Q: Has the Queen that sort of energy?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, but she's not effervescent like her mother. The Queen is far more composed. And it's interesting to me, the English people seem to like that just as well. Their public persona is so different. The Queen, when you're alone-but it takes a very small group-has a delightful and much more outgoing personality. In public, you notice she rarely smiles; the wave is a little half gesture. Whereas, the Queen Mother just effervesces and is ebullient and smiling all the time. And the English people seem to respond to both approaches to public life. They're quite different. It makes a nice balance.

Q: The Queen has to be the queen, as well as the consort.

ARMSTRONG: She does. She has to be more serious, and she's got a long way to go.

Q: Which is just what you had to do. You had to be the ambassador and the ambassador's consort, didn't you? Or was your husband able to, in his own way, be the consort?

ARMSTRONG: Somewhat. I don't know that I could judge that to what extent.

Q: Did he ever go to the lengths that Henry Luce did, of sitting with the women while you sat with the men after a dinner?

ARMSTRONG: Well, we didn't do that. We didn't separate the sexes. Now, I had to make up my mind whether I was going to take a stand on that in other people's houses. I did not. The only women's issue you'd say I took a stand on was at a club; I wish I could remember the name of it. They had a separate entrance for the women, and I did take a stand there. I said, "If I'm coming to speak here, we're all going in the same entrance."

Q: Good for you.

ARMSTRONG: But as far as separating after dinner, if we were in somebody's house and did it, I did not squawk.

Q: It's a little bit tricky, isn't it? You have to pick your issues.

ARMSTRONG: Well, you know, each woman has her own way of doing things. And I have not been as confrontational as some women I respect very much who get things done by making more noise. So it takes all kinds.

Q: I have a lot of questions I want to ask you, but today I wanted to concentrate on your time in England.

ARMSTRONG: Mrs. Thatcher, maybe?

Q: Mrs. Thatcher, indeed.

ARMSTRONG: She was the head of shadow government. She commanded my respect then, and I think I knew her well enough not to be at all surprised at what she's accomplished. A most commanding woman that makes an instant impression of power and authority. The first time I met her, she'd invited me to her quarter. She was just back from a trip to Israel, which had been a big success, and tremendously impressive with her grasp of the issues, of her analysis of the personalities, and she was very pleased. She had accomplished what she went for. Then we got to know her after that.

Since then, I have a better insight into here as a wife, because it was hard to get her. We had a very hard time. Ron and I tried and tried to get her to come for dinner to Winfield House, and she was slow to accept. Finally, we got her, and it tickled me so afterwards. You know how the English are very polite about seeing you literally to your car when you're their guests? So Tobin and I, as hosts that night, after dinner at Winfield House took Mr. Thatcher and Mrs. Thatcher to their car. Mr. Thatcher gets in behind the driver's seat and drives, and Mrs. Thatcher gets in the back seat and he drives her. I thought Tobin would die, because he liked her so much. But this was quite a blow to him. [Laughter]

Q: Oh, isn't that wonderful.

ARMSTRONG: But she probably had some papers back there that she was going to attend to. And since then, we have learned that Dennis is a very happy husband, that she is a wife very dependent on him, that they're a marvelous pair. But that was kind of a blow.

Q: Oh, that's priceless. I can't imagine your husband doing that.

ARMSTRONG: Oh, no.

Q: I could see him behind the wheel, but you would sit up front.

ARMSTRONG: I'd sit up front; that's quite right.

Q: When you traveled around, speaking of cars-traveled around England-did you go by car mostly?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, we did. Very rarely by plane. It just doesn't make sense, usually. We went by plane to Northern Ireland. I did; Tobin did not go then. But we'd travel, and, of course, that was one of the delights. The English countryside has to be one of the most gorgeous things in the world to drive through. We shipped over a car of ours, a big car, and we had children over there at various times, so we were able to make some family trips.

Q: Oh, wonderful, not all official trips.

ARMSTRONG: Not all official.

Q: I suppose you took the embassy car for those. What was your idea on when you should and when you shouldn't fly the flag on the car?

ARMSTRONG: In those days, there was not the problem of terrorism. Yes, there were still sandbags around some buildings in England because there'd been a bad rash of bombings several months before we got there. And as I was leaving-well, actually several months before I left-they changed the curtains in our offices in the chancery to those mesh curtains that catch glass.

Q: Oh, yes.

ARMSTRONG: So there were a few steps taken, anti-terrorist steps. But there was not the fear for the ambassador that there has been in recent years. So as far as flying the flag, any time I was on official business, there was no problem with drawing attention to the American ambassador; it was a good thing to do. So only when I was on personal business would I not fly it.

Q: Did you ever have any health problems over there?

ARMSTRONG: No, I can't think . . . Well, I did lose my voice for a week or two. Our daughter was there, and she took over some of my speaking engagements. I can't remember any other health problems.

Q: And your husband regained his lost weight?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, he did. He would say, "Unfortunately." It didn't take long.

Q: Did you do all your traveling around the British Isles or did you take vacations on the Continent?

ARMSTRONG: We went to Mons, to Belgium, twice; to Germany once on a NATO tour; down to Cadiz, Spain-the naval base, once.

Q: These were all official things?

ARMSTRONG: These were official. That was it . . . and Northern Ireland.

Q: That must be a sad place.

ARMSTRONG: Terribly sad; it's like an armed camp. It's just awful. The amazing part is how normal life is.

Q: Really?

ARMSTRONG: I don't know whether-I guess they're just inured; just go on.

Q: Well, you had your husband with you, so you didn't have the problem of being lonely as Chief of Mission.

ARMSTRONG: Not a bit.

Q: But were you able to have a private life at all?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. Maybe it's partly because of the big, beautiful house and the upstairs rooms. I never felt put-upon as far as lack of privacy. And those gorgeous grounds; you could take a walk. You've got several acres there to walk around. Regents Park. So I never felt hemmed in. And, of course, the British people are such civil, wonderful people. They'll leave you alone, usually. Or if they bother you, it's in a nice way.

Q: There's no culture clash at all?

ARMSTRONG: There's no culture clash, and, of course, their politeness is famous, and justly so. So if you were walking down Stratford-on-Avon and you were sightseeing, if they had anything to say, it would be something complimentary about your country or, "We're so glad to have a lady ambassador," or something like that. It would never be hurtful or intrusive.

Q: No. And even the ones who are on the left are not fanatical.

ARMSTRONG: Oh, no. In fact, of course, there was a left government, a Labor government, in [power] the entire time I was there, and here I am a Republican on the conservative end of Republicans. Wilson was a P.M. just a few weeks while I was there. Maybe I told you the last time my distress when it came over the wire that he had resigned, and I thought I was the only ambassador in London who hadn't known. Of course, it turned out nobody'd known. But that was a very bleak time. Callaghan was a very fair and good man. I feel we had a good relationship.

Q: It does make a difference-all of those things. You, then, never had any personal danger?

ARMSTRONG: No personal danger that I was aware of at all.

Q: No death threats?

ARMSTRONG: No death threats, no. We had guard dogs that ran around Winfield House at night, but it was really quite relaxed and amateurish compared to what people have to do now.

Q: What kind of guard dogs were they?

ARMSTRONG: This was a German shepherd.

Q: Provided by the government?

ARMSTRONG: (Laughter) Yes. It bit. Obviously, didn't bite too hard, but our son was returning late with a poor friend from a night on the town and the friend had got bit. Thank goodness the friend didn't want to sue the State Department.

Q: I should say. Did you have any major honors that you were given by the British?

ARMSTRONG: Oh, yes. I've got a bookcase full of them-all sorts of things; a couple of honorary degrees, and then various associations, everything from Ladies of the Press to the this to the that would honor you.

Q: How about decorations?

ARMSTRONG: No decorations. I was delighted Cap Weinberger got one recently. He's a great Anglophile. There are not many things that you can do to please Cap that way, but that really did it.

Q: Well, is there anything that you think being a woman contributed to your great success? Do you think that was a large part of your success?

ARMSTRONG: It certainly contributed to being well known and being a novelty, and so you certainly got your foot in the door as far as getting people's attention. You were noticed the minute you arrived. Ambassadors can do good jobs in so many different ways, I've learned. One of my strengths was knowing how to deal with the public and enjoying it, and this was the kind of a post where that could be useful. In many countries, you wouldn't think of doing that-to be out and about often. I think it helped to be a woman.

Q: You didn't do the actual, the nitty-gritty, day-to-day work on IMF and things like that, did you?

ARMSTRONG: Only on the most important parts. I mean, Ron would go over cables with me when he thought I needed to know. Had I been there longer-I would say it was an ambassadorship in stages, because had Ford been re-elected, you know it's reasonably certain he would have asked me to stay on. When he wasn't, obviously I was going to go, although they were very civil to me. Cy Vance, Bob Strauss knew me, and they said, "Do stay on. Take your time." Mr. Vance said he was busy reorganizing the State Department. So it couldn't have been more nicely handled that way.

I tell you, the only truly unpleasant thing that happened the whole time I was over there-other than this one congressman, who was a problem not just for me, but for the whole embassy-was at the very end. After Carter was elected, even though Vance had been marvelous, we get a phone call that I am to leave the country because Mondale is coming. I said, "What? I'm ambassador for the vice president-elect, and I'm ambassador for all the Americans."

"No. You get out of the country."

Q: When was this?

ARMSTRONG: This was about in January.

Q: Before the Inauguration?

ARMSTRONG: I think it was before the Inauguration, it was possibly after. It was certainly close, one way or the other. And then I found out-oh, I know. Ken Rush was ambassador to France, and he called and said he was getting out of France, and could he come stay with me?

I said, "Well, I've just gotten a phone call that I'm supposed to vacate."

And so I said to Ron, "Ron, you tell them I want to see a cable to that effect. Put it in writing." And it never came, and so I stayed.

The Foreign Minister came out to meet Mondale and said very nice things about me as I was standing there. On purpose, because I'm sure the British were privy to this. And, you know, that isn't the way diplomacy works. I bet Mondale-I doubt, from the way he talked, I don't even think he knew about it. Somebody had done it.

Q: He probably didn't. Somebody down the line. What a gaffe!

ARMSTRONG: But then there was an interesting thing that happened. There was an unfortunate set of statements by one of Mondale's people after a party that the prime minister gave them, and he had served them some famous old brandy or famous old wine. Anyway, the next day the press person said, "Well, the Vice President never would have been elected if he spent that kind of money on an obscene party." Well, poor Mondale by that time, was in Tokyo. That was the other ambassador who didn't leave, the ambassador to Japan; he stayed put, too.

Q: But Rush left?

ARMSTRONG: Rush left. All the others left. There were some others involved. And so Mondale called me and said could I explain to the Prime Minister that, of course, those weren't his sentiments and that he was terribly embarrassed about this statement. They had not invited me to that party and had said it was a stag party. I found out later there were women there. But anyway, I called the Prime Minister and said, "The Vice President-this is certainly not the way he feels. It was a beautiful party. He's so upset that he's called from Tokyo to make sure that you understand this."

Q: So you had to clean up after the mess made by those people.

ARMSTRONG: Well, that was the only mess.

Q: That's too bad, though, that you had to. It's a shame that you didn't get to stay longer.

ARMSTRONG: No, but they couldn't have. I want to reiterate. I quickly saw that, really, it didn't work either way. I could have stayed longer as far as Cy Vance was concerned, but since I was so political, it wasn't right. There'd be issues and people where it was slightly awkward for them and awkward for me. So it wasn't the best. Whereas, for 90 percent of the ambassadors, it would have worked. But I had been highly politicized.

Q: And too highly visible. You were such a well-known figure, too.

ARMSTRONG: Well, that's true too. That was another thing. But it was beautifully handled, with the utmost tact.

Q: I guess Mr. Vance is very nice.

ARMSTRONG: He was completely fine about it. And all the State Department people were. It just couldn't have been easier for all concerned.

Q: Did all of this-and this will be my last question today-did all of this change your opinion, or any opinions you may have had, about this Foreign Service?

ARMSTRONG: Oh, most definitely! I had a preconception of the dilettantes, the cookie pushers, the not-so-hard workers. It changed me completely, what I think of the Foreign Service. I became a great admirer. I've never known a corps of people who were-I figured they'd be intelligent. That, I knew, and that certainly proved true: the most intelligent group of government people I've ever worked with. But also I think I've cited the other characteristics-very hard working, very loyal, without ever being two-faced, the ability to put all their efforts behind whoever is deserving of it at that point. I am a great admirer of the Foreign Service.

Q: Well, that's delightful to hear, I must say, and they reciprocate. You have a good corridor reputation, indeed. Thank you very much.

ARMSTRONG: Well, thank you.

End of interview