

HARRY COBURN

Interviewed by: Michael Mahoney

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Q: This is an oral history interview with Harry Coburn done by Michael Mahoney on July 22, 2002 on behalf of the Association of Diplomatic Studies and Training. Here we are with Mr. Coburn. Tell me something about your early life and how you came to get into the Foreign Service.

COBURN: I was born and raised on Long Island in New York State. I had no inclination to come into the State Department until I came to Washington, which followed my military service.

Q: Well, tell me a little bit. You grew up; did you go to public or private high school in Long Island?

COBURN: I went to a public school in Long Island for twelve years. It was a nice school at the time. The town was small and it was very stable. Everybody I knew in the second grade finished high school with me.

Q: What town was it?

COBURN: Freeport.

Q: Now, where did you go to college?

COBURN: I went to the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts.

Q: How did you happen to go there as opposed to any other place?

COBURN: I wanted to have a liberal education in a Christian centered atmosphere. I also looked to colleges that were in easy commuting distances from my parents home and Holy Cross fit the bill.

Q: I'm sorry for interrupting, so what did you major in in college?

COBURN: I majored in political science. Well, everyone in a Jesuiuniversity majored in philosophy, so my minor was political science.

Q: You graduated in 1956?

COBURN: Yes.

Q: But at that point you were not thinking about the Foreign Service or the diplomatic service. You had taken the intern exam for general government service?

COBURN: Exactly.

Q: All right. Now, did you do the officer training thing? Was that part of the educational program at Holy Cross or did you do that in the summer?

COBURN: No, it was part of the educational program at Holy Cross. The college had a Reserve Officer Training Corps for the Navy and the Air Force at the school. If you will remember, back in the 1950s, the United States was engaged in the Korean War.

Q: Right.

COBURN: Since there was a draft operating in those years, most of us understood that we would have to join the military after completion of our degree. Obtaining a military commission as part of our education appeared to be a useful thing to do.

Q: Right. So you became an air force officer?

COBURN: Yes. It was a very broadening experience for me since I lived in Texas, California, and Maine during the time I was in the service and met men from all parts of the country with different backgrounds and different views. During my last tour in Maine, a representative from the Civil Service visited the Base and informed me that I could reestablish my eligibility for Civil Service status as a management intern.

Q: What year was this?

COBURN: 1959.

Q: Okay.

COBURN: In 1959 I came to Washington and found a job in the Department of Labor as a personnel officer. There was a young group of men in the office, all of us starting out and very competitive with each other. One of them heard of the Foreign Service exam which was going to be given in December of that year. He suggested that we all meet on Saturday and take the exam. I think that there were seven of us who did so. Of the seven, only two of us passed the written exam. The other man said he wasn't interested in the life but only wanted to know what the exam was like. Since I hadn't started down the road, I wanted to see how I would do on the oral, the medical and the security exam.

Q: I mean, were you interested in international affairs?

COBURN: Yes. I was interested in international affairs. I read the press. I always liked geography. I always liked history which came in handy when I got to my oral exam which was June 13, 1960. I remember the date because it was the same day I graduated from Holy Cross in 1956. So, four years later on the very same day, I'm taking an oral exam.

Q: But you did no formal preparation for this for the written or thoral? I mean you didn't take any courses?

COBURN: No.

Q: So, you had the oral exam?

COBURN: Right. It was in the afternoon, which probably helped me, because I think the three senior officers had all been out to lunch and had imbibed. I can tell you this because years later when I was in personnel and they were clearing out the files, they showed me my interview file. I specifically remember the questions they asked me. They started off asking me to describe the development of the United States from the Plymouth Landing until the present day. Since I had taken history and was fairly confident on that, I told them, giving dates of wars and major events. Then, they asked me about the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the name of the Secretary General of NATO. I said I didn't specifically know, but I thought it was probably a national, either Belgium or Holland. Of course it was a Dutchman at the time and I guess they thought well this man can think on his feet. The question that I think was funny is they said, you've just come back from Europe, give us your impressions of what you saw there. I went on in great length talking about the cities I had visited and the great soaring cathedral in Cologne and how I stood in this cathedral and all the thoughts that came through my head about how it had suffered through the centuries. I expanded on this theme at great length. Well, years later when I read the file, it said, "Although Mr. Coburn has never been outside the United States, he apparently has the interest in the foreign area." So, I knew that somehow in my long disquisition I lost them and they were probably contemplating how soon they could get rid of me, but be it as it may, they told me that I had passed.

Then I had to go through the grueling security experience. When I talked to my A-100 classmates (A-100 is the term they use for the first group of people when they come in together for orientation), I asked them about their security investigation. They said, well, somebody came by the house and asked me a few questions. I was in a room with two men. One who was very tough and one who was very friendly. The tough one asked me all sorts of questions about my sexual habits and drug or alcohol use. He pressed these issues at great length and the session seemed to last more than an hour.

Q: Were these Department security people or FBI types?

COBURN: No, they were Department security staff, but I was really knocked back by the personal nature of the questions and the fact that the man just kept probing. I thought he really seems to be into things that I haven't thought about. The interesting part of the security investigation was afterwards the friendly agent said to me, "Well, I live right close to your apartment. Why don't I give you a ride home?" I accepted. To this day I wonder if that was part of the security clearance, if they wanted to see what I would say about the grilling of that tough agent. He told me when you go to post don't complain because if you complain that opens a security investigation on you. If that's the truth, and I don't think it is, the security office must be overwhelmed with work. Anyway, that took place in the early summer and finally six months later I got my appointment and was told to report to the State Department in January of what would have been 1961.

Q: So, you worked until then, you stayed at the Labor Department?

COBURN: Yes. They knew that I was leaving, but I continued to work there.

Q: So, January of '61 you entered the Foreign Service?

COBURN: January 21st.

Q: January 21?

COBURN: January 21, 1961.

Q: Good, okay.

COBURN: I entered the A-100 course for 21 new employees, 20 men and one lady.

Q: One woman, so things have changed a bit since then in terms of the female side.

COBURN: At the time she was told that if she married she would have to resign which she subsequently did.

Q: That was the rule until I think around 1970 or '71 I think.

COBURN: I was in Rome at the time of the change. I remember that was when they stopped reporting on spouses in efficiency reports and changed the whole procedure for dealing with those kinds of issues.

Q: You would say that was early '70s somewhere in there?

COBURN: Yes.

Q: So, you started in January of 1961. Talk a little bit about the training program then and how they arranged your initial assignments including perhaps language training.

COBURN: We were over at the Foreign Service Institute, FSI, which at the time was in the garages of Arlington Towers, which is now River House, that complex right on the Potomac River. We had a whole series of exercises. First of all, getting to know each other and then getting to know the Department. At one stage we spent a day with any desk officer that we wanted and I chose the Cuban desk of INR.

Q: INR being?

COBURN: Intelligence and Research, which is the part of the Department of State that gets the information through intelligence channels. Since the Cuban situation with Fidel Castro was much on the front page, I thought serving a day in the part of the Department of State that received intelligence reports on Cuba might be useful. The interesting part was that the desk officer was Lawrence Eagleburger, subsequently ambassador to Yugoslavia, Under Secretary of State, and for a short period of time during the first George Bush presidency, Secretary of State. Mr. Eagleburger at the time was a very brash man who spoke his mind, which I think, is probably the way he spent most of his career. I didn't find out much about Cuba, but I did find out a lot about Lawrence Eagleburger. I don't recall too many of the details other than the fact that when our assignments came up, the first assignments in the Foreign Service, low and behold the personnel officer of the State Department selected me for their personnel office because I had previous experience in the field.

Q: So, you didn't as they basically do now, you did not have to go overseas for your first assignment?

COBURN: Most of the officers did. We really weren't given, if I recall correctly, much of a choice. We just went in a room one day and they read off our names and told us where we were going.

Q: Was there a language requirement that you had to pass in order as they do now in order to get promoted or to be tenured or did you have permanent status?

COBURN: The language requirement existed because before I went to my first post I had to be language qualified. We didn't have the tenuring situation, which developed in later years. We were at the time given three commissions. It was a very formal organization in 1961. I received a commission as a vice consul in the consular service, as third secretary in the diplomatic service, and as a Foreign Service officer class 8. Each of those categories resulted in a beautifully inscribed scroll, suitable for framing, which I have to this day. Every time you were promoted you got a whole series of additional ones.

Q: So, you were assigned then to personnel in the Department. What length of assignment did you get?

COBURN: It was a two-year assignment.

Q: So, two years and what were you assigned to be doing there?

COBURN: It was called personnel operations division, POD, and it was the European office. A significant element in that assignment and one that I still ponder about was that the people I met in that assignment had impact on the remainder of my career. The head of the office was Robert Gordon, who was an Africanist and had been political counselor in Khartoum, Sudan. Subsequently many years later he was the consul general in Florence, which was the reason I ended up in Florence working for him again. One of the executive officers in EUR, who we dealt with all the time, was Joan Clark who subsequently was the director of personnel. She chose me to be in that office and subsequently as a deputy assistant secretary for consular affairs. Another member of that staff was Pierre Graham who was also influential in another assignment I got. So, fortuitously, the first group of professional Foreign Service officers I was associated with had an echo through the remaining years of my career because even though I didn't correspond with them or see them on a regular basis, my name was known to them. When assignments were up they thought of me and gave me the opportunity to work for them. I was in that office for two years essentially placing secretaries and communicators in posts in Western Europe and serving on the panel that assigned support staff.

Q: What's the panel mean?

COBURN: The panel was the assignment panel for clerical or what we call staff personnel now. These are secretaries and communicators.

Q: Who was represented on that panel and how did it work?

COBURN: The panel had a geographic representation from the European bureau, which was my job. The African bureau, the American Republics bureau, Near East bureau, and the East Asia bureau all were represented.

Q: You worked for the bureau of personnel, but the individual so-called geographic bureaus in other words, had their people also who sat on this panel?

COBURN: No, no. I mislead you.

Q: That's okay.

COBURN: The personnel operations division was broken down by geographic organizations. The representatives from personnel operations division met together and they took the instructions from the geographic bureaus. EUR would tell me who they wanted for these jobs, if they had interest. Many times they didn't, they just wanted staff for secretarial and communicator vacancies.

Q: Right.

COBURN: We would meet as members of the personnel operations division representing the wishes, if there were any, of the various geographic bureaus to staff the secretarial, clerical and communicator positions in the embassies overseas. We were chaired by the deputy director of the personnel operations division. It was a personnel operation in toto, but influenced by the wishes of the geographic bureaus.

Q: Is it safe to say you said that in some cases the bureaus would tell you who they wanted and in other cases you know they would accept if they had a space and there was anybody available who they thought could do the job there. Is it safe to say that it would be very difficult even then in 1961 or 2 to place people in a geographic bureau if for some reason the bureau was very opposed to a particular person? In other words, that the bureau really tended to have a veto, the geographic bureau tended to have a veto over people that were sent to it or could personnel if the Department had central purposes of its own for example, that it needed to do certain things with certain types of personnel, did personnel much if ever override a geographic bureau?

COBURN: I don't ever recall bureaucratic battles of the assignments of these very junior people. It might have been different in the more senior levels where reputations were known and personality conflicts existed.

Q: What about a secretary for an ambassador or deputy chief of mission?

COBURN: They were always pro forma. If an ambassador or DCM wanted someone, it was automatically done.

Q: And if they didn't want somebody, they certainly didn't geanybody they didn't like.

COBURN: Right. What we tried to do in the Western European assignments office is make sure employees in hardship posts that indicated a wish to go to Western Europe, got there. Interestingly enough, we often found that many of these employees, when they arrived in Paris, London, or Rome were very unhappy because there wasn't any camaraderie. They missed the feeling of community that often exists in hardship posts where everyone looks out for each other. They tended to be on their own a lot and for single people who didn't speak the local language, it could be a lonely existence. We often found that these folks requested a break in assignment and sought to return to the hardship post.

Q: That's a very interesting point because I think that theme goes, certainly it goes through until today that if given a choice between a sense of community even in a very difficult post where you may lack a lot of the amenities of life and you have difficult climates. If having to choose between that and what we think of as the benefits of big European cities, people more often than not if they have to do one or the other will take the sense of community. You found that to be true even then?

COBURN: Right. Because it's often the case that the big European cities are expensive, the salaries of the junior employees don't go that far, and the social life in the big embassies tends to be around the events of the senior officers. The junior personnel are not included and that can breed some unhappiness.

Q: So, you spent two years in personnel essentially doing these types of assignments and coordinating assignments to the European side of the house and so after that presumably you began, in the personnel system began to think about sending you overseas?

COBURN: Correct. And I had the requirement to gain fluency in foreign language.

Q: Right. We should say here that the foreign language requirement system is based on a scale of numbers from one to five with a number given for reading and a number given for speaking, with 5 being a native speaker. In general for what are called world languages you need, world languages are French, German, Italian, Spanish, you needed a 3/3 for language qualification. So, you had to achieve that, so what happened?

COBURN: So, I knew I had to achieve a 3/3. I had taken Spanish in high school. I hadn't taken any language in college, so I had a fleeting familiarity with that language. I was in the Western European personnel office. I thought my chances were pretty good of going to Spain, which is what happened. I was assigned to Madrid.

Q: How many weeks of language training did you have the approximately?

COBURN: I think it was six months and then my wife and I plus my sole left for Spain.

Q: How did you meet your wife?

COBURN: I met my wife in college.

Q: I see, when you were at Holy Cross and she was at a similar college.

COBURN: She was at Regis, which was a woman's college located between Worcester and Boston.

Q: Right.

COBURN: In those days the dances between a male school and a female school were organized so that you would meet females at a male school and males at a female school which worked in our case, but we didn't obviously get married right away. We were married in 1961 in July and the Foreign Service Institute kindly let me break my training for marriage and honeymoon which was a total of about a week or a week and a half. After which I returned to FSI and then we sailed off to our first assignment.

Q: Which was Madrid.

COBURN: Which was Madrid. I was assigned to the consular section.

Q: So, what year, what date would you say approximately you arrived in Madrid, you can refer to the file?

COBURN: We arrived in Madrid in October of 1963.

Q: Okay and you were assigned to the consular section. How long was that assignment going to be for?

COBURN: It was a two year assignment with rotation through the various functions of a consular section; non-immigrant visas, immigrant visas, passport and citizenship, etc. In the Sixties, there were still American flag vessels so we were able to sail from New York to Spain on the USS Constitution. By this time we had our first son so our ability to enjoy all the ship's services was limited, but we enjoyed the crossing. We got off the ship at Algeciras, which is the Spanish city near Gibraltar. We had to travel by lighter from the ship to shore. No one from the embassy was there to meet us so we had to make all the arrangements ourselves, from finding a hotel to booking the train. We took a sleeper and arrived in Madrid in the morning. There we were met by the Embassy personnel officer, an old friend from Personnel, Evelyn Blue. She escorted us to the hotel. Then essentially the embassy said "good luck." There was no embassy housing, except for the Ambassador. We were required to find our own housing. While we had a housing allowance, all the work and negotiations for a place was on our back. Because we feared our young son might fall off a balcony in an apartment house, we searched for and found a house in a section of town called El Viso. It was a crumbling old place which had the kitchen in the basement and dining room on the first floor. It was heated by a furnace which had to be stoked up each morning. In addition the house next door was in ruins so, like a townhouse with adjoining walls, ours was open to the weather and each time it rained, moisture entered the house from the exposed wall. Since we had tile floors and little heat, our son managed to suffer all sorts of infections the entire time we were there. Because of the organization of the house, it was necessary to hire a live-in maid who had to start the furnace each morning, make the breakfast and all meals in the basement and then climb up the stairs to the dining room. Spain was still suffering the aftermath of the Civil War so it was possible to find household help at a reasonable rate. Because we had a garden, it was also necessary to hire a gardener. I found myself earning a little over \$5000 a year and supporting a family of three with two staff members who fought all the time.

Three weeks after our arrival, President Kennedy was killed in Dallas. I was scheduled to assume my first tour as duty officer in the Embassy, a job I had never done before. The duty week began on Friday and that night the Ambassador called me at home as we were unpacking our luggage which had just arrived. I had met Ambassador Woodward when I made my courtesy calls on the senior officers of the Embassy. He said, "Harry, Haile Selassie is coming back from the funeral with our Ambassador to Ethiopia. The plane is going to land at Barajas for refueling. Would you please go out there and provide any support the Ambassador might need?" Barajas was the Madrid airport where we also had a U.S. military component. He sent a car around for me and we drove out of town towards the airport. All along the road I notice the Spanish military police, the Guardia Civil. Since I had only been in the country a few weeks and never been to the airport, I didn't know if this was common, but it seemed a bit strange. The ruler of Spain, Generalissimo Francisco Franco, was a man known for his strong views and strong police force, but still it was odd. When we arrived at the protocol lounge, I saw there were even more police with many officials in military uniforms at the entrance to the lounge. I had been issued my diplomatic document by the Spanish Foreign Ministry, the "carnet" stating I was third secretary of embassy. I attempted to enter the lounge with my documentation but it didn't get me very far. However, I had been assigned to the non-immigrant visa office when the chief of the protocol office of the Government of Spain came to pick up the visa issued to the vice president of Spain who went to Kennedy's funeral as the official representative of Franco's government. He had therefore met me and recognized me when I handed over my documents and allowed me to enter the protocol lounge. The room was large and almost completely empty except for an elderly couple. We looked at each other but did not speak. We waited about 20 minutes while I wondered what was the next move. Then the doors of the lounge opened and Generalissimo Franco entered followed by the senior members of his government.

Franco greeted the elderly couple who turned out to be the British Ambassador and his wife and continued on out to the tarmac where the plane was taxiing up for the disembarkation. Haile Selassie and the American ambassador were met by Franco who invited Selassie to remain in Madrid as a state visitor. This all happened late Friday evening. The next morning, as duty officer, I had to go into the chancery. Upon my arrival I was notified that the Deputy Chief of Mission wanted to see me immediately. After my airport experience I had drafted a memo on the events that transpired.

Q: It's probably worth noting that the State Department runs a duty officer system domestically and overseas. During hours when the office is closed and on weekends there's always an officer available to handle emergencies for American citizens and so forth. That is what you are talking about here. It goes on a rotation. Everybody has to do it at different times, so continue.

COBURN: I went up to the DCM's office and he was, to say the least, agitated. He wanted to know what I was doing at the airport and why hadn't I seen fit to tell him that I was going to the airport. I said, "Sir, I assumed the ambassador had informed you since he was the one that gave me the directions to go to the airport." He said, "That will be all. Thank you very much." I rarely saw the DCM because I was deep in the bowels in the chancery.

Q: Talk a little bit. So, you arrive as a very junior officer in 1963 in Spain and what was your sense then of the United States' relationship with Spain and the issues that might have characterized relations between the two countries?

COBURN: Well, I could say something about Madrid at the time because under Franco it was a country that had suffered through a civil war and it was still very evident that the country was still recovering from the devastation of that war. There was I think little crime. You never felt any sort of threat living there. We had individuals called "serenos" who patrolled the street in the evenings and kept tabs on what was going on in the neighborhood. Traffic was very light. We had no trouble driving anywhere anytime. In fact I had to purchase a car in Madrid. There weren't any cars sold in Spain except a type of Fiat, an Italian manufactured car which was called Seat. It was possible for diplomats or people on the diplomatic list to import automobiles. At the time many individuals brought in first class luxury cars which they used for two years or three years and then when they departed post they were able to sell them locally which gave them good profit. Unfortunately, by the time I left the policy had changed and the money that you made had to be donated to charity. I did drive a Mercedes for the first and last time in my life.

The relations between the Spanish government and the United States government as best I could see were close. We depended upon the Spaniards for the use of military bases. There was a military base at Madrid and a naval base on the Mediterranean at Rota. We had free use of these bases and during my time there when there were problems in Africa, we had over flights which required refueling in Spain. The Spaniards always cooperated in allowing our military to use their facilities when emergencies developed.

Q: So, from your point of view the bases were at the center of Spanish and U.S. relations?

COBURN: That's my impression. Spain was very well located for our transfer of troops from NATO to the U.S. back and forth and for any problems that developed in Africa that required deployments from the United States..

Q: And what the Spanish got from us was in effect an active legitimacy for Franco's government. I mean we recognized them. We had relations with them and that was to his benefit presumably.

COBURN: I think so. I think he saw that as part of his effort to gain some respectability among the civilized countries of the world because he was considered by many people to be a brutal dictator. There was nothing resembling democracy in Spain at the time we were there. The question on many peoples' minds was what would happen when Franco left the scene. How would Spain make the transition from this rather rigid system, heavily influenced by military interests, to a more western democratic process. That was one of the things that the junior officers did get involved in because the aforementioned Deputy Chief of Mission wanted the young officers of the embassy to interact with young Spaniard officers, military and diplomatic. We were encouraged to open our doors to them. In fact we had to report to him every month our contacts with local nationals.

When I left Madrid one of the tasks I had was to escort a group of young Spanish military officers, probably at the grade of lieutenant captain around the United States on a tour. The embassy was engaged in trying to open lines of communication to these men. I say men because at the time women weren't in positions of influence in Spain. In fact, my consul general was Margaret Husman who was the first woman assigned to Madrid in that job and it raised many eyebrows at the time because some thought the Spaniards would not want to deal with a woman. Margaret was a very effective consular officer and a woman who gained credibility with the Spaniards. It was rare in 1963 or '64 to see women in any positions of authority in Spain. Women who went bathing, for example, under the Spanish rules had to have coverage down to their knees. So, the bathing suits had skirts. You would see the garbage collected by men who actually had suit jackets. They were rather shabby, but they were suit jackets. Everyone dressed very formally. None of the kind of casual clothes that we see today. Spain in 1963 did not have air conditioning, so it was very, very warm. In fact, in Madrid you didn't go out to dinner until ten because it was so hot you couldn't really get comfortable until the cool breezes in the evening. It was a very structured hierarchical formal society and we operated as best we could in it and had to the best of my knowledge pretty effective relationships with all levels of Spanish society.

My experiences in the consular section were not too pleasant because at the time the Cuban situation had deteriorated. Fidel Castro had come to power in Cuba and was expelling anybody who didn't want to cooperate with his regime. Planes from Havana were full of Cubans. Most of them as soon as they got off came right to the American Embassy and sought entrance into the United States. The problem was that the immigration naturalization law at that time, in 1963, allowed any native born Latin American to have free access into the United States. There were many Cubans who were born in Spain and had immigrated to Cuba and when they were ejected from Cuba to Spain they fell under another provision of the immigration naturalization act which required them to apply for immigrant visas under the numbering system which limited by geographic country of origin how many people could enter in any given year. So, as a consular officer, I was faced with these cases where people would come and their children, having been born in Cuba were free to go to the United States, but they, having been born in Spain, were not. The emotions in the office, as you can imagine, were strong with people crying, shouting, screaming, threatening. I used to go home at night saying I don't think I can face another day because you had to keep saying no. We had to uphold the law and yet there were these terrible situations. All you could say was wait until your children become citizens. (End of tape)

Q: You were saying that the visa people had terrible workinconditions.

COBURN: It was a difficult environment with the waiting rooms full of Cuban refugees, some of them with just the clothes on their backs who wanted to leave immediately to go to the United States. My impression at the time was that the various aid agencies and assistance units hadn't caught up with the problem, which was mushrooming. We did the best we could. We caused a lot of turmoil in the chancery proper because of the noise and disorder of large families with emotional encounters with the consular staff. Again in 1963 we didn't have any security protecting the staff, neither the Spanish employees who assisted the consular officers nor the consular officers themselves. Behind the counter the Spanish employee had a desk and behind the Spanish employee the visa officer, non-immigrant visa officer had a desk in the open room. The immigrant visa section was in another part of the consulate and that was quite a different operation altogether because the requirements to get an immigrant visa were fairly complex and the documentation required people to come in after their paperwork was done. So it was a processing question, not a decision question, at least not as open a decision question as we had. We were dealing with a lot of Spaniards who didn't like the office being cluttered with all of these refugees and they wanted to get their visas and had to stand in line with everybody else.

Q: Would you say this number of Cuban applicants or people coming in from Cuba was in the hundreds, thousands, was it pretty big numbers or was it just the individual cases were so emotional?

COBURN: I think the individual cases were emotional. There were daily flights coming in from Cuba and we were dealing with hundreds of requests a day.

Q: I mean did you have the sense of being in effect really working flat out all day every day on these kinds of cases or was it a few every day?

COBURN: No, it was somewhere in-between. It wasn't a few and it wasn't people standing around the block to get into the chancery. It was a constant group of people coming in all the time.

Q: And very worked up people.

COBURN: Very worked up people. Remember this is 1963. We had Arabs in Spain and a number of them came in trying to get tourist visas to the United States.

Q: Were they mostly from Morocco?

COBURN: Jordan, Palestinian refugees, Syria, a wide range of young men who were looking for a door to the United States.

Q: Fascinating.

COBURN: Yes, well I was glad after a while to be moved upstairs to the passport office which, since it dealt with American citizens, was on an upper floor of the chancery away from the hullabaloo of the non-immigrant visa office.

Q: That was your first connection with passports, which came to occupy a significant part of your life later?

COBURN: Yes, it was my introduction into the passport adjudication and issuing system. We had a very interesting category of Americans living in Madrid. There was a large expatriate community since Spain, at the time, was very inexpensive.

Q: The dollar really went a long way, huh?

COBURN: It went a very long way. You could have a villa with servants on a modest income. We also had an active American movie colony there. The high moment of my passport work was meeting Audrey Hepburn who came in with her child. Audrey Hepburn was a movie star of some fame and magnitude at the time.

Q: Oh yes.

COBURN: But she was a Belgian, even though she spoke English like well bred British lady.

Q: She was a Belgian citizen?

COBURN: Yes, a Belgian citizen but she married to a Puerto Rican, Jose Ferrer, and their son had an American passport. I thought that it said something about her that she came to the Embassy by herself with her son to get his passport and did not send a staff member and was not escorted around with staff and assistants. Just a mother bringing her son to get a document.

Q: She was a pleasant person?

COBURN: Very sweet, just like her appearance on film and very grateful when I took care of him and issued the passport. She went off happily. I thought it is nice to know that some of these folks can be genuine people.

Q: Not a demanding figure at all.

COBURN: Not like some of the self important people you witness in Hollywood or in the political life. I was still taking my turn as duty officer and had to deal with some of the self important political officers in the embassy who did not like to do the duty because it was consular work. They were constantly writing memos suggesting that the duty should only be done by consular staff because they didn't know how to issue passports or deal with welfare cases.

Q: A theme, which continues to this day.

COBURN: Does it really?

Q: Sure, of course.

COBURN: The consular officers felt that we had that work all the time and we should have a weekend off. While I was there it remained that all the Foreign Service officers had to take their turn. Some of the weekends were pretty grisly. I remember one in particular. I was called by a marine guard at 3:00 in the morning. Somebody was burning to death in a terrible accident. They wouldn't send an ambulance to pick them up until the embassy gave a guarantee that we'd pay the cost of the ambulance. Unbelievable. Another time I was called by the military, also like 2:00 in the morning, and told that I had to get the DCM to come to the U.S. military facility. They had a highly classified cable and we couldn't send anybody to pick it up. I couldn't go get it and give it to him. He had to come and see it himself. I had to call the DCM and tell him that there was a sergeant who was being very difficult and demanded that he read this message within the next hour. He had to come in person. The DCM was not very happy. He said, well, come and get me and I'll go. So, I drove over and picked him up and he grumped the whole way. When he got to the building, the office was apparently on the eighth floor, but the elevator was broken. So, he had to walk up eight flights of stairs and when he came down he was as hot as a pistol. He said, "That will not happen again. I will guarantee it." The consular work on the weekends had its moments and here almost 40 years later I remember those two instances.

Q: Well, it is worth noting that unlike people who give in to dilemmas domestically in the United States where service will be apportioned out among police forces or medical systems or whatever. Duty officers overseas receive calls totally across the spectrum of human needs for assistance and you are available 24 hours a day. The State Department does provide some services. So, you did two years in Madrid and then what happened to you after that?

COBURN: Well, as I found out later my good friend, who was my boss in personnel, still thinking of me, had me assigned to the political section in Manila as third secretary. By the time my assignment was made and I was actually ready to depart, the Department of State in one of its many cutbacks, had abolished the position in Manila. So, I was then the property of the Far East Bureau and was assigned as vice consul to Suva in the Fiji Islands.

Q: Did you apply for that or have any idea that that was coming?

COBURN: I knew the Fiji Islands existed and when I was in personnel we used to talk about what a glorious place it must be to live on the South Pacific island under all the palm trees, but no, I hadn't thought of it as a place where I would spend a tour of duty.

Q: So, thinking you were going to Manila one day you got a notsaying.

COBURN: I never knew I was going to Manila.

Q: Oh you never, you found out later? Oh. So, in those days did they have any system because you were still a junior officer that you actually bid on things or you just?

COBURN: Your bid was on the April Fool's list because it was due in Washington on April 1st and whatever you put down bore little resemblance to whatever you got. In those days there was no communication between the field and the Department. Nowadays people call Washington at the drop of a hat.

Q: Well, they send e-mails constantly to their counselors, it's continuous process.

COBURN: We had absolutely no contact with the personnel office in Washington until the cable came through assigning me. I might just add, as a footnote on the assassination of Kennedy, of course there was no television. We didn't know what was happening. All we had was BBC radio because we couldn't follow the local Spanish radio stations. The lack of information in those days and that's not that far back was dramatic as opposed to constant information we get today. I thought that somebody in their wisdom had decided that they were broadening me by assigning me to the Fiji Islands after having been in a Western European post. We departed and now we were four because my daughter was born in Spain. My son had been born in Washington. We departed for our trip to Fiji. The best part of the two years in Fiji was getting there and getting back because the Matson Lines sailed from San Francisco. American officials had to travel on American flagged vessels. The only American flagged vessel going to the Fiji Islands was the Matson Cruise Line, which had a very small number of people and most of them over the age of 50. When we got on board with two small children, they were everybody's grandchildren. We sailed from San Francisco to Los Angeles and everybody went to Disneyland. Then we sailed from Los Angeles to Tahiti. I, as vice consul in the Fiji Islands, had responsibility for the entire Pacific Ocean from New Zealand to the California coast.

Q: How many people, how many American officers were assigned to Fiji?

COBURN: Three.

Q: There were three officers and so there was what, was there a ambassador?

COBURN: It was a British crown colony.

Q: It was a British crown colony, so in effect it was a consulate.

COBURN: It was a consulate with a consul, a vice consul, myself, who did the political and economic reporting, and then a consular officer who was a staff officer, vice consul. The difference between a staff officer and a commissioned officer was that we had the commission from the Congress to perform our functions in the traditional sense. While a staff officer did the same job, but didn't have the commission. I don't know if that distinction still exists, but at the time it did.

Q: So, no secretary, no communicator?

COBURN: There was an American secretary assigned.

Q: A secretary who also acted as a communicator?

COBURN: Well, the communication was limited.

Q: Basically unclassified?

COBURN: One-time pads. Anytime you get a classified, I'm getting ahead of my story, but anytime you got a classified cable that came in the whole staff would have to come in and take three or four hours and go through this one time pad to find out that Governor so and so was going to come through and please provide courtesy support. Nobody in Washington who sent out these classified cables realized that we didn't have any facilities to declassify or break the codes other than this tedious method of going through one by one.

Q: How did you divide the work?

COBURN: The consul, who spoke French, visited all the Francophone islands, Tahiti, New Caledonia, while I had the English speaking islands with the exception of Tonga. Tonga was a protectorate with a reigning King. So the consul kept Tonga for himself. My trips were to the Gilbert and Ellis Islands, the Solomon Islands, and the Condominium of New Hebrides. Samoa was partially an American territory and partially under the British flag. American Samoa was handled by the Department of the Interior and the rest of the island chain under the British flag was covered by our Embassy in New Zealand.

Q: So, you thought you were going to this tropical paradise thaeveryone had fantasized about during training?

COBURN: Yes.

Q: And?

COBURN: It was tropical but not quite a paradise. For one thing, Fiji was a grouping of about 300 islands. The native inhabitants were Melanesians, not Polynesians. They had been cannibals before the Methodist missionaries arrived. In appearance they are similar to the people of New Guinea and apparently have some African heritage. How they ever got from Africa to the middle of the Pacific still has anthropologists scratching their heads. Socially they were organized on a Polynesian type hierarchy because Fiji was the last reach of the Melanesians in the Pacific and is very near to the Tongan Islands where pure Polynesians inhabit. Just before the Europeans arrived in the area the sporadic warfare among the Fijians had resulted in the victory of one tribe whose chief became the senior chief of the Islands. The British, in keeping with their patterns in such cases, reinforced the structure and recognized the chiefs as the interlocutors keeping tribal land, with few exceptions from being broken up. So the Fijians had their structure maintained intact. They lived in villages under the rule of the local chiefs. Local chiefs reported to the more senior ones and the biggest chiefs met regular as a grand council under the leadership of the senior chief, the direct descendent of the warrior who had united the islands under his rule. Because the Fijians didn't see any need to work, they lived off the land, the British, in order to make the colony pay for itself, brought in Indian laborers to work in sugar cane fields that were developed. The Indians were very prolific and produced large families. They soon became local shopkeepers and dominated the local commerce, although the largest firms in the islands were owned by Australian interests. By the time we arrived, the population was almost 50/50. The Fijians were almost entirely Methodist. They were a religious people and mandated that Sunday was a day of rest. They were in church from 9 am to 2 pm and then from 5 pm to 7 pm. There was nothing to do on Sunday since everything was closed.

Q: By Fijians here you mean the Melanesian component of what waliving in Fiji?

COBURN: In Fiji, the Melanesians are called Fijians; other native born non-white were called Fiji Islanders. The white inhabitants, many of them born there, were called Europeans, even the Australians and New Zealanders. Chinese were called Chinese even though they had been born there. Society was segmented in so many ways. As I said, the Fijians were Methodist, the Indians, Hindu. The Chinese were largely Catholic. Catholic missionaries in the Pacific were usually of French nationality. The Fijians played field hockey, the Chinese played basketball and the Indians played soccer. There was no intermarriage. I never saw any mixed couples. The Fijians spoke their native language and only the senior members of the tribes spoke English so communication was a problem. Most of the Indians spoke their local dialect. When we tried to do outreach to this community, we had real trouble getting books and materials that could reach the community.

Q: Most of the Indians did not speak English?

COBURN: The shopkeepers did, but not in the country. When you got into the countryside where the people lived very primitive existences, the Fijians lived in what they called buries, which were thatched roofed huts with privies outside, no electricity. They were living as they had lived traditionally. The city, the town of Suva probably had 25,000 or 30,000 people. The pavement stopped at the city limits. There was a dirt road around Viti Levu, which was the main island. Suva was on the wet side because Suva had the best harbor for ships. On the dry side they had an international airport called Nandi and the airport when we were there was important because it was where the planes stopped for refueling on their way to Australia.

Q: Is that why, why was there a consulate there at all?

COBURN: That's a good question. I don't know.

Q: Had it been there a long time?

COBURN: It had been there since World War II. There had also been a consulate in Tahiti. In fact I think we still own property there. We tried to before, I got there to open it. The furniture, the seals, everything had been shipped to Suva, to ship to Papiete and the story that I was told was that when the exequator, which is the document that gives the consular officers their authority to issue documents in the territory, reached President De Gaulle he said why are the Americans opening a consulate in Tahiti? His staff said the property there was closed for budgetary reasons and now they have the money and they want to open it. He said, they're not going to open it there. He refused to approve, probably suspecting our official presence in Tahiti during France's testing of its nuclear devices would be a security breach. So, one of my chores was to get rid of all the furniture we had because we had two consulates' furniture, seals, documents, rules, books, what have you, in storage in our little walk up consulate on the main street of Suva Town.

The culture of the community was interesting. Visitors would come through and say it was similar to Ceylon because there was a real hierarchy. The British Governor, Sir Derek Jakeway, lived on the domain in a house on top of a hill and had a plumed hat and an official guard of Fijian warriors.

Q: What do you mean on the domain?

COBURN: The domain was the part of town where the British civiservants who managed the bureaucracy lived.

Q: So, in effect they had like a compound of their own?

COBURN: A compound in downtown and it was a hill. On the top was the governor and one level down was the chief secretary and you know, two levels down were various minions etc. The pecking order there I figured out one day was the Oxford/Cambridge people, then the expatriate Brits, then New Zealanders, then the Australians, then the Chinese, then the Fijians and then the Indians. Somewhere off were the Americans. The Australians got most of the grief of the local community because they were the merchants. They had the stores and they had the economic activities there that people resented when they thought prices were high or things weren't working. They always tended to blame the Australians. It was interesting to see the frictions among the various groups. The New Zealanders told me that they were descended from the aristocracy while Australians were descended from prisoners. That kind of feeling permeated this very small town and the longer we were there, the smaller it got because you knew most of the people who had significant jobs or social positions in the colony and they all knew you. You would see the same people at social events around town and meet them at civic events or when special ceremonies were being held. The Queen's Birthday celebration at the Governors Mansion was the top event of the year. Everyone arrived in their best clothes and the Governor and his Lady would mingle with the guests in the garden while the Fijian military band played. Most of the social life outside of homes took place at the Suva yacht club which was off limits to all but the European community, which as I said included New Zealanders, Australians and our American staff. The radio, our only station, went off the air at 10 pm after playing God Save the Queen. We had one daily newspaper of four pages. There was one movie house in which the Europeans sat upstairs in the balcony and the locals sat downstairs. It was a very segregated place where expatriates could live at a level way above what they would find in their home countries.

Q: Hot, tropical climate?

COBURN: Hot, humid and very rainy. We had a tin roof on our house and in heavy rains, you couldn't carry on a conversation.

Q: Lots of insects around?

COBURN: More than you could count. We had rats in the house and outside since the drains from the kitchen sink ran down the hill in an open trench. We had bats who loved to eat the papaya which grew around the house. We had mice, lizards, spiders, and even some mongoose imported to eat snake eggs which finished off most of the snake population and then became a menace themselves. One night in bed we heard a terrible scream coming from outside. I looked out and couldn't see anything. The next day we went out on our balcony which had two electric wires bringing power into the house. There was a dead bat which had gotten two wings on both wires and electrocuted himself. For a few days we had this dead bat looking at us. We had lizards in the house every night. We had mosquitoes since only the bedrooms were screened. The children had rashes and all sorts of infections. It was an unhealthy climate for children since they tended to run around without shoes and any cut would become infected. Getting medical attention was difficult because you would have to be screened by a general practitioner before you could get an appointment with any specialist.

Q: Were there beaches? Did people go to the beach?

COBURN: There wasn't a beach in Suva because the city's shoreline was covered with mangroves. Outside the harbor were coral reefs which kept the surf from reaching the shore. A breach in the reef allowed large ships to enter the harbor. There were beaches on the other side of the island but the nearest was 70 miles away and it took about 3 ½ hours to reach it over an unpaved and rutted road. By the time you got to the beach you were hot and dirty and the realization that you have to return the same way tended to keep us from making too many trips. Many of the members of the yacht club had private boats which they used to take them out of the harbor and down to beaches not reachable by roads. So the long term residents and the wealthy merchants had a way of getting to the beaches. I don't recall seeing any swimming pools the entire time we were there except for one small one built in the house the consul rented - it was more of a bath tub than a pool.

Q: Was there a golf course or anything like that?

COBURN: Yes, there was a nine-hole golf course on the other end of town. I took up golf there although the course wasn't very good. We also started to collect shells, which was another very active group.

Q: People played bridge, that sort of thing?

COBURN: Not that we knew about.

Q: So, this is definitely not a tropical paradise?

COBURN: No, I don't think you could consider it a tropical paradise. I have one little vignette about the place that I want to share. Since we had the only white Ford station wagon in the crown colony, everybody knew where we were any moment of the day or night. The consul had given a party. He lived in the better part of town and as we were coming home at 11:00 in the evening, our car broke down and we, my wife and I, got out and we had to flag someone down. It turned out to be a taxi. They took us home. The next day I got the car and had it towed into a garage. For weeks people wanted to know what I was doing at the insane asylum on Saturday night. You had the feeling that everybody knew who you were, where you were and what you were doing. A total lack of privacy. You weren't a movie star, but sometimes you feel like how they must feel. They never can go anywhere and be themselves because people are watching them and what they're doing.

I had the opportunity to travel, which my wife unfortunately did not except for our rest and recuperation trip, which we had to Sydney. I'll talk about that trip because it will show what happened to the children. My daughter was a cranky child. She was always crying and unhappy. As soon as we got on the plane, she was only about two years old, she was a happy child, giggling and content. We got on the plane and flew back, she got off the plane, crying. To this day, she can't stand heat.

Q: So, just to back up a second. So, as vice consul, you were in effect the number two person in the three-man deal and your duties were not consular strictly in this case. They were more generally what?

COBURN: Well, generally reporting on activities and managing our outreach programs. I represented the East West Center in Hawaii. It ran a program to bring people from the islands to Hawaii to train them in the hotel industry, for example. We thought one of the development aims of that part of the world was to get efficient hotel staff. We would identify people and the East West Center, supported by the United States government, would pay their cost of travel to and training at the center in Hawaii and then send them back. Then we had a traveling troop, sponsored by the United States Information Agency, to demonstrate American culture. We had this group that came through and played American music of the day (the '60s). I became the information officer and arranged for their performances around the island. Then as a commercial officer I had to promote American wines. We had a wine festival at a tourist resort on the dry side of the island. We invited a lot of tourist industry people from Fiji there. There were many travails to get the wine there. Then the vice consul, the consul and I tried to make some determination as to which wines we thought were the best and then presented them to the locals. They drank everything we had. It didn't matter. That was my commercial experience. Then I did what I thought was the seminal study on land tenure systems in the Fiji Islands and subsequently having sent this off to Washington I was at Nandi Airport when Senator Rusk came through on his way to a...

Q: Senator Rusk?

COBURN: Secretary Rusk. Dean Rusk, the Secretary of State, was going to a Southeast Asia Treaty Organization meeting, SEATO, in Sydney. As usual the plane had to land at Nandi for refueling. The consul and myself flew over. He had arranged for the high chief of Fiji, Ratu George, a direct descendent of the paramount chief of Fiji at the time of the annexation by the British to present a tabua to Secretary Rusk. A tabua is a whale's tooth and it's the most honored presentation that a Fijian can make. This was significant because they can't be exported out of Fiji. So, the consul arranged to have the most senior Fijian dignitary give the most honored Fijian award to Secretary of State Rusk.

I tell you this story because the secretary to Mrs. Rusk, Virginia Wallace, who was in personnel as the secretarial counselor when I was there got off the plane. I said, "Virginia, how are you?" She said, "Fine, Harry. How do you like Fiji?" I said, "Well, it's interesting." She said, "Oh, well, whatever you do, don't send him 55 pages of reports to Washington." I said, "You're three days too late." So, that was the last land tenure report I did.

Q: Did anybody ever respond to that or maybe just say we were happto get it or nothing?

COBURN: Nobody ever acknowledged it, one way or the other.

Q: Right.

COBURN: You're sitting out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean not knowing what's going on in the rest of the world, reading your four page newspaper everyday which was full of Vietnam stories. The consul used to spend a good amount of time writing letters to the paper about their editorial policy which was essentially get America out of Vietnam because you're killing too many people. We thought we would help by getting the chief political reporter of the paper on a trip to the United States, which we organized through the United States Information Agency (USIA). Off he went to the States and when he came back he was fired. The editors of the paper thought it was so funny that we didn't know his situation. We had given him a trip which they thought was a good way to get rid of him and when he was gone they cleaned out his office.

Q: Then, as part of your job you went around to all these various islands and did a little political reporting on them and the local dignitaries and so forth?

COBURN: Yes, that's right. Once a year I traveled to Tarawa in the then Gilbert Islands which was a British Colony. It is now an independent country. The local governor was from New Zealand and was a senior member of the British Colonial Service. Like many New Zealanders he had a rather cool and superior attitude. After flying for hours over the empty blue Pacific, I landed in Tarawa during a fierce rain storm and was immediately taken to the Resident Commissioners compound and put up in a Guest House, which was little more than a hut on the lawn of the Commissioner's residence. The Commissioner told me that he had organized an itinerary for me which would take me to Betio, an atoll across the lagoon where the major battle of Tarawa had taken place. The next day I would depart on a trip to a distant island of Abiang where I would see the "unspoiled" native habitat. I traveled to Betio on a launch with the Resident Commissioners wife and child which appeared to be a treat for them. There I was shown around the battlefield which was still littered with the wreckage of war. I learned that the U.S. troops were landed at low tide. Since the tides in that part of the world are severe, the marines were forced to fight their way toward the beach over several hundred yards of coral reef while being mowed down by Japanese machine guns. They said at the end of the battle there was only one palm tree left standing. The next day I was to leave on a boat for Abiang. I don't know if you have ever dealt with copra but...

Q: It is something from coconuts?

COBURN: Yes. The captain told me that I could use his cabin for the overnight trip. When I got on the boat I understood why everyone slept on the deck. The heat, the insects, the sweet smell of copra was overwhelming. The next morning when we arrived at Abiang, the natives came out to the copra boat in several outrigger canoes and escorted me to shore where my canoe was picked up in the water and carried several yards inland so I wouldn't have to get my feet wet. These people, the Gilbertese, were not Polynesians, but another race, the Melanesians, a distinctive race. They were tall, brown and wore sarongs. A British officer was present and escorted me to the meeting hall, called a marema, where over a hundred local Gilbertese were sitting on the mats on the ground awaiting my arrival. As soon as we entered, local men began to sing and dance. As opposed to the Polynesian and Fijian dances, the Gilbertese stomp their feet and hit their chests while they grunt and yell. Afterwards, I was asked to make a speech and they responded with a welcoming talk. I was then escorted around the island where I viewed their living quarters. The island was long and narrow, only about two feet above sea level. The huts were built with a thatched roof and thatching halfway up the wall for privacy. But in fact, there wasn't much privacy since the huts were all grouped together in the village. Their latrines were built over the lagoon. Life on Abiang was very basic with little in the way of infrastructure.

When I returned to Tarawa, the Commissioner's wife told me that she had planned a reception for me with the local political leaders who were going to be in Tarawa for the colony's constitutional convention but that the trip her husband planned for Abiang made that impossible. Then, I realized that the Resident Commissioner had seen my trip as being planned to coincide with this meeting and fearing U.S. intentions, had sent me on a trip to the outer reaches of the colony. Little did he realize we had no interest nor intention in interfering in the internal political affairs of that small place.

Q: You didn't know about the constitutional convention?

COBURN: No, we had no advance notice of it. Communication at that time in that part of the world was slow and incomplete. The only news from the Gilbert Islands was the local official publications which would arrive in Suva, Fiji several weeks or months after the event. The only means of contact other than mail was by cable. When I was in Tarawa, I learned that even among the islands, communication was a problem. On Sunday, while I was there, I visited the local Catholic bishop who was French as were most of the Catholic clergy. He told me of the problems he had with his priests since each one was isolated on small islands separated from each other. This put Europeans under some pressure and when he arrived he instituted weekly meetings where the priests could boat into Tarawa and spend time with each other exchanging information on how they could handle the problems they found. Since many of the French speaking priests were dealing with Gilbertese speaking islanders communication to each other in English, you can imagine the kinds of situations they found. It was interesting that the bishop's aunt, a nun, had been sent from France to the Gilberts when she was 20 years old and she spent the rest of her life living on one patch of land until she died at 98.

Q: How did you find it yourself? Here you are in this small three or four person post in Fiji. Somebody once said to me if you're going to be in a small post, it was best to be the headman of the post. Did you find that that caused a lot of feeling of pressure under that or were working relationships good?

COBURN: I've thought about this when you talked to me about my experiences. I felt one of the questions might be what was the best post you had and what was the worst post you had. I thought I really never really had a bad working relationship with any of my bosses. (End of tape)

Q: We're just talking about his experiences in Fiji and particularly of the dynamics of being in a very small post with only a few American officers. So, you were saying?

COBURN: I was saying that the consul, knowing that we had three small children and coping with some difficult housing situations, suggested that we get a weekend away. So, we went to Timbukula, which was the beach area about 70 miles from Suva and spent a weekend only to return to find that two of the children had come down with the measles. So, the consul really had a tough task. They had three children of their own. They were supportive. Dick Mann and his wife were also a nice couple.

Q: Dick Mann was the?

COBURN: The consular officer. Probably it was helpful that the consul lived on one end of town. The Manns lived on the other and we lived on a hill overlooking the harbor so we saw each other, we worked together, but we weren't in a compound where we knew what everybody was doing and when they were doing it. The secretary who was a first tour from Minnesota was in shock for the first couple of months. She was a very good secretary. She had all the skills at the time that secretaries needed. She struck up a good relationship with the Australian commissioner's secretary and they traveled together.

Travel to the other islands of the South Pacific often resulted in my seeing these major battlefields of the Second World War and hearing stories from some of the old timers about the area. The Solomon Islands was the site of the battle of Guadalcanal. After the end of the war, the capital of the territory, Honiara, was built on the battlefield. It was a strange feeling to see rusted trucks and wrecked planes by the side of the road. I was told unexploded ordinance around the town was very dangerous and several natives had been injured by explosions. Any brush fire exploded long forgotten shells. This almost 20 years after the battle. The local people were Melanesians and lived a simple life. One of their practices was to bury their dead at sea. As a result the waters around Honiara were full of sharks and it was unsafe to enter the water.

I had the interesting experience of being the house guest of the British Governor who kindly offered to host a reception for me. The time of the reception was 7 pm. At 6:50, we went into the gardens. You could see the headlights of the cars as they drove up. At precisely 7 pm all the guests arrived and at precisely 8 pm, they all left. The Governor used the opportunity to ask me about American customs. He was stuck by the fact that we didn't say "sir" when talking to persons more senior. He also could not figure out why we used first names so easily. He told me he would never use a first name unless he had been properly introduced and thought the other was on his level. This remote part of the British Empire still carried on the customs long after much of them had fallen into disuse in the rest of the world.

The next day I met the Catholic bishop, who was German. He told me he had been a missionary during World War II and was stationed on an island up country from Guadalcanal. He learned, in the third year of the war, that the Japanese were going to arrest him because he was a foreigner. He told me he could see the ship coming to pick him up when suddenly it turned around. He found out later that the battle of Guadalcanal had begun and the Japanese commander recalled all his troops. He was able to survive the war without ever dealing with the Japanese and subsequently was made bishop. His cathedral was a Quonset hut left over from World War II. In fact, all the air strips in that part of the world had been built by the Americans and were still being used.

Q: So, you went around and you did reports about your encounters and so forth and you sent them off to Washington. Was there ever any feedback about any of these things? Did anybody say to you would you follow up on this point or that or good report or no, this isn't what we want? Did you ever hear from them?

COBURN: No.

Q: What other islands did you visit?

COBURN: The New Hebrides was one of the more interesting places because it was a condominium, a joint rule by France and the United Kingdom. There was a French resident commissioner and an English commissioner and I had to pay courtesy calls on both officials. When I landed at Villa, the capital, I was met by a member of the French colonial service and a member of the English colonial service. They gave me a program for my visit which included official calls on both commissioners. The British commander lived on the island in the middle of the harbor at the top of a hill. In the islands, the chief executive officer always lived on the top of the highest hill, it seemed. To arrive at the residence, I had to climb 189 steps in the tropical heat. It was hard to see how a family could live in such a location obtaining supplies, entertaining, and carrying on business when every trip meant a boat ride from the port to the island and then a climb to the top of the hill. The French commissioner also lived on a hill on the other side in the town, but at least you could arrive at his residence by car. Both men offered a formal dinner for me with their local staff and contacts. The clash of cultures was significant. At the French commissioner's dinner, the food was excellent and the guests were all turned out in their Sunday best but the conversation at the table was in French and very lively. At the British commissioner's dinner, the food was standard English fare and the conversation was in English but very strained. Of course most of the guests were weary from the climb.

The next day I departed on a trip to a mission station where I was entertained by an English Presbyterian missionary who was translating the bible into the local language. The people in the New Hebrides were Melanesian, a similar race to those in the Solomon Islands. It seemed to be that the level of development in the New Hebrides was much superior to that of the Solomon Islands, perhaps the competition between France and England had something to do with the level of infrastructure that had been developed.

Q: Was there tensions between the populations of Fiji when you werthere, was it noticeable?

COBURN: Yes, it was very noticeable.

Q: How did they, I mean, did they have gangs that brawled with one another?

COBURN: No, but they did it in their legislature. The legislative body would have debates on the forthcoming constitutional arrangements, which would prepare Fiji for its independence. The Indians used to make speeches about monkeys and baboons referring to the Fijians. The Fijians would make speeches about rats referring to the Indians. There was never any violence. But, there was always the feeling that it was just below the surface and that it wouldn't take much to start it. The Fijians were led by an Oxford trained physician, Ratu Mara. He was a senior chief, number two in the hierarchy. The British had spotted him a long time ago as a comer, a young man who was intelligent and who came from the right background. They'd given him all the training and education and exposure to prepare him to be the first prime minister, which he subsequently was. Most of the Fijians were still in tribal structure and under control of the chiefs. Minor chiefs were under control of the senior chiefs and Ratu George was the most senior in prestige, but he wasn't very well educated and wasn't very well thought of. Ratu Mara, the number two, was very sophisticated and mixed easily with any group of people and was very highly thought of by Europeans who were there. Basically there was the Indian party (the federation), and the Fijian party (the alliance).

Q: Just to jump ahead, but not to spend so too much time on it, so what happened recently when they had all the trouble in Fiji I think it was technically the Indians won an election and the Fijians refused to accept the outcome. That's what precipitated all of that long several months government imbroglio about.

COBURN: Yes, it's happened twice. The Indian party won the election but, then, the army composed of Fijians overthrew the Indian dominated government. Then the Australians get involved because the stevedores, in Australia, who were left leaning, refused to load anything for ships going to Fiji and they tried to browbeat the Fijians into accepting democracy, but the Fijians were never going to accept any constitutional regime which didn't leave them in control. In the meantime, the Indian population kept growing. The upper class Indians would go back to India to marry.

Q: Did they have the, do the Fijian Indians now have a large part of the economy in their hands?

COBURN: Yes.

Q: So, you were how many years in Fiji?

COBURN: Just under two.

Q: Just under two and then what happened?

COBURN: Then.

Q: So, this brings us up to about what year. You're now finished in Fiji. You got there in January of '66.

COBURN: We left in November of '67.

Q: Okay. Going to what sort of an assignment at that point?

COBURN: Well, at this time the State Department had finally developed the conal system that we all had to be either political, economic, consular or administrative officers. In their wisdom after all those fine reports I sent in, they determined that I was an economic officer, but I didn't have any economic training in my record. They sent me to the Foreign Service Institute (FSI). I was told to report in January of 1968. We came back from the tropics and landed in Washington in January of 1968 where the temperature was about 80 degrees colder than we had experienced and we had no clothes for the children. They immediately placed me in this statistical and economic projections course. I was looking for a house in the Washington area. We needed to find schools for the children and purchase clothing for the winter. I had several difficult weeks trying to get my brain attuned to the economic studies. I wasn't really interested in statistical analysis, had no background in it and found the weather, the work and the commute very difficult. Also, the pace of living in Washington after two years on a tropical island was very unsettling.

Q: How long a program was that?

COBURN: I think it lasted six months. I remember I was at FSI, which had moved from the garages of Arlington Towers into a high rise building in the Rosslyn area of Arlington. Martin Luther King was assassinated. 1968 was a terrible year from all points of view.

Q: Riots in Washington after the assassination of King?

COBURN: Looking from the window of our classroom you could see across the city of Washington and on that day we saw black smoke rising from various parts of the city from the riots. Rumors went right through the student body that the city was burning and that gangs of blacks were on the loose in the city causing mayhem. Fear was prevalent and immediately everyone tried to call home and found that the lines were jammed. I learned later that my parents tried to call from New York and couldn't get a dial tone. We were all sent home as classes were canceled for the rest of the day. But when I got on the road I found that people were driving without any attention being paid to the lights or signs. Everyone appeared to want to get home as quickly as possible and a real feeling of panic was evident. In addition to the murders of King and Robert Kennedy, the Catholic Church was also in turmoil. Coming from the Fiji Islands we were not current with the changes that had happened and the fall out from the Papal Ban on birth control was especially shattering. In our local parish there were campaigns to throw pennies in the collection basket as a form of protest. When the bishops letter was read from the pulpit on the subject some parishioners got up and walked out. My children were completely twisted around. "What is happening, Daddy?" I didn't know what was happening myself.

Q: Yes, it's important to remember, isn't it, that in a place like Fiji where there's no cable television, no real sense. I mean I suppose you could get the New York Times six months later if you saw it, or if you ever got it.

COBURN: No, we didn't have any current news. We had official government publications and the local 4 page newspaper. We didn't get any magazines that I recall. They were out of date by the time they arrived.

Q: So, you had a real culture shock when you came back?

COBURN: We did. It was just walking into a world that had changed dramatically because we had been overseas since 1963. Fiji was completely cut off from what people in the U.S. were dealing with.

Q: So you had a six month economic course in the middle of all this turmoil. Did you have an assignment ready at the end of that that you knew or did they just put you in the course?

COBURN: Well, what happened again. I don't know the exact timing of the assignment, but the desk officer for the South Pacific Islands was a civil servant who was retiring. She said would you be interested in being the desk officer and I said yes I would. So, she put my name in the hopper for the job, but Pierre Graham, who was in the personnel operations division when I was there was the deputy director of the international organization office in the United Nations affairs. He got my name and he assigned me to IO to do the UN development program backup (UNDP). I didn't want to do it. I wanted to be a political officer in East Asia. I thought that was my career track. At the time conventional wisdom was to get to the top, you had to climb the political officer ladder in the geographic bureaus. So, I felt it was a perfect job for me.

Q: The same as it is today.

COBURN: Same as it is today. I was perfectly placed, experienced, and ready to go, but I had no options. Nobody was fighting for me.

Q: So, Mr. Graham was pressing for your assignment to IO.

COBURN: Mr. Graham was pressing for my assignment to IO. I was looking around for someone to do the battle so I would go to East Asia and finding no one I acquiesced and was assigned in June of 1968 to be the United Nations Development Program officer in Washington for a period of two years.

Q: On that note, we'll stop for now.

COBURN: All right.

Q: Today is July 23, 2002. We left off at the end of the previous session with Harry being assigned to the IO bureau in the State Department. What did that entail and what were the main things that you worked on there?

COBURN: My job was to be the desk officer for the United Nations Development Program which is the part of the United Nations that does the assistance to developing countries. I supported our mission to the UNDP in the ECOSOC [Economic and Social Council of the United Nations]. There were meetings held in New York and then in the summer ECOSOC met in Geneva, Switzerland. I had to prepare the papers. I had to do the backstopping for the delegation to the United Nations in New York and in the summer was fortunate to travel to Geneva for the annual meetings. At that time Paul Hoffman was the director of the UNDP and he was an American. We were the major contributors to the organization and so our delegation had a significant role to play during the meetings.

Q: What kind of, when you say major, what kind of percentage would you say it was?

COBURN: Probably in the 60% range.

Q: How much money were we talking about in those days, any idea?

COBURN: No, I don't remember a specific figure but it was in the millions of dollars. We were the main supporter, as I said. The UNDP was directed by a council and we were permanent member of the council.

Q: How many members did it have?

COBURN: I would say it must have been between 15 and 20. Our ambassador to the ECOSOC Council was a political appointee, a Christian minister from the Mid-West. I remember during one session of the ECOSOC meeting when he gave, on his own, a speech talking about taking weapons of the world and destroying them all and using the money saved for development. The senior advisor to this ambassador was an AID (Agency for International Development) officer and he was in a state of shock as he listened to the speech. Later a representative from the World Bank approached our delegation and asked if that was a formal position of the United States. The AID officer replied that the comments were important to the Ambassador and should be taken in that context. The next morning there was an urgent cable from the Department of State requesting information on who had authorized it. I remember the morning staff meeting where it was discussed. The Ambassador turned to the professionals in the meeting and asked us all to "go off and draft a response to it." We pondered what to do and one of the senior State Department officers present said "the only way we can answer the message is to misinterpret the question and send back answers that have nothing to do with the point of the incoming message." Several telephone calls followed and eventually the moment passed. Later I heard that same Ambassador went off to Canada without informing our embassy and gave another speech that raised questions about U.S. policy. Shortly thereafter he resigned and went off to Kent State University where he became president. At one point in my association with him, he had asked me to join his staff in New York. I investigated the housing situation and it became clear that with three small children, we would not be able to live there on the salary I was being paid at the time.

Q: The U.S. government did not provide any money in those days for people to live in New York?

COBURN: Not at the lower levels. You had to find your own housing.

Q: As always, it is pretty expensive.

COBURN: Very expensive to find a place on Manhattan Island and as United Nations meetings usually went on into the early hours of the morning when the detail negotiations and agreed drafts took place, I wanted to be able to live near the office. In the '60s, there was no incentive pay nor additional pay for high cost areas. So, it didn't work out although the thought of working in New York and being part of the U.S. effort at the United Nations was very enticing. At the end of the two year assignment period I was in international organization affairs and someone came to me and said that there was an opening at the Food and Agricultural Office of Representation in Rome and would I be interested in that. I always wanted to go to Rome. It sounded like an interesting job. So, I said, I would. At the same time the head of the office had left so another man from our office who was an ex-FBI agent who had come into the State Department and was handling the food and agriculture desk of the Bureau of the International Organization Affairs was named to be the permanent representative to FAO in Rome. I was named the deputy permanent representative. We went off about the same time to be part of the U.S. Mission to the FAO. In Rome we had the embassy which was represented to the government of Italy. We had a political officer in the embassy who was the personal representative of the president to the Pope and then we have this office that was the official representation of the United States to the Food and Agricultural Organization.

Q: So, now what year did you go to Rome?

COBURN: We went to Rome in 1970.

Q: In 1970. So, there was at that time there was no apart from a political officer in the embassy, there was no formal representation with thVatican?

COBURN: No, that didn't happen until President Reagan. The U.S. had a personal representative. Henry Lodge was the first personal representative to the Pope. The Embassy political officer provided support to the personal representative.

Q: Henry Cabot Lodge?

COBURN: Henry Cabot Lodge.

Q: But that person didn't live in Rome. That was just kind of ahonorary title.

COBURN: He came over periodically to pay his respects to the Pope.

Q: He wasn't in other words, he wasn't employed as a full time person in Washington to represent the U.S. It was more of an honorific with some occasional meetings and so forth?

COBURN: Right, but the day to day work was done by an embassiofficer in Rome who had the contacts over at the Vatican.

Q: That's interesting, we'll come back to that. How big was thmission to the food and agricultural organization?

COBURN: We had two State Department officers and one Agency for International Development Officer and two secretaries, one from State and one from AID, so a sum total of five people.

Q: What did the work consist of? I mean what were we doing there?

COBURN: Well, we had several levels of activity. One was the financial because once again we were the main contributor to FAO and we had the Geneva group, which was the representatives from the major donor countries. Since the State Department budget was the source of money that supported our contributions to FAO, the State Department was the representative on the Geneva group. We would meet with the UK and France, Germany and Japan and other major donors and try and enforce some disciplines on the FAO administration so that they would use the money wisely.

Q: What was their mission? COBURN: The mission of?

Q: FAO.

COBURN: FAO was and is that part of the United Nations with the expertise and mission of helping developing countries develop their agriculture. It would be the repository of expertise in farming techniques, fertilization, crop improvements, clean water, all of the kinds of things necessary to help agricultural countries maximize their ability to feed their populations and export their surpluses.

Q: Did FAO contract this out or in effect did they have permanenpeople on its staff that would travel overseas for six months or a year?

COBURN: Both. There was a corps of experts at the headquarters in Rome and located overseas in major developing countries under the umbrella of the UNDP. The UNDP representative was the chief of mission for the UN in each country and on the staff would be representatives from the other specialized agencies; World Health Organization (WHO), International Labor Organization (ILO), etc. When there was not expertise in the staff, FAO could contract out assistance with universities or research institutions around the world to provide the specific knowledge needed. FAO also managed the World Food Program, which was specifically organized to supply surplus food from developed countries to developing countries needing help or to assist in providing emergency food stuffs for national emergencies around the world. FAO also served as a meeting point for experts to discuss problems regarding agriculture. For example, we had a whole series of meetings on specific food items where experts from the industries would meet and discuss common problems. Usually our office in the embassy backstopped these delegations providing support for attending the meetings, preparing reports, and providing social engagements for delegations. For some meetings such as the annual jute meeting and the citrus meeting, I would be the official U.S. representative attending the meetings under instruction from Washington.

Q: Did these meetings all take place in Rome?

COBURN: All these meetings were in Rome with experts from various countries. What they were trying to do was harmonize the trade in these commodities working together to overcome problems that they saw, getting access to markets, trying to develop a process so one country wasn't dumping its surpluses while another country was trying to find a market. These meetings would go on almost constantly.

Q: Did anything ever come of these meetings?

COBURN: Sometimes you wondered because a lot of it was pro forma. You would have a meeting. You would have people come from all over to make speeches, they would prepare documents and they would go away. There was a lot of interaction among the people and over time as relationships developed, the people in Pakistan and the people in India and the people in Africa who were in these areas got to know each other and would share information. In that sense things changed and developed and FAO had its policies of trying to promote agricultural developments of sharing technologies, sharing equipment that would help in these various areas.

Q: How many people would you say worked at FAO, not just the American mission, but how big was it as an entity in Rome?

COBURN: It was large. It was a building that I would say housed several thousand people. It became something of a patronage, dumping ground where people just were taken care of. There was difficulty in finding hardworking, knowledgeable people in some of these areas. In fact my predecessor retired into FAO as associate protocol officer. He was very happy because he liked to live in Rome. The tendency I think was for a lot of people to retire in FAO. Part of the problem we had in both UNDP and in FAO was in pushing our agenda to make FAO a more efficient organization. We were thwarted by representatives from underdeveloped countries, who would make elaborate and emotional speeches about the poor and suffering in their countries. In one case I recall an Argentinean who made a very vitriolic talk about the suffering his people had to undergo because of the greed of developed countries. Of course, he was very well groomed and after his speech was driven off in his Mercedes. In many cases representatives would defend FAO against our efforts at reform only subsequently to be hired as staff members by the organization they were supposed to be governing. It was always a struggle to make any progress with such an unruly body of countries, all with their own agenda and many with representatives who acted on their own, rather than their countries, behalf.

Q: How did it come to be located in Rome?

COBURN: When the specialized agencies were established, many countries made an effort to have them established in their countries. France offered space to the Educational and Cultural Organization, Canada for the Civil Aeronautics Organization, and Switzerland for the International Labor Organization. After World War II when the specialized agencies were organized, countries saw these groups as revenue producing sites. Meetings would fill hotel space and provide business for restaurants and employment for citizens. There was also the "prestige" factors as being the headquarters for an international organization. The Italians found there were certain downsides because the FAO employee store sold more cigarettes, tax free, then could be smoked by the population of Rome. The same was true for hard liquor and beer. So tax revenue was being lost by the FAO staff members who used their access to secure these items.

Q: They have full duty, free privileges and so forth, yes?

COBURN: Yes, there was full diplomatic status for the senior staff. The other interesting part of this whole operation was the pulling and tugging between the State Department representative and the Department of Agriculture representative as to who was the senior representative to the FAO. My boss felt that international relations was a function of the Department of State and he, as the Permanent Representative to FAO, was the contact point. The Agricultural representative felt that he was the expert on agricultural matters and the most knowledgeable U.S. official on the operations of the FAO. During my time in Rome, these two men engaged in a constant battle to be the top man. An additional factor was that the U.S. agricultural attache in Rome had originally been the Dutch agricultural representative in Washington. Subsequently he became an American citizen and was assigned to Rome as agricultural attache. His classmate back in Holland ended up being the director general of FAO. As a result, there were so many lines and cross lines during the general meetings of FAO that it was difficult to keep track of who was dealing with whom. I found it interesting to speculate on what agendas were being followed since the personal intrigues were quite complicated.

Q: As policy issues, I don't know if you can remember any examples of, can you give an example of where or anything you particularly remember that an issue that had a variety of interplays to an odd outcome. I mean you say they were trying to harmonize markets and so forth, but I mean in other words, where might Agriculture and State actually technically clash apart from the prestige issues of who's the chief representative today. Did they really differ seriously on some issues?

COBURN: I think only when it impacted on money. The Department, as an organization had no knowledge or expertise in agricultural activities, and in many aspects it really couldn't affect American exports of grains or other agricultural products. The senators and congressmen from farm states were very keen on pushing to get those advantages for their farmers. I can't remember specifically at the time any crisis that put Agriculture and State, as organizations, head to head. It was mainly the personalities that I carry as a history of how we did things. The position papers were always prepared in Washington and coordinated between State and Agriculture before the meetings. We always had position papers and most of that was done as it should have been done. It was only in the nitty gritty when we're trying to do the draft reports at the end of the session when there was usually conflict between developing and developed countries as to what the commitments would be vis a vis the developing countries. People were meeting late in the evenings trying to craft language that would cover disagreements so that they could come back with a final report that would be acceptable to all. I can't give you any specific instances of crises.

Q: Isn't there always this in a tension that your one part of the international system is pushing agricultural development in all these countries and yet another part within each country including our own naturally does not want the result of this agricultural development to be to displace the own commodities that it itself produces? It's a dilemma. Obviously it goes on forever, doesn't it? You encourage somebody to grow some kind of citrus somewhere where they have a good climate, but then obviously the people that grow citrus in the United States don't want their product displaced by a less expensive product coming from the Third World.

COBURN: Yes, I think that's true. There's always that displacement problem in developing a crop. We came across this when I was later in a narcotics program, trying to find substitution for drug crops. What impact did that have on the world markets in various commodities? So, all of these are factored into what you were trying to do. There's always a lot of pushing and tugging that goes on. In the end it's usually the market that solves the problem. You can sit around and make these determinations, but if a low cost producer can come forward with a product he's going to drive the high cost producer out of the market.

Q: Except for something like sugar, right?

COBURN: Yes, or in steel or in other places where you put trade barriers. These things were issues for UNCTAD (the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development), which is another UN group, that was also in Geneva and sometimes impacted on what we were doing.

Q: Tell me again the difference between what FAO did in Rome and what went on in Geneva that you went back and forth to Geneva for?

COBURN: Well, Geneva was the site of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. In the United Nations structure, you'd have the Security Council which handles political affairs and you have an Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) which supposedly handles everything else. So, there was parity when the UN was organized, but most people only hear about the Security Council.

On the ECOSOC agenda for the summer meetings in Geneva, there were several agenda items but the one that we were specifically responsible for was the United Nations Development Office and that would set the policies for the activities of the specialized agencies of which FAO was one. The FAO itself thought of itself as semi-independent. It didn't really want to take any guidance from anybody else. When I was in UNDP one of the projects was a study by Sir Robert Jackson who was an Australian. His report called the UNDP a dinosaur without a brain which I remember got Paul Hoffman, the head of UNDP, unhappy because it sounded like he didn't know what he was doing. The thrust was that there was this great weight of money that was operating without any clear direction because the UN system was decentralized. I read President Roosevelt wanted a decentralized United Nations because he felt if it was too centralized, and you had the wrong person running it, then a lot of harm could be done. But if you set up independent power centers, they would always, like the Congress and the executives, be measuring each other and balancing against each other. So, while you have inefficiency and waste you might have in the end a better operating system. It was the argument that you can make. Jackson's argument was that this system was so inefficient and wasteful that it wasn't accomplishing anything, except giving a lot of people high paying jobs in the system.

Nothing's changed. It still as far as I know operates the same way. The UNDP does some good work. The FAO does some good work. World Food Program does some good work. Could it be done more efficiently under a more effective organization and structure, sure.

Q: UNDP doesn't have offices in every country, at least I don't think so. Does it tend to have like regional offices?

COBURN: Right.

Q: So, if they have a regional office, is it just the people who are permanently in that office that in effect go around and give advice and so forth? Or do they then bring in experts separately in effect on contracts to advise how to grow more corn here or more oranges there? I mean is that a fair description?

COBURN: Yes. That is. They bring people in from university. They bring experts from business. They have a whole series of activities that they support. If the local staff, because they need somebody who knows about hybrid corn, they would find somebody who is an expert and give them a contract and send them over for six months or a year to do the work to help the local people learn the techniques and technologies.

Q: So, how many years did you do this in Rome?

COBURN: Let's see, how many years did I do that in Rome? I did that.

Q: You went there in '70 I think you said?

COBURN: Yes, that was four years.

Q: '70 to '74.

COBURN: Right.

Q: Basically doing the same sort of thing all the way through?

COBURN: Yes, we were of the embassy in Rome, but not really part of it.

Q: I was going to say, how did you find that relationship worked?

COBURN: The embassy in Rome was so big that I don't think they probably were too aware that we were there. The ambassador was Graham Martin at the time and subsequently he was our ambassador in Vietnam. I had occasion to see him once or twice. He was a very strong leader. The Deputy Chief of Mission was Well Stabler who was a very effective Foreign Service Officer. Occasionally when they had the large staff meetings in the Embassy, I would go and sit there and listen to what everybody in the embassy was doing, but there was very little direct contact between our office and their office. Our contacts were mostly with Washington, with instructions and people coming to FAO. We had no real contact with the political and economic sections. We did have contact with the agricultural attache because, of course, he was always around because of his friendship with the director general of FAO. Normally you wouldn't have thought that would have happened, but that was because of the personal relationship at that time.

Q: Did the Department train you in Italian before you went there since it was not an assignment in a way to Italy?

COBURN: No, they didn't. They just dropped me into Rome and said God speed. The embassy at that time had no housing and so they just said, go find something and you'll have a housing allowance.

Q: Did you work administratively under the embassy rather than ieffect through your own FAO mission?

COBURN: Yes, the local personnel office and the admin officprovided us with support, which was reimbursed from the IO account.

Q: Did you take Italian while you were there on your own?

COBURN: I did. The embassy had classes and so I started at scratch in the embassy and took the class the whole time I was there. I faithfully tried to learn Italian. I had Spanish. In fact when we first got there Spanish, which is similar, but not exactly the same, helped us get our first apartment because we had to go around looking when we could to find a place to stay.

Q: People don't realize that there were small children of course.

COBURN: Oh yes. In fact the day the third day we were there my youngest was three years old got something in his eye that required an operation to extract it. It turned out to be a piece of metal that had been embedded in his eyeball. This was one of the problems of settling in and we didn't know where to go or how to do it. It was pretty tough going until we got settled.

Q: So, you spent four years in Rome working with the Food anAgricultural organization. Then what happened?

COBURN: Right. Then strangely enough as my tour was grinding to a close, there was no word on any assignment. My boss, who had arrived at the same time, told me that he was going to be reassigned back to Washington. He said, "What's the word on your assignment?" I said, "I haven't heard anything." We had people coming through periodically who supposedly were giving us guidance on our next assignment. They would always come through and then nothing would ever happen. I finally called Washington. My personnel officer said that there was an opening coming up in Vienna at their office for International Atomic Energy and we want you to go there. I thought, oh learning another language, German, and another office that's part of an embassy, but not part of an embassy probably just like the one in Rome where you have to do everything yourself and cope as best as you can. I said, well, I don't know.

Just at that time I got a call from my old boss in personnel, Bob Gordon, who was the Consul General in Florence and he said that his deputy had been forced to curtail his assignment due to family problems and would I be interested in going to Florence. I said, yes, but I didn't think the personnel system in Washington would be agreeable to sending someone from Rome to Florence. It would have been different with Rome to Vienna because that was considered IO and if you go into IO you become an IO officer and they transfer you around, but your career probably ends as a middle grade officer because it wouldn't be competitive for other senior assignments. Bob had a serious medical problem, which caused him to lose his eyesight, and by the time he was assigned to Florence he was legally blind. I think Bob wanted somebody that he knew to be his deputy. He told me that he was going back to Washington and that I shouldn't do anything until he contacted me. I think what happened is he went back to Washington and spoke with the Under Secretary for Management or Director General of the Foreign Service and made the plea for the need for someone he knew he could trust to be deputy for the remainder of his tour. The call came through that I could go either to Florence or Vienna. I said Florence. That's what happened and we went along to Florence to spend the next two years.

Q: So your Italian was good enough by then?

COBURN: Yes. At the time we were assigned to Florence, in 1974 to 1976, it was a curious situation because the embassy had prohibition on any contacts with the communist party. The situation in Italy at the time was dominated by the fear that the communists would gain power. This fear had been present since 1948.

Q: I was going to say, did they have that prohibition since 1948 or for some reason had it just come in recently in the '70s?

COBURN: It had always been. In fact when I was in Rome in 1994, for the first time in history the ambassador met with the head of the communist party.

Q: No, I remember, we'll talk about that later. That's a fascinating turn. In other words, doesn't it seem strange though that here is the party, which is one of the two or three biggest political parties in the country.

COBURN: It was the biggest.

Q: Yes, and you can't have any contact with them. I mean wasn't that?

COBURN: It was odd.

Q: I mean was that really a function in effect a hangover from the McCarthy period in the United States, that to be safe the Department would or was it a function of their analysis of domestic Italian politics? They absolutely did not want to give any shred of legitimacy or attention to the kind of fear that that would somehow be misinterpreted in the broader Italian political circles?

COBURN: I think you put your finger on it. I think that was it. The Italians were so unsure of themselves politically. They had a rough patch in the Second World War. They had come out as a country that changed sides. So, the political class, which was eternal, but very extensive, read the palm leaves everyday as to what was going on. There was no strength. In fact after Mussolini had dominated Italy, it was almost politically correct not to be very strong. They looked at the United States as the guarantor of their liberties, at least the non-communist political structure did, and any sign that we were considering the alternative of a left-wing government in Italy would have sent them all running to the hills and it probably would have happened overnight. You know governments in Italy lasted I think an average of something like eight months. They were always shuffling cabinet portfolios.

Q: Although the country itself of course went on to bigger and better things constantly.

COBURN: The country was detached from the political square dance. The political infighting didn't have much relationship with what was happening in the wider world. Deals were made. Activities were performed. People lived their lives.

Q: The economy more or less prospered, huh?

COBURN: They did prosper because few paid attention to all the laws that were passed. They were unevenly enforced. It was a joke among some that if you wanted something done it was who you knew and many times the "Bustarella," the little envelope with the money in it, was passed. That got things done. So, the country was unhealthy because it operated on several levels. In other words, again, like at FAO nobody understood what was happening unless you were really plugged in. Then you could get things done. I had several jobs in the consulate. The consular ones were the most memorable. One I remember was sending home a body of a boy who fell off the Leaning Tower of Pisa which was a tragic situation. Then I had another case of a body found in the Arno River, another American. We called the parents. They said they didn't want anything to do with the body, "Just dispose of it any way you can. We're not going to pay for it." I had the USIA side of it, too, which was bringing over distinguished American lecturers to influence the local university. The region of Tuscany and the city of Florence were under communist political rule and had been since the war, which meant that our reporting was rather limited. The only people we could talk to were people who would never have a role in government because these areas always voted red, never white.

Q: Yet supposedly from my limited memory of it, the places that the communists controlled were apparently more or less sufficiently administered and not, I don't know how to put it. Not downgraded by being governed by somebody with a socialist or communist ideology. I mean the economies didn't stop functioning or anything.

COBURN: No.

Q: So, how do you explain that kind of situation?

COBURN: Well, first of all I think it was that the communists, as opposed to the ruling Christian Democratic Party, had a role of showing that they could run things more efficiently and effectively.

Q: Perhaps more honestly perhaps?

COBURN: More honestly. The Christian Democratic Party was tainted by corruption by nepotism and these were well known to the Italian public. The only reason the Christian Democratic Party was successful in its long life of political dominance in Italy was the fear of many of the church going Italians about a communist takeover. So, they kept this system in place and the communists who were traditionally strong in the anti-clerical parts of Italy in Bologna and in Tuscany tried to show that they could run efficient and effective administrations. They could pick up the garbage, bring in electricity, repair the roads and do these kinds of things which said this is how we will rule Italy should we ever come to power nationally. The more I traveled these areas, the more I realized that they, in many ways were similar to the Christian Democratic Party. If you wanted to get a government job in a city or in the region you had to vote the right way and they would take care of people that they thought were supporters. They did the same thing, but they did it more efficiently and effectively than the Christian Democrats, who were busy tearing each other apart. The communists had a discipline in their party that meant that number one is number one and number two is number two. In the Christian Democratic Party there were like 12 or 14 bosses from different parts of Italy and they were always jockeying. They were like dukes jockeying for power while the communists had one king in charge. So, they had a more effective way of managing their party members.

Q: How did the communist ideology manifest itself apart from providing efficiency which in theory anybody could do apart from ideology if you could do it? How did it reflect itself? Did they provide more social benefits? Did they tax more? Did they try to level incomes in some way? Was it noticeable?

COBURN: They were a workers party and they fought to give more benefits and protect workers jobs. This meant that the whole country was bound up within rather rigid employment rules. You could not fire people, you could not change work hours, you could not do any kind of activities that would threaten the livelihood of the workers; in effect, a guaranteed lifetime employment for people. The communists fought to increase social benefits, vacation times, health benefits, etc. The schooling was effected in having open enrollment at the university so anyone who wanted could get an education at a very low cost. They also had developed a whole series of support activities, which they called unity festivals. Every year in Florence and I think all over the country the communist party would run these fairs where they would bring in political speakers and entertainers. There would be several days of activities of music, dancing, food and people would make contributions to these unity festivals which would go into the party's treasury. So, being a member of the communist party was in many ways like a member of the Catholic church. You had your parish hall, which was the communist hall. You could go read the newspapers and have a cup of coffee, talk to your friends and then you had the parades. They were always celebrating the war time partisan activities and many of the partisans were communists. But more as the years went on more people claimed to have been partisans and they would have these great rallies and they would talk about the heroes and the rebellion against fascism. So, a lot of it was theater.

Q: Why did Tuscany as you said have a tradition of anti-clericalism? Why would you say that? It came from there; they didn't have it in other parts of Italy?

COBURN: Central Italy once formed part of the papal states. The papal states extended as far as Bologna and the people who ran the papal states were often inept and in many cases corrupt. So, they had a definite anti-clerical attitude in Tuscany and Emilia Romagna, which is the province, that Bologna is in. You know, grandfather was anti-clerical, so the son was anti-clerical and the child was anti-clerical. There were church going people in all these places, but the majority voted for the communists.

Q: Now there was separately though a very big Italian socialisparty right?

COBURN: Well, it wasn't that big, but it was in the middle so that it could play a game between the left and the right. The left in Italy split several times and even the communists had split to their left. We had a whole panoply of parties, but at the time the socialists had the swing vote so they were able give a lot more influence in the government than the roles they could play from their actual size.

Q: In addition to the non-contact with the communists and those to the left of them, you also had to avoid contact with people on the far right, is that right? Because there was a kind of holdover inheritor very right wing party, too, I think.

COBURN: There was, yes, but in our part of Italy, Tuscany, they were hardly visible. They were more prominent in the south which is more conservative than the north. We had few right wing politicians. I don't recall being aware of their presence. The Christian Democrats were basically the people that we talked to and they were always worried about the communist takeover. They would say they need more American assistance, they need more help, you need to do more to prevent the communists from coming, etc.

Q: What does that mean assistance and help?

COBURN: Money.

Q: Right, which would have to be given under some other guise.

COBURN: We had various programs. We'd take people off to the United States to train them and bring scholars to Italy to discuss America.

Q: Cultural activities.

COBURN: I remember one specifically who came during the Vietnam War period. Any American who came to Italy was forced to respond to our activities in Vietnam. This particular professor said, "Well, America has learned how to lose because of Vietnam which is something that Italians have had a great deal of experience with." It did not go over well. We had some of those moments when we were dealing with these visitors.

Q: So you worked the consular side and then you worked the political side, but of course the main, to use the word, the main substantive issues were work in the embassy?

COBURN: Yes. The embassy staff would come up periodically. They would tell us things that they wanted us to do or if there was a conference. Usually the political officers would come. So, we'd go with them, but they would take the lead and do the reporting on it. Our reporting was mainly talking to the DC and Socialist secretaries.

Q: DC being Christian Democrat?

COBURN: Christian Democrat political chiefs who would discuss the local and political situation. Then there was some economic reporting. We'd prepare an annual shoe report we had to do reporting on the various wines of Tuscany. We had some interesting people who lived there. I remember one night the Gordons who always entertained very well had high profile people at their parties. I sat next to the ex-queen of Romania who talked about Sophie and Frederika, Sophie being the queen of Spain and Frederika being the queen of Greece. You could find people like that in Florence. We had a lot of counts and barons who had wineries and were always engaged in the social set. It was a bit of a walk back in history. Then we had I Tatti, where Barenson had his villa.

Q: Bernard Barenson, the famous art critic?

COBURN: Exactly, I think I Tatti was eventually given to Harvard University. It is now operating as an art center for Tuscany. So, we had a lot of cultured people in the area and interesting people, plus tons and tons of tourists. The consulate was always besieged with people losing things.

Q: You also, did you cover San Marino then?

COBURN: Yes.

Q: Say a few words about the sovereign republic of San Marino.

COBURN: I'm glad you mentioned that because I was told that I was accredited to the sovereign republic of San Marino and I would have to present my credentials on a certain date when the chiefs of state, the co-regents, had their swearing in. This was every six months. The government changed every six months. The day I was supposed to go to San Marino which is on a mountaintop on the Adriatic side of Italy, the Gordons were in Rimini on the coast doing some business so they said, well, we're going to be there and we'd like you to join us for lunch.

Q: Be there at San Marino?

COBURN: At Rimini.

Q: Oh, at Rimini.

COBURN: Which is just down the mountain from San Marino. We were at this long lunch and I kept looking at my watch knowing that time was getting very short and finally I said I'm afraid I have to go because I have to be in San Marino at 3:00. This was around 2:15. We got in the car and my wife was with me. We go roaring up the mountain and just as I pull up in front of the hotel and I see the band with the procession coming down the street to escort me to the castle for my presentation. I left the car in the street and ran into the hotel and jumped in the elevator and started changing clothes. As soon as I got to the room the phone rang and I was told that the foreign minister was downstairs waiting to escort me. Sure enough I had to march up, with the band to the castle. I had a speech that I was supposed to give which got lost in the confusion. I just sort of spun something off the top of my head and then I had to sign the "golden book" they keep for important visitors.

Q: Now, this is an independent state, San Marino, at least to a large extent. What is the size of it?

COBURN: It's a few villages on the side of a mountain.

Q: Yes, but it has the lowland territory, too, you know, when you go up and down the mountain. It's a very odd and historical survival, my impression of it because it's represented at the UN.

COBURN: I know.

Q: When I say Monaco, which people think of as an independent entity, it's really for all practical purposes under the thumb of France and has no independent diplomatic representation, certainly not at the UN I don't think.

COBURN: I don't think so. Well, San Marino is certainly influenced by Italy.

Q: Oh, yes.

COBURN: Well, the stamps are different because they make a lot of money on their stamps. I think it was just neglected when Italy was unified. They really didn't think about it. So, it has survived as the oldest republic in the world and they get very upset when we call ourselves the oldest republic because they were there long before we were.

Q: So, although we don't have an ambassador to them and the ambassador to Italy is not in effect, but the consul in Florence is somehow?

COBURN: Accredited to the sovereign republic of San Marino.

Q: That's a big deal for them. They are very intent on keeping that contact alive.

COBURN: They would deal with the consulate when they wanted something from the United States which was infrequent, but occasionally we would get material from them to transmit to Washington.

Q: Fascinating. So, you had two years in Florence, up to '76?

COBURN: Yes, '76 its the time up again for reassignment and I was told that I was being replaced by a grievant settlement. Apparently the Department of State had a black officer who had grieved and as part of his settlement he said he would accept an assignment in Florence.

Q: Which is something that happened some years later, too actually.

COBURN: Maybe grievants do that as part of the process.

Q: Well, it's interesting how some places get repeated that way. So, an officer's part of the grievance process was assigned to Florence?

COBURN: Yes. Subsequently I was called from Washington and asked if I wanted to be part of the INR operation.

Q: INR being the Bureau of Intelligence and Research.

COBURN: Yes. They wanted me to replace a man who was Italian born and fluent in Italian. In fact he had gone to school with Forlani who at that time was the minister of defense and he was very well hooked into some of the Italian politicians because of his background. He had been the man, so to speak, in this office writing reports on Italy and was very knowledgeable. It turns out that as his final assignment he was going to be named consul general in Genoa and he required a replacement and my name kept coming up. I probably said no six or seven times. In the end I was assigned to INR to replace him as the senior Italian analyst. When I got there I said, "Where are the junior Italian analysts?" They said, "Well, there aren't any. You're the Italian analyst." I said, "Oh."

Q: This is the summer of 1976 then?

COBURN: 1976 we'd come back in the bicentennial.

Q: This was in effect a two-year assignment?

COBURN: Two-year assignment.

Q: So, talk a little bit about INR, what it is and what it does.

COBURN: INR is the Intelligence analytic arm of the State Department which gets reports from the field and prepares material for the Secretary of State and the principal officers of the Department of State.

Q: It's not a pro-active intelligence agency. It's not running its agents in the field somewhere?

COBURN: No.

Q: Okay.

COBURN: No, it's staffed by officers who have the function of trying to make sense out of the reporting that comes in through various channels the State Department diplomatic channels and some of the military and intelligence channels.

Q: They have liaisons with the CIA? COBURN: And the DIA.

Q: And the DIA and also.

COBURN: The Defense Intelligence Agency.

Q: Right and do they do anything with the National Security Agency?

COBURN: There's a part of INR. INR has several activities. Some of them are compartmentalized. I didn't see all of them.

Q: But they have a broad mandate at various levels to share what comes in through the intelligence community?

COBURN: Its function really is to give the Secretary of State his own staff to look at the totality of the intelligence.

Q: In addition to which they're getting the stuff that the State Department people abroad are sending in as well?

COBURN: Right. We would prepare the NID, the National Intelligence Daily, which is the intelligence brief of the State Department. It circulates to the senior people in the State Department. I was fortunate enough in my time there to have a very good rapport with the analyst in the CIA who covered Italy. He was a very talented and open colleague. In many of my dealings with the CIA over the years I have found many of them to be very closed and willing to take, but unable to give information. He was just the opposite. He shared everything whether we agreed or disagreed. We knew what we were agreeing or disagreeing on. The information for both agencies was better as a result of our cooperation. At the time the Italian communists again were threatening to enter government. The idea was that any election they could win. Their vote was always around 47% or 48%.

Q: There was some serious interest in the U.S. government I suppose in this question.

COBURN: It was a vital question to the United States. We had several important NATO bases in Italy; the Soviets were still a threat. Italy was a vital part of our defense alliance. We also had a large Italian American population, which was very interested in Italy being safe and free. All these factors operated to keep Italy, whenever the possibility existed that the elections might go the wrong way, up on the front burner. The embassy at the time was concerned about Italy going communist. Neither my colleague at the Agency nor I were as concerned.

Q: Was there a fear? I mean did people really think that if the communists won that NATO would be, that they'd tell the bases to leave. I mean there must have been somewhere in there some kind of contact if not official with Italian communists to try to get some idea as to what they might be thinking.

COBURN: The Communist Party Secretary, Enrico Berlinguer, had developed the Euro communist concept, which was that Italy could accept NATO. Italy wanted the protection of the United States so it wouldn't fall under the Soviet domination. The Italian communists were different communists from the Russian communists. This was stated on several occasions loudly and widely, but there was always a statement of the American public political class that saw this as a Trojan horse to address America's concerns. It generated a lot of paper, a lot of thought, a lot of meetings, a lot of discussions, a lot of seminars with every expert in the world giving their opinion which was always a little bit different from every other expert in the world. In the long run the crisis passed.

Q: Do you think the United States had any tangible plan as to how they were actually going to react if the communists won or was it just. You know, you do all this analysis, can they win, will they win, what if they had won? I mean, was it just then wait and see and then what happens? Did you have any sense of that?

COBURN: No, no, we never got into the contingency planning for if Italy went communist. We were always writing about will it go communist and since we always said, no it won't I guess we never went the next step and said, well, what if it would. That would have been interesting.

Q: As close elections, I don't remember, as close elections approach in Italy than did various parts of the U.S. government. The public form kind of ratchet up the fear, you know, we're afraid that Italy may go communist and to kind of remind the Italians that this wasn't something we felt that was a good idea?

COBURN: No, we didn't have to do it. I mean the Italians themselves thought about it. There were stories in the Italian press that people were chartering jets, to fly to Malta the day after the elections, if the communists won. We would have people coming in trying to get their visas because they feared a communist victory. They weren't going to wait because they'd already gone through fascism and they weren't going to go through communism. We didn't have to stoke the flames.

Q: So, your primary focus in INR was on the Italian political situation? You were in an office. It was a European office?

COBURN: Western European office, yes, right.

Q: Were you sort of largely left alone to do your own work in effect or how did it seem to function on a day to day basis? Did you have good relationships with the other people in INR? Did you find it was an efficient organization?

COBURN: No, it really wasn't. Everybody there focused on their own country and there was little camaraderie. I was fortunate in one aspect because Bob Barber, who was the political officer in Rome, while I was there had become the director of European, Western European affairs. I talked to Bob and asked if I could attend his staff meetings in the morning. He said, oh sure, come on along.

Q: This is when you were in the Bureau of EUR?

COBURN: No, I was in INR, Bob was in the Bureau of European Affairs. So, I was able, as an intelligence officer, to hear the political discussions that they were having in EUR.

Q: They hadn't done that? Your predecessor hadn't done that?

COBURN: No. As soon as Bob left, I was told I was no longer welcome.

Q: Really? No kidding?

COBURN: Yes. The new director came in and said, no, these are in-house, we don't want other representatives in our meetings. We could go to the bureau wide European meetings. The assistant secretary had a staff meeting once a week, on Thursday, I think, and somebody from INR was there, but that was usually a generalized discussion. My meeting was where they were making daily assignments of what people should do and who was doing what. Then I could come back and say EUR is very interested in this aspect and so it's time to do something that supports issues they are raising.

Q: Right, exactly.

COBURN: If you know the people and you have a relationship with them you can get things done. If you don't know them, it made it very much more difficult. Because of the CIA and Bob Barber I was able to be an effective conduit.

Q: How did you work with the CIA? I mean did you have lunch with guy now and then or did you just send papers back and forth?

COBURN: Both. I remember he invited us to the CIA director's residence in what is now the vice president's house and. He was allowed to invite one person and he took me. (End of tape)

Q: We're talking about your time in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research and your relationships with some of the other agencies you was talking about. You had very good relationships, working relationships with the Central Intelligence Agency. Tell me about, for example, how it went with the Defense Intelligence Agency, if it went at all.

COBURN: It didn't go at all. We had no contact with the Defense Intelligence Agency and I never met any of their people.

Q: Did you send anything to them?

COBURN: No. I think their activities essentially were more focused on the military side and relationships. If I read their reports I don't recall because I was really interested and my superiors were interested in political developments in Italy and that's principally what we did. I also had some good contacts with the Italian Embassy because my predecessor was one of their strong contacts.

Q: How did it go with the geographic bureau? I always had the sense with, there was a certain rivalry with the geographic bureau as to who would or might send papers up to the seventh floor principals or who was really preparing the final papers for certain things. Did your association with the European bureau in general, I mean how would you say it went or INR's more generally with the bureaus?

COBURN: My personal contact with the Italian desk officer, who was Brunson McKinley, who again I knew from Italy were close and friendly, and with Bob Barber were good. We had a structure in INR with a very talented director, who was subsequently the Executive director of the Department and, later, Under Secretary for Political Affairs. He was well plugged into the European bureau as well. I thought that our relations were supportive. I don't have any memory of any friction or any problem of while all these people were in place.

Q: Right. Were you asked for input in other words, when the bureau prepared policy papers or analysis of their own, was INR regularly asked for input or to review those if they were going up to principals?

COBURN: We cleared them.

Q: Yes.

COBURN: Our names were on them as well.

Q: Right and so, and similarly then if you were doing analysis you would consult with the bureau, so it worked well actually?

COBURN: Right.

Q: What I heard in later years may have just been the odd item rather than the institution, so that's good to know. So, you spent two years in INR, it would be '76 to '78 and what happened then?

COBURN: Well, by then my old boss was the executive director of.

Q: Executive secretary?

COBURN: Executive secretary of the Department of State and my time in INR was coming to a close and what I had feared about accepting the assignment was true, that INR did not provide you a launching pad for anything that you wanted. In fact, I don't recall anybody giving me any indication of any assignment. My boss in INR had said to me, if I can ever help you, let me know. I said, "I think I need that IOU." He said, "Well, let me see. Mathea Falco is setting up an office and let me give her a call." So, he called Mathea Falco, Mathea Falco was a protégé of Warren Christopher, who at the time was Deputy Secretary of State. She had established a reputation as a narcotics expert.

Q: She was not a career FSO, was she?

COBURN: No. She was brought in by Warren Christopher to be the senior narcotics advisor at the time we were developing programs to counter drug activities in the world. Her role, as she saw it, was to strengthen the Department of State's activities in this field. Traditionally the State Department has been a policy organization. She wanted it to be more active. The U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) office had done the actual proactive activities in the narcotics field such as crop substitution, training of police and coast guard and those kinds of activities as well as demand reduction support. She used her influence with the deputy secretary to bring all of the AID activities under her wing and establish a new bureau, which was the Bureau of International Narcotics Matters.

To make a long story short, Mathea Falco was named assistant secretary of state for international narcotics matters.

Q: And they created this bureau?

COBURN: They created this bureau. They brought a lot of the staff from AID over who were ex-policemen.

Q: Did they bring them in as Foreign Service officers in effect?

COBURN: As political officers.

Q: Right, but I mean as FSRs?

COBURN: Yes. They had their own promotion ladder.

Q: What was the reason for this? Because there were political pressures either in Congress or in the broader American society that somehow at least in part pushed themselves onto the State Department to be doing something internationally? Or was it just Warren Christopher himself that felt the need for the Department to be more vigorous? In other words, where was it, if Ms. Falco was a person who could in effect make this happen, why did anybody want to make it happen?

COBURN: There was always a need to upgrade our efforts to counter narcotics infiltration into the United States. What was working wasn't considered to be effective. To make it more effective we needed a more focused and high level effort and I think the first response was to put an advisor into the Secretary of State's office so that the foreign policy aspects would have a narcotics sensitivity.

Q: But, again, is this because of Congressional pressure on the Department to do this?

COBURN: I don't know; I mean there's always pressure. Could it have been withstood and could more money have been poured into AID and heightened the AID effort? Sure. But the personal relationship between Mathea Falco and Warren Christopher, I think, was key to the decision that Mathea needed to have the bureaucratic rank in the Department of State to influence policy.

Q: No, that's fine. That makes sense to me, but the issue is, why for example, why did Mr. Christopher himself in effect unless he was just personally interested in the topic for some reason, you know, what lead him to want to do this and to bring it. You know, because it's somewhat of a departure for State from its traditional view of its function.

COBURN: Right. It caused a lot of heartburn in a lot of parts of the State Department because suddenly we were dealing with operational projects. We had people then who were involved in law enforcement. We had people who were going overseas living in places like Columbia, Burma, Thailand dealing with nasty guys and our traditional core of people weren't trained in arms or judo. We were trained to negotiate, to dispatches, etc. The kind of people that came in to do this work were different from what the State Department traditionally had. Their anticipation of their rewards was different from what the rewards system in the State Department was. We had this hybrid organization which was set up which brought in people who knew drug demand reduction. These were scientists who knew the effect of narcotics on the brain and training techniques, none of which the State Department had in-house. So, you had to introduce a new cadre of expertise and then try and give them a career ladder so that they don't spend 25 years doing the same job.

Q: So, just to come back, so your old boss suggested to you that yogo into this new group that was coming along and so what happened?

COBURN: Well, he set up an interview with Mathea Falco. I went and talked to her. She was very charming, very sweet and she at the end of the interview, she said, "Do you know Edwin Corr?" I said, "No, I don't." She said, "Well, he's DCM in Ecuador and I'm thinking of bringing him back." He subsequently came back as deputy assistant secretary in operations and my direct boss, a fine fellow with whom I enjoyed working. Then they brought in a deputy secretary for budget matters. I was the director of program management. Then we had all of these people who were field staff and we had to bring them into our system and organize them and establish our activities from scratch. We had to try and recruit people for the rest of the positions in the State Department. The political officers were very leery about going off into this new world because no one really knew if it was going to last.

Q: Out of the proverbial mainstream as they say.

COBURN: Out of the mainstream into a little cul de sac where the risk of failure was high and success was probably not going to be achieved in our lifetime. Mathea was a dynamic person. Of course the access to the deputy secretary gave her tremendous clout. We would have our meetings in the deputy secretary's conference room on the top floor. Nobody can really realize the kinds of impressions that that makes when you have people come to meetings and you're right up practically sitting in the Secretary's lap.

Q: Proximity is seen as power.

COBURN: That's right and in the building it certainly is. She had various initiatives that she wanted to develop. I remember one of the ones that I was responsible for was the European initiative. This was to get the Bureau of European Affairs to put narcotics on the agendas of all the meetings that they went to with Europeans because as we said drugs are not a problem only for the United States. It's a problem of the civilized world. To those who were doing traditional State Department work, narcotics was dirty, the people who deal with it were dirty. We pressured and pressured and pressured and because Mathea had the clout we were able to get these things done. We set up a whole series of regional meetings.

Q: Now, these are the years roughly 1978 to 1980?

COBURN: Yes.

Q: You said you set up a series of regional meetings?

COBURN: We'd have regional meetings. We established in every embassy, in the political section, a narcotics officer and then we would have regional meetings.

Q: But often it has to be said that that wasn't done, that there was a person who had a narcotics portfolio.

COBURN: In addition to.

Q: In addition to. In other words it would be a political officer or maybe an economic officer who had as one of his job descriptions to be the narcotics man in that particular place.

COBURN: Exactly.

Q: Okay.

COBURN: In Europe, our goal was to get narcotics control on the national agenda of the country. Where there were actual field programs (and we had people in the field in Columbia, Thailand, and Mexico) then we would have funded projects to help local law enforcement. Q: What's the relationship at this point with DEA?

COBURN: It's collaborative.

Q: DEA being the Drug Enforcement Administration, which is division of the Justice Department.

COBURN: Right. When we had our meetings of course they would always be there.

Q: Did they have people in and my history is a little weak here, but by the late '70s did they have their own people by then in places like Columbia and Mexico?

COBURN: Oh yes.

Q: They did?

COBURN: Yes.

Q: Okay. So, what was it that you were doing overseas in those places that was different from what they were doing?

COBURN: The Drug Enforcement Agency would have staff in the embassies or consulates working with the local law enforcement authorities to apprehend members of the cartel. Our activities were crop substitution, law enforcement training. We would give DEA money to do some of the things that they were doing. They would get their own money, but then we would have a special cooperative program with them where we would provide them with resources that they needed.

Q: Would you also say in one way that your function was to push the political end of the thing with embassies and so forth in a different way than maybe DEA was doing as a, I mean to push on the political structures of the countries where you represented, Columbia, Mexico, to make or try to make them be more intense in the anti-drug effort? Was that a large part of it?

COBURN: Yes, part of our function was educational. This was to get to the power centers of the countries and tell them that the drug control aspect, as far as the United States was concerned, was one of our highest priorities. If they wanted good cooperative relations with us, they were going to have to be effective in dealing with this. We wanted the supply cut off. We wanted the perpetrators put in jail. The counterpunch was always if you weren't asking for it, we wouldn't be sending it. You stop it in America and you won't have a problem.

Q: Cut the demand.

COBURN: We did some efforts on that score. Money was spent to try and do that. Then we did a lot of work on drug rehabilitation helping overseas efforts to give them techniques and technologies that would be helpful in saving the lives of people that had gotten deep into the drugs. We tried to do crop substitution. In so many countries the corruption was endemic. I remember someone saying, well we just got speed boats that now go 20 miles an hour and the next day the druggies have speed boats that go 40 miles an hour. We never had as much money as they did and we never had the confidence that the people we were dealing with in some of these countries were honest and truthful and not taking money on the side. One of the concerns when we were trying to get the military involved was that.

Q: You mean local military?

COBURN: No, our military, but they never wanted to get involved with anything to do with drugs.

Q: In other words they don't want to be the policemen on the beat.

COBURN: Right. We did have the EPIC, the El Paso Intelligence Center set up which was a DEA, INS, and Customs center for using common intelligence to try and get the sources and the various ways that they came across the border. Now I think we've finally got the radar tracking some of these planes that would come in and the military was involved with that.

Q: So, one of your roles was to work with and try to push otheagencies in Washington to be working on this stuff?

COBURN: We didn't have any trouble getting them to work on it. It was trying to get coordination. There's a lot of information in various corners. A lot of people are very protective of their sources. They don't want to share what they have. So, the effort was to get everybody in one place to tell you everything they knew and identify the source of the drugs, where it was coming from, who were the ones that were supplying it, and the most effective ways of identifying the people and stopping the traffic flows into this country.

Q: Your job, you called yourself a program officer?

COBURN: Director of Program Management.

Q: Director of Program Management and in essence that meant we'rtrying to, well, tell me what it.

COBURN: Well, it meant that we developed a series of programs, country specific for the resources that we had both personnel and financial. We would have budgets for Columbia. We would have a budget for Thailand. We would have a budget for Mexico.

Q: These programs would be with the input of the embassies as to what they thought you could direct your resources, by what might be effective and so forth?

COBURN: Yes, they would come in with their proposals. It was very un-State Department, you know? You don't do this in the State Department. It was a departure. We were actually running an operational program with direct funding into this narcotics bureau and we'd have to report on our activities every year and how successful or unsuccessful we were. We had to fund our own people and run our own little personnel system because these people weren't in the mainstream of the State Department. It was almost a little department within the Department that was operating here. We had an air wing; we had pilots, mechanics, etc.

Q: I remember being astonished to learn some years later that they had, I know 20 or 30 or 40, aircraft that they were in some way responsible for.

COBURN: I know. It was a nightmare with the maintenance and logistics on some of the equipment. Keeping the airplanes flying and repairing them and getting the people to do it and then sending them into some really nasty neighborhoods to do the work that had to be done. The results were pretty good.

Q: Right. So, this you did for two years from '78 to '80 and this is that bureau was really getting going.

COBURN: Right. It was just starting out. Then in 1980 I got a phone call saying would you like to go to the War College. It was a critical moment because I wanted to go to the War College and I had to tell Mathea that I was leaving. She wasn't too happy about it, but said I won't stand in your way. Off I went and then they got the fellow who replaced me, Clyde Taylor.

Q: Oh right, yes, who I know well.

COBURN: Ed Corr told me later that he should have told me that he was going to be named ambassador to Ecuador. He said you would have gotten my job, but I didn't feel I could tell you because it wasn't certain. So, I left and Taylor came in and six months later he was deputy assistant secretary of narcotics and then went off to be ambassador to Paraguay. If I had stayed there I would have had a different career track. Anyway, I went off for a year at the War College which was a very rewarding experience. The difficult part of it was that all State Department people were about ten years older than the military. The physical activities that we were engaged in made us look a little puffy. The army, navy and marines were all fit. We did better in the academic side, but on the physical side we weren't up there with them. It was a good year. It was a normal kind of life for a change. You go to work at a regular hour and go home at a regular hour. The site at Fort McNair was a nice location. Then we had an interesting tour overseas. We picked Eastern Europe and we went off to Romania and Hungary and Yugoslavia. I remember taking the train from Bucharest through Transylvania to Budapest. We had a colonel on the train with us who was born in Hungary and had fled during the revolution to the United States and he was as nervous as a cat on a hot tin roof as we crossed the border. He said would you please stand with me when the border police see my birthplace, I'm afraid I will disappear off the train and never be seen again. Nothing of course happened, but when we went across the border the train stopped and the Hungarians came out with mirrors checking under the cars. These were two communist countries, but the people were trying to escape Romania into Hungary, which makes you wonder how bad Romania must have been in those days.

Q: Yes, interesting.

COBURN: So, that was a good trip. Then we were in Yugoslavia when President Reagan was shot. We got word that the president had been shot and we tried to call the embassy in Belgrade. Nobody answered the phone. He was furious. We couldn't find out what was going on. We were in the middle of Yugoslavia not knowing what was happening. It was like Spain and Fiji all over again.

Q: So, you did that for a year?

COBURN: Did that for a year and then at the end again, once again you're up for an assignment and that's the fun part of the Foreign Service, you're always waiting for your next assignment. Is it ever going to end? So, somebody called me and said do you want to go back to personnel? I started and spent most of my life in personnel. He said Joan Clark, once again, Joan Clark is the director general and she saw your name and said you could be the deputy director of the assignment office.

Q: Foreign and career assignments, FCA?

COBURN: Yes.

Q: You had known her from your original assignment in personnel?

COBURN: My first assignment, back in 1962. I was assigned as deputy director for assignments and then just about the time I got there the new director arrived. I had also known him in personnel in the first assignment. He was in African Affairs and I was in European Affairs. We had a good relationship. I think you probably know him don't you?

Q: I've met him, yes.

COBURN: He's a very nice fellow, easygoing.

Q: So, this is 1981 now, you're going to FCA.

COBURN: This is 1981, June 1981.

Q: Right.

COBURN: I was there for three years as the deputy director for the assignment process which as you know is fairly complicated. The office was broken down as personnel offices representing the geographic bureaus and personnel offices representing the four traditional cones, political, economic, administrative and consular. Then we also had another series of assignment panels for secretaries, communicators, security officers and medical personnel. My memories of that particular experience were the dynamic of the assignment process which you're quite familiar where people make proposals and the discussions ensue and the more ingenious and clever people get their clients assigned amid some great battles. Many times a regional bureau representative would propose someone for an assignment and the counselor representing the cone would have a counter assignment proposal and they would make their presentations. Then the panel itself would vote on which assignment seemed appropriate. That was then final unless there was an appeal to the director general. On one or two occasions there were appeals and the assignment would be overturned. At the time I was on the assignment panel we made assignments for all positions below the ambassador level position. So, principal officers.

Q: DCM?

COBURN: DCMs were always pro forma. They were the choice of thambassador.

Q: Were those done through the regular weekly panel rather than what later became known as the DCM committee which did all the DCM principal officer things really as a separate meeting among higher level people?

COBURN: Yes, I think it was that committee which made ambassadorial nominations. We processed the ambassadorial nominations and the DCM assignments. Principal officers were assigned by our panel.

Q: Were they?

COBURN: Subsequently it was moved to the more senior level.

Q: It seemed to me when I was in personnel that there were two really competing streams of desirability or good that competed. One side would say, why can't a bureau or an office director or whatever have the person that he or she wants, has the most confidence and then feels can do the best job? There's a lot of logic to that argument. The other argument was that the Department as an entity and as a representative of society in a democratic institution has certain goals that collectively it's got to meet. It's got to bring women along, it's got to bring minorities along, and its got to meet tests of fairness in assignments to its own people regardless of any other particular pleadings. That is that the guy who has spent his time in Haiti or in some other demanding African post where the climate is bad and the education worse, that person is entitled at some point to go to Europe or to go to East Asia or wherever he wants and that that's an equity question. These things were in constant competition with one another. Personnel saw itself as an entity that was trying to balance both.

COBURN: An honest broker.

Q: Yes, an honest broker, but one that was determined as much as it could to push the equity side of the business and also that had a realization of the wider issues that the Department had to face against the very particular and legitimate interests. In other words, if someone would come in and say, "I'm an office director. I know this guy. He speaks the language. He has experience in the country and he's the person I want," sometimes, at least you had to try to go to that person and say, "We understand that, but for a whole series of other reasons, there is a reasonably also capable person over here that you may not know personally that we feel has to go in here." I mean, there's other ways of describing this model, but it seems to be that those two streams.

COBURN: That's a very good description. I couldn't agree with you more. I recall specifically one case where equity was the issue. The officer had a series of terrible posts. The job was the consul general in Florence, Italy. This man had been around the world, had the language. The other officer had the language and the support of the embassy in Rome. The officer supported by the Embassy had an aggressive personality. He came to me personally and wanted to know why there was a problem with him getting this assignment because he had the personal backing of the ambassador. He had the language, he had the country experience and he was supposed to take on this job. I told him the panel made the decision and when the decision was discussed I remained quiet. The consular officer who was proposing the consular officer for this post I thought made a very effective presentation. The assignment was made and the Embassy candidate lost. The officer assumed his post and I later heard he was not popular with the local community. He had everything except the ability to deal with the issues in that consular district.

Q: To do that particular job.

COBURN: That particular job was in a very stuffy society, full of many people who expected hand holding. His previous experience hadn't prepared him for that. You know, in retrospect, the first fellow would have been much better.

Q: This is the dilemma that you have that these things conflicted and you often would find for some reason or another when you made one of these assignments that in the end it didn't work out or didn't work out very well and yet that's the constant struggle.

COBURN: I think for the morale of the corps, you need to show that people who go through hellish posts can get good places. In that case people might have said, well, that was the right assignment because he needed a good assignment after everything that he had gone through. You don't know. Even though he was unsuccessful in Florence, it didn't mean anything other than he was unhappy and people were unhappy with him. Nothing vital in the world changed because of this particular assignment.

Q: Right, but you also have these other societal requirements is the way I think of them that you simply have to face as an entity. It has to go to congress every year and get its budget which is you know, what are you doing as they say to be more representative of America?

COBURN: Oh, of course.

Q: That also is going to collide with the very particular demands that certain that people in the building will have for people that they want.

COBURN: Well, it was very hard at this particular time.

Q: You were really there at a transition phase.

COBURN: A transition period. I think the women's class action suit was still underway, it hadn't been resolved yet. We were under some pressure to be more representative which meant finding more minorities and more women for these positions. We made that argument that it takes the Department a while to bring people through the ranks but that was dismissed as just another excuse for not getting things done that had to be done. The one part that might be interesting to future history is the point when the computers came into the office and where we have a group of men who were used to dictating to secretaries or writing drafts on yellow pages, great drafts that have to be transcribed by a typist, suddenly being given the ability to do it themselves. As the deputy director it was my responsibility to manage this transition from pen and paper to computer. I had a real tough time of it because a number of the officers refused. They weren't typists, they'd never learned to type, they weren't going to type. If you put that machine in my office, it's just going to be sitting there because I'm not going to use it was the response I got to the advent of computers.

Q: Wow.

COBURN: It took a period of months and a few transfers before it became part of what people accepted. It was the shock of change and it was resisted as most changes are by a percentage of people, a small percentage, but a significant one.

Q: So, I'll just get out of your hair.

Q: We'll continue another day with Harry Coburn and his assignment in FCA and this is still almost the end of tape three, side one.

Q: Okay, we're here with Harry Coburn, the beginning of day three and he's talking about foreign career assignments where he was the deputy director from 1981 to 1984. Talk a little bit about the women's class action suit, which I think started in maybe the middle 1970s. A Foreign Service officer named Alison Palmer originally instituted it I think because she felt that the Department had been unfair in a number of ways to women officers and the suit went on. Its remedies went on through, certainly when I worked in personnel through the early 1990s. Talk a little bit about it and your impression of the impact and the ramifications for the personnel system and whatever you remember about it while you were working on the assignment process.

COBURN: Well, when I was there in the early '80s it was the initial phase of the case. I think the case had already gone to a preliminary judgment because the judge was in charge of directing information be gathered for his consideration. As a result there was a woman who was hired specifically to collect information on the assignment patterns in the Foreign Service as it related to women officers. I remember dealing with the lady who came around from time to time, at first just to get the data, but then subsequently she would attempt to get opinions as to how these patterns developed. I recall not having much background or information that I could help her with. I departed when it was still underway, but of course subsequently in my career I saw the impact of what turned out to be a decision that the Department had discriminated in the assignment of women. Women subsequently were given positions and, through grievances, promotions that enabled them to take on top level jobs in the Foreign Service from ambassador on down. Alison Palmer in her quest for equality was also one of the first women ordained a priest in the Episcopal church. I recall seeing her in the halls of the Department of State with a clerical collar and a clerical suit. She was a woman who broke down barriers in both the church and in the State Department.

Q: So, she's a person who actually in a way one would have to say will be a probably a subject of some historical study in the future?

COBURN: I would think so because she waged a battle in both institutions that were slow to have women in leadership positions. I don't know what ever happened to her, but she wasn't the beneficiary of anything that she accomplished because the women who followed her were the ones that got the positions. I think she was financially independent so she was able to pay the initial costs of this, but then subsequently other women in the Foreign Service contributed to the case and were the beneficiaries of its success.

Q: So, it's safe to say that this case really did have a major impact you would think on the Foreign Service personnel system?

COBURN: I think it did and I think it was followed by minority officers and gay officers, both using the same techniques to achieve a similar result.

Q: And an example again of something I mentioned earlier where the Department had to adapt itself to wider strains in American society?

COBURN: Very definitely. I think the pressures from the courts and subsequently from the congress resulted in the changes that are visible today in the career Foreign Service.

Q: So, you were there from '81 to '84 and is there anything else that you want to comment about from that period really being close to the center of the assignments system?

COBURN: I think one other factor, which is still operative today, was the institution of a corps of professional counselors.

Q: We were beginning to talk about the hiring of civil service career counselors.

COBURN: These career counselors I think were conceived by Deputy Assistant Secretary Gershinson as a counterbalance to the counselors who were Foreign Service officers. The feeling was that there was no institutional memory in the assignment process since the assignment officers and the career counselors both were on tours of duty which were short, only two years. People who had problems might be lost in the system and if you hired continuity counselors, who were trained in counseling as an art, these individuals might be helped either to improve their careers or to find other careers that would be more rewarding for them. The initial experience I think was rocky because once again the system resisted change. The individuals who sat in on the assignment process were reluctant initially to raise their voices, but they did have, as time went on, an institutional history. The positive was that they could bring to the assignment process facts that might not be written down in these files. The negative was that these people over time could be gamed by some of these problem employees and become their protectors and in some ways promote them into positions that they might not be prepared to perform.

Q: Let me ask you about something that I heard at the beginning as well as the end of my career. That is the argument of substance versus management and the attempt to develop officers capable in both fields. It ultimately led to what we now call multi-functionality, but I'm curious from your view of the personnel system. Did you think that in the end the system as you saw it tended to produce people who going into top level ambassadorial, DCM, deputy assistant secretary positions, who were skilled in what we think of as substance as well as in management?

COBURN: There were rare people who had both qualities. I think from my long time watching and being part of the system, many times officers progressed on the basis of their personal contacts. If you impress someone higher in the hierarchy, what they called "your rabbi," or "your mentor", they would work to make sure that you progressed. I think the question always was the promotion gets you to the job and the job gets you the promotion. Many times being in a key area where something significant was happening, the negotiations in Vietnam, or some other area that was of high interest, propelled you on the promotion ladder and gave you openings for other jobs. Hopefully along the way you developed management skills as well as abilities in your personal experience, but a number of people did get to senior levels who had serious problems dealing with people.

Q: Wasn't there also an argument on the consular and administrative side that those officers although they were used to managing people, if they suddenly became principal officers or deputy chiefs of mission, they were not prepared to do the political side of the job. They weren't used to writing analytical reports. They weren't used to the entertainment functions that you have to do at a higher level. So, in a sense you had both sides that you could get to senior positions and be incomplete. Am I overstating this?

COBURN: No, I think that's part of the conundrum that we always had. People managing resources and the people sitting in offices writing reports and going to the foreign ministry developed different skills and attitudes. When they had to do the other side of it, they were not as well prepared and had difficulties in many cases. I think sometimes those kinds of experiences can be rather daunting. I remember hearing from another officer who was on the administration side of the house and became a principal officer in Italy. He had problems in dealing with some of the snobby types in the Italian city in which he lived and their great unease when they heard, at one point, that he had started out life as a fireman. They just dismissed him as not being socially equal. So, those kinds of problems, which Americans find unusual, you can run into when you get into foreign societies which are very hierarchical. What school you went to and what languages you spoke and your social background becomes part of the acceptance that you gain when you're dealing with some of the leaders in other countries, especially in Western Europe.

Q: How much influence would you say a director general, particularly a career person, has over the assignment process and where is it most felt and perhaps least felt?

COBURN: Well, certainly the director general has influence over the assignment process by the way that they allow it to be run. When I was there the director general hardly ever intervened.

Q: I don't mean intervened, but I mean in the sense that the director general. Some people who haven't worked in personnel look at the director general as an extremely powerful person in terms of assignments. My sense when I worked inside was that the director general was really more of a broker than a person who could make his or her own decisions particularly with any type of higher level decisions. By that I mean deputy chief of mission and up, principal officer and up, certainly deputy assistant secretary, that sort of thing. In other words, the system is allowed to operate where it's allowed to operate, the assignment panels and all the rest of it. But, apart from I would say lower to mid-level assignments, how much influence do you think the director general has above them?

COBURN: Not as much as people who want to be director general think. I remember one man who really pushed the director general aside to get the job and was so disappointed when he got there to see that, in fact, he was just an administrative officer with a fancy title. The top jobs are the ambassadors of course, and the White House plays a key role. When you get into the deputy chiefs of mission, principal offices, the assistant secretaries in the regional bureaus play a role and they move mountains to get the people that they want into those jobs. If you have an under secretary of management or deputy secretary who is a career officer then he has a whole list of people to take care of. The director general has to, as you say, balance the contending forces. They're not the be all and end all of the assignment process by any stretch of the imagination.

Q: Now, that was the sense I had and when career people are assigned to be director general or the deputy assistant secretaries in personnel, they also, those people are also thinking about their onward assignment.

COBURN: Exactly.

Q: So, they have to realize that the assistant secretaries and others that they deal with have great potential leverage over them later on. Isn't it fair to say that that's going to be very seriously taken into account as assignment, as the regular assignment process goes on during the director general's tenure?

COBURN: Yes, I always felt that to have an honest system you really need a director general who is going to retire and plays the game the way she or he thinks it should be played and doesn't have in the back of his mind, what am I going to do after this job. When you see some of the director generals, who have been successful, and have gone on to rewarding assignments, such as ambassador to Australia, for example, you suspect they have played their cards well. Anybody in those jobs can make enemies. You can have a lot of bloodletting and win on one assignment. The next time you want something done and someone can block you, they will to get even. So, it's a very skilled person or a very honest person who is successful in that job. I mean successful in their own mind.

Q: Right. So, you were there from '81 to '84 and then what happened?

COBURN: Well, personnel likes to reward the people who do that work because otherwise nobody will do it. It's not always considered career enhancing to go into personnel.

Q: Yes, just to stop at that for a second. Personnel is one of those places that I think is extremely important, but the system because it, in my view and correct me on this, the promotional bias of the system is toward in the first instance political and economic skills and thereafter toward perhaps a high level managerial jobs. If you go into personnel in a mid or upper mid-level job compared to having to compete against these other things where the Department's cultural bias lies, it's tough.

COBURN: Well, it's tough because the geographic bureaus, where most of the jobs are overseas, are the bureaus that become clubs and they like to take care of people who work for them. So, to leave a geographic bureau and take a functional bureau job or an administrative job you lose your membership in the club so to speak. At the time that you are ready for assignment there's nobody in any of the bureaus who is asking for you. In fact, I remember at one point when I was up for assignment there was a job in a certain bureau and my name was put forward. The executive director was quoted back to me as saying, "what did Harry ever do for us?" It was a clear indication of how that worked in my particular case.

Q: How interesting.

COBURN: Yes. When my time came up I talked to the deputy assistant secretary of personnel, and he said what job would you be interested in. I said I think at this stage in my career, a deputy chief of mission job would probably be the place to go. So, we selected Barbados, which had as its future ambassador, the roommate of the senior senator from Mississippi. I had to talk to the gentleman as part of the interview process. He was about my age, at the time. His focus was on his wife's antiques and how they were worried about the mildew in Barbados and things of that sort. No substantive issues were raised. Subsequently, I was told that I was not his cup of tea and I think he interviewed 25 senior officers. He later was called in by the Secretary of State and told that he was going to have to take a career officer. So, the post was vacant for quite some time but somebody eventually went there I understand. By the time this all played out I didn't know where I was going for my next assignment. Subsequently I met Phyllis Busco in the hall of the Department. She asked, "What are you doing for your next job?" I said, "Well, I'm still twisting in the wind." She said, "Let me see what I can do."

Q: Phyllis Busco was it has to be said a long time civil servant, but an employee in personnel, right?

COBURN: She was a special assistant when we were in personnel to the director general at the time who was Joan Clark. Joan Clark was then assistant secretary of state for consular affairs. Phyllis Busco went with her as her special assistant, subsequently director of policy and coordination. Well, to make a long story short, Joan Clark asked me to become director of the passport office.

Q: The passport job being what's the title of that?

COBURN: Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Passport Services, which I did in July of 1984.

Q: Who did you replace as the deputy assistant secretary? Do you remember?

COBURN: Don Blevens, who went off to be consul general in Toronto.

Q: The passport office is an extremely fascinating piece of the State Department. Talk a little bit about its history and your initial impression of it.

COBURN: Yes, well I was warned not to go there because someone said it's full of low paid minority women who are prone to file grievances.

Q: It has to be said first that this was an office that never had many Foreign Service people in it, right?

COBURN: Rarely. There were two when I was there.

Q: How many employees did it have?

COBURN: Oh, I think we were about 900 persons.

Q: All around the United States?

COBURN: We were located in the major cities, Boston, Los Angeles, Houston, New Orleans, San Francisco, Chicago, Stanford, Connecticut, New York City, Philadelphia, and Honolulu. These were the offices that had been established by the famous passport director Frances Knight.

Q: Before her was Ruth Shipley. There were two of them and if I'm right, these two ladies together consecutively, one after the other, directed that office for a total of something like 55 years. After Hoover, after J. Edgar Hoover, they were the longest lasting Federal employees in senior positions almost in the history of the United States. Admiral Rickover is up there, too, and that in effect until the middle 1970s Frances Knight was not removed until 1977, so 55 years this goes back to 1922. It was run in many ways as a virtually independent thief.

COBURN: It was. It still had a lot of that.

Q: That would barely even take instruction from the Secretary of State.

COBURN: No, no, it was very independent. One of the things that Joan Clark tried to do was break down the walls within the bureau of consular affairs. When I got there we had our own fraud office; we had our own publication division where we published our own little in-house newspaper. The passport office had a tradition of conflict between adjudicators who were mainly college educated majority men and the processing people, the backroom people who were largely minority women with high school educations.

Q: What did the adjudicators adjudicate?

COBURN: Citizenship.

Q: This is someone overseas, right?

COBURN: No, this is in the various agencies in the United States. When someone came in to get a passport they had to prove that they were an American citizen, bring the documentation in and the adjudicator would look at what the documentation was and adjudicate their citizenship. Once they had a passport, then they had proof they were a citizen of the United States. So, these adjudicators tended to have a little status as people who worked with their heads while the people who actually put the passport together, pasting the picture in and putting the seals on and stamping it and typing in the data were clerical. Because of the racial tensions in the country at the time it also had an impact on the office where the people in the backroom said they felt they were second class citizens.

Q: You found the most of the people who put the passports together were minorities and the people who did the adjudicating were not minorities?

COBURN: Traditionally. By the time I got there there had been efforts made to correct that situation.

Q: Most of these people worked within the civil service personnel structure?

COBURN: They were all in the civil service with one or two exceptions.

Q: They were all in the civil service in an agency which is primarily what is known as an excepted service and operates under the Foreign Service system which is a very different system than the civil service system.

COBURN: Yes, and when I got there the salary levels of the people in the passport service were low. The senior in each office was a GS-13 and the deputy was a 12 and the chief adjudicator was an 11.

Q: You're talking about the local passport offices?

COBURN: Yes, the local passport offices. We had nothing to do with passport issuance overseas. That was all done by Foreign Service officers in consulates and there was very little connection, something that I tried to change, but without much luck.

Q: But there had been before the consulate bureau of the organization in the middle '70s, all the adjudication functions from overseas came into the regular passport office. What they did in the '70s is they took that overseas function and they combined it with emergency services and created the office of overseas citizens services within the consular bureau and that was about only five or six years before you came in.

COBURN: Oh really? I'd never heard that from anybody in the office. Our problem was the great demand for passports which was a surging.

Q: How many were they doing in your time?

COBURN: Oh, I don't know if I can recall the exact figure.

Q: Several million though a year?

COBURN: Yes. It was a heavy workload and it was an uneven workload since it would surge around April and then peak around July. We had many crises. One of the problems that I was told to solve was to stop the congressional complaints because when people can't get passports the first thing they do is go to the congress. We also were faced with a production system that dated back I guess to Frances Knight's teenage years. The equipment wasn't even made anymore. Every time it broke down it was a major crisis because I think there were only two 60 year old repairmen left still working who knew what the machine was all about. We had to upgrade the equipment. We had to organize the workload. We had to train the people. In the surge period, we hired temporaries. Behind all these problems was the fact that the government exam to hire civil servants had been challenged as being racially partial to whites and had been canceled. There was no way to hire professional civil service employees at that time and yet there were vacancies. They started a process to bring into the professional adjudicator ranks clerical employees already hire. To plan for the workload I organized annual conferences where we would have our "battle plan." We would get the directors from all of the agencies in the country together and on the advice of these people, who had years of experience, they would give me their projections for incoming work. Then, with the total projections we would establish a hiring plan. We did find there were people who were happy to work temporarily for six months. What we were doing was constantly bringing in new people, training them and then letting them go and then next year bringing in new people, training them and letting them go. We also had to establish a plan where agencies had overtime, but when overtime couldn't keep up with the workload we would have to shift the surplus work to other agencies that might have resources to do it. We had established in New York City what we called a closed agency where the people didn't have to meet the public. The public agency was at Rockefeller Center and it was an annual headache because that's where the crowds would come. It was still on Fifth Avenue. We found that there were numbers of people who had come illegally to this country and had children born here who were citizens. They couldn't speak English. When summertime came, Dominicans for example would come and send the children back home so they wouldn't be on the street. In their culture when anybody went to a public office you brought everybody along so that they would be support while you waited and you brought your food. So, you would go into the Rockefeller Center offices many times and there would be bedlam of people speaking 35 different languages, people eating food and changing diapers. The strain on our employees dealing with this crowd was heavy. We had many, many problems because people didn't like to wait in line, people didn't like the noise, people didn't like the food, people didn't like the dirty diapers. This is a government agency; can't you be more professional? It looks like you're going to a third world country every time you go in to get a passport. We heard all the complaints possible. So, we had this closed agency where staff could work in quiet. They were a production factory. We used post offices as reception centers where people could go and do submit their applications rather than have to come into a specific agency. That meant that we had to go out and train all the postal clerks each season on the citizenship rules and procedures..

Q: Did the State Department pay the post office an amount of money for doing this work?

COBURN: Yes, they had a contract to act as agents for us.

Q: It's worth noting that the passport office brought into the government something around \$250 million to \$500 million a year. Does that sound like a reasonable figure?

COBURN: Yes, we were a money maker for the Government.

Q: It didn't come to the State Department but it came in as general revenue.

COBURN: We were never informed of the exact amounts of funds the Passport Service generated. Perhaps the executive director of the Bureau of Consular Affairs knew, but if he did, he did not share that information.

Q: But you can extrapolate, you know how many passports you issue and you know how much they cost.

COBURN: Well, there were other factors involved as well. The cost of salaries, travel, rent on the offices, etc. The way we were organized, these issues did not come to my attention. In fact, I discovered quite by accident that information on passport decision making was not always shared by the executive director. On one occasion, I was asked to make a presentation at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) the budget review process of the administration. In the question and answer session after the presentation, I was talking about the need to upgrade our equipment on a regular basis. The OMB people present told me that they had given funds to the Department of State for that purpose the previous year. I was never made aware of that and realized that the budget office in the Department or in the Consular Bureau could well have diverted funds to other purposes. The needs of the passport office were only important when the system was on the verge of breaking down - the old squeaky wheel syndrome. We were often told that our staff was the face of the State Department most Americans saw. Unless they ran into difficulty overseas and needed a consular officer's assistance, they would never have contact with State personnel. To emphasize this aspect and to instill some morale in the staff, I started something called PASSPORT PRIDE. The P stood for productivity, the R for responsibility, the I for integrity, the D for development of staff and the E for efficiency. We really needed some effort to motivate a staff which wasn't well compensated and yet have a very stressful job.

Q: And often hardly felt themselves to be part of the Department.

COBURN: Unfortunately, that was the case.

Q: Yes, I was going to say about money, it's interesting that, and this has to be understood by anybody who studies the subject, the government agencies collect fees, but by and large the fees don't go to the agencies, they go to the central treasury in effect and then that gets into the whole huge pot of government money that then gets parceled out in other ways so that certainly the passport officer and I think the visa function, too were definitely net generators of cash over what the people in the system got paid for salaries and expenses. It didn't work in that sense and also I think it has to be understood that the way that the Department budget works is that the office of management and budget and even congress may sometimes think that they are allocating money that's going to go to a particular thing in the State Department, but that may not end up. Where it goes interestingly enough in the sense that very smart central budget people can find ways to move money around that is not always the way that you might have thought it was going to be. That's part of the great game, isn't it?

COBURN: Good budget people are rare, but the ones that are good can keep their bosses happy. The rule is always keep your boss happy whether you're the director general or whether you're the chief budget officer or whether you're the DCM or whatever you are and you keep your boss happy and hopefully if they're decent people they will "take care of you."

Q: So, what did you try to do? You've got these huge mobs coming to the Rockefeller Center. You've got a certain number of disaffected personnel for various reasons working for you. You've got tremendous fraud problems with a very, an old outdated passport style and you've got political pressure from Congress and others. So, is general management things besides trying to get your personnel upgraded for their morale and to stimulate pride in the work force and so forth, what else did you do managerially?

COBURN: We had all sorts of things going on. We would bring the chief adjudicators in. We'd talk to them as a group trying to get group loyalty among them and then we had the chief processing people in trying to get loyalty among them. All the fraud coordinators would come in for training with the fraud central office that was in passport at the time. We had an awards program that we'd nominate people.

Q: Awards meaning that people could get extra money at the end of the year?

COBURN: Yes. A cash award for good work. We tried to get recognition in the State Magazine, the Department's monthly publication. Anybody who would look at State Magazine from that period of time will see pictures of passport people in almost every other issue. People used to make comments about me. Your face is in that magazine almost every month. I said, well, this is trying to get recognition for these people and we'd have our conferences and always take pictures of them as a group. We tried to get an identification as a hardworking under appreciated group of people who were doing the tough job. What I tried to do with less success than I think I should have had was develop a sense of passport loyalty so that your career should be wider than just living and dying in Boston. I tried to promote people from agency to agency and say that we have a career ladder not that it's all that grand, but you should think of moving and your goal should be to be a passport director anywhere in the country. We had some people that were willing to do that and we did move some people around and give them more experience and broaden them. There was always great resistance. A lot of people were just rooted in their hometowns. They had no interest. They were just working to get a salary. They couldn't buy into any "mystique" of being in a passport office of the Department of States.

Q: Did you send out to develop in a sense a new type of passport?

COBURN: Yes, we did. We had a working group with the executive office of consular affairs; we had a team that was our technical backstop. We had proposals for a machine-readable passport. This was new but is now currently the way of doing documentation. We had some first class people. I got them together with the consultants from the technology firms so they would understand how a passport was put together and the important aspects of it and design a computerized program whereby we could produce a document that would be readable by machines. At the time we were doing this, there were no machines that could read the passport, but we were looking down the road that at some point, Immigration and Customs would be getting this equipment. So, we were coordinating with them on doing this. Occasionally we had FSOs who came through. I had one who was a very smart guy. I said, "I'd like you to do some way out thinking about a passport card that we could have people to carry to travel if they wanted to, rather than the passport booklet."

Q: A card that would look like a credit card or something like that, a driver's license?

COBURN: It was going to be what they called a smart card where you would put all sorts of data into the card.

Q: Yes, but it would be the size.

COBURN: Yes, it would be something easy so you didn't have this bulky book. But the FSOs wanted the diplomatic passport and tourists wanted the visa stamps for their souvenirs. Anyway, we did a little bit of research on it. We had a good run at the passport office, but by the time I was at the end I thought we'd run out of steam. There wasn't much more to do.

Q: Were you involved in the aspect of creating the central passport facility that now exists in New Hampshire?

COBURN: I was involved in trying to expand the passport office and I was looking for an office out in California or Arizona. We were doing some work because we knew that the growth of the industry required another facility. So, my.

Q: By another you mean a facility that would just be a processing one?

COBURN: No, my concept was just another office in California, San Diego or maybe somewhere in Arizona. But, there was also talk about Utah because one of the themes was that you need good workers and if you get into an area where there's low employment and a good cultural approach to work, you can have a successful operation. So, having a western outpost where you get a lot of people who would be glad to get the job. It was one of the thoughts we had. I think the New Hampshire operation occurred because of a closing of a base and opportunity to.

Q: No, that's why they put it up there, but the concept that you would have one basically one central processing facility that everything would be sent by Fed Ex or people would just mail the applications to?

COBURN: Well, we found that the New York office worked very well, the closed office worked very well.

Q: Yes. Do you think that was a model then?

COBURN: It was for the New Hampshire operation.

Q: In other words, everything that came in off the street in Rockefeller Center you would send out to be processed elsewhere so that those people only had to do processing and not be distracted?

COBURN: No, Rockefeller Center did processing, too.

Q: They did?

COBURN: Yes. We had sometimes people who had emergencies.

Q: Oh, in that case they would, but you could.

COBURN: No, but the long term meant that you could move out and take care of the short term ones, but the long term you would send out.

Q: Talk a little bit about one other aspect that always fascinated me and that is the issue of official and diplomatic passports and the pressure to issue those to various people. I remember the famous case after Jimmy Carter's administration when they found that Burt Lance as budget director had a diplomatic passport when he no longer had any official government position. Did you run into some interesting examples in that line and plus the desire on the part of other agencies of the government to make sure that their people had these official diplomatic passports?

COBURN: Originally diplomatic passports had been issued to commissioned diplomatic officers. That meant career Foreign Service officers who had a diplomatic appointment. As time went on the pressures for what people considered to be a perk increased. I recall seeing Assistant Secretary Clark sign a memo for the under secretary of management which said that so much administrative time was spent adjudicating special requests for these passports that she recommended a blanket approval for anyone assigned to a diplomatic establishment, be they a Customs employee or INS or FBI, have a diplomatic passport for the duration of their assignment. So, the number of diplomatic passports increased dramatically after that. Another decision was to have ambassadors and senior department officers to have diplomatic passports in perpetuity, including the under secretary of management. Well, the under secretary of management was glad to approve that recommendation.

Q: By in perpetuity you mean the rest of their lives?

COBURN: The rest of their lives.

Q: Interesting. I would say it's worth nothing that in my experience and this is one of these interesting things that having a diplomatic passport made no difference to your life whatsoever. It certainly didn't exempt you from Customs checks. Certainly if you were coming into the United States they were prepared to look at your.

COBURN: Right, there was talk of eliminating the different passports.

Q: Maybe people thought it helped them when they went overseas.

COBURN: Yes, we proposed that we do like the British do and just have one passport for everybody. So, that went to the field. I remember seeing cables back from places in Africa and East Asia. "Oh, without a diplomatic passport we could never get from A to B." "It's the only protection we have when we're out in the country." I think people are very impressed by that. So, that sort of carried the day and we kept the three passports, regular, official and diplomatic.

Q: So, they make an argument I suppose of that system. It's mystery to me that it ever did anything for anybody.

COBURN: It certainly didn't do anything when you were in a country. You needed a document issued by the country saying that you were a diplomat. In many places people were able to bluff through on diplomatic passports I think just because some border guards didn't know and were afraid of getting in trouble. If you acted like you were somebody and showed something that indicated maybe you were they would let you pass. I'm sure there's a lot of skullduggery that goes on with all that. We also found that the number of people who were born in Washington in foreign diplomatic missions attempted to get American passports. They'd bring in their birth certificates and if the adjudicator wasn't sharp enough to check because anybody born in the U.S. is a citizen except children born here of foreign diplomats.

Q: We're talking with Harry Coburn here about his experiences in the passport office. This is tape four, side A, so continue. How many years did you spend in the passport office?

COBURN: It was close to six years.

Q: Six years. You started with Joan Clark and you finished with Elizabeth Tamposi. Joan was a career person; Elizabeth Tamposi was a political appointee I guess. Talk a little bit about that and how she got that job and where she was from.

COBURN: Yes, the transition was an interesting one.

Q: This is from President Reagan to President Bush which was a little unusual in the sense that it was a Republican transition, but even when that happens all the old appointees go, right?

COBURN: That's right, at least they all submit their resignations. They can be retained, but in this particular case Joan Clark was at the end of her career and retired as assistant secretary for consular affairs. The news that Elizabeth Tamposi was going to be the new assistant secretary caught everyone by surprise. No one knew anything about her. When she came in she turned out to be a rather vivacious youngish lady with a small child. I was involved immediately with her as a part of the "staff" and I was present at her nomination hearing in the senate which I thought was unusual, but she wanted us all to go with her. Senator Sarbanes from Maryland asked her how she ended up in this particular position. She said, well, it so happened that after the election, her next door neighbor who happened to be the senator from New Hampshire started talking to her and asked her if she was interested in any job. She said, yes, she was. She was from a fairly well to do family and I assume they made substantial contributions to the election campaign.

Q: She was I think a state legislator in New Hampshire. That's very much a part time job. They have the biggest state legislator in the country, 400 members in it, but she had some political experience and her family was I think were big contributors.

COBURN: So, Senator Sarbanes said, "Let's walk through it step by step. How did this happen?" She said, "Well, I went and looked at the types of jobs that were available, that were open and I was interested in the State Department and I like to travel. So, I saw this assistant secretary to consular affairs and said that sounds interesting." He said, "What qualifications do you have to bring to this position?" She said, "Well, I've traveled widely and I am well experienced with the problems of the people who have to travel, so I think I can manage that." She was confirmed and commuted between Washington and New Hampshire each week. All of the senior staff in the bureau knew that our continuation in the job was insecure. The principal deputy learned during Ms. Tamposi's hearings that he was a short timer when in answer to Senator Sarbanes question about how she would run the bureau, she stated "I am looking for a first class deputy to help me." I was at a consular conference in Rome with Betty Tamposi shortly after her confirmation when I learned that my job was up for political appointee candidates. In fact, the wife of the man I had replaced many years earlier in Rome was the candidate. He had spent his time at the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) while his wife had served as the Republican Party Chairperson for Italy. The White House was pushing for a job for her in the State Department. She didn't get it but once back in the U.S. I received a telephone call on Saturday night from Betty Tamposi from New Hampshire informing me that my replacement would be coming from the personnel office of the White House. Hearing this, I arranged for my own departure from the bureau rather than stay as an overcomplement officer until they found a place for me.

Q: So, this was in 1990?

COBURN: 1990.

Q: So, what happened then?

COBURN: I returned to personnel.

Q: Your cone was not consular, you're still an economic cone officer?

COBURN: Still an economic cone officer, but nobody in the economics bureau knew who I was or cared about me.

Q: Never having actually had an economics job. Not for many years.

COBURN: Not ever. I went to the deputy assistant secretary for personnel. I said I'm one of these gypsies in the Department without a home bureau. The closest to a home bureau is the personnel office since I spent so much time in it. The deputy assistant for personnel smiled and said, well, you're not going to get anything from us. I thanked him kindly and I went and dealt with my assignment officer. They put me temporarily in MMO which was the under secretary for management operations office. I had an office on the seventh floor and they gave me chores to do. One of my most interesting ones was to try and prevent the establishment of the bureau of South Asian Affairs, which Congressman Steven Solarz was pushing. I asked what resources do I have. They said, well, there's a computer and there's your desk and there's the telephone.

Q: Solarz was the congressman from New York. Steven Solarz who wanted to create a new South Asia bureau, in effect take pieces out of the Near Eastern South Asia Bureau and create a bureau that would consist of India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

COBURN: Don't forget Afghanistan.

Q: Yes, and maybe places like Bhutan and Nepal. It got such a hard sell because India never got its proper attention from the U.S. Government because it was part of a bureau that went from Morocco to Burma.

COBURN: And all the attention in that region was on the Israel/Palestine question.

Q: So, Solarz was pushing this proposal and naturally the Department was resisting?

COBURN: The Department didn't see the need for another bureau with the superstructure that such an organization would require. Subsequently Solarz was defeated for office.

Q: Right. He ran for the senate I think but his bureau lives on.

COBURN: Well, you are correct; the bureau was created, but after my time. I had to prepare the report the Department sent to Congress listing all the reasons such a move would not be reasonable at that time. It was interesting to have to do the entire report by myself. I also had some interesting work in understanding all the various activities MMO did. For example, trying to control staffing levels at overseas posts was a continual battle. The office was attempting to cut back the staffing of the embassy in Manila and we were fought every step of the way by the embassy and the Washington agencies that had staff there. Then some Americans were attacked in a terrorist incident and the stampede out of Manila was so heavy that we overshot our goals on reduction.

Q: It is worth noting that people who think that the central management of the Department can simply control position levels overseas by just issuing an order really take a naive view of things I would say, right?

COBURN: You are correct in that. As in the case of the Director General of the Foreign Service, the official has the authority and the State Department has the responsibility but that doesn't mean that the Director General nor the Department have the power to enforce their decisions. When you deal with other agencies who are represented overseas, it becomes more difficult since their funding and support is often found in various congressional committees whose members are likely to back them on conflicts with the Department. When you have staffing fights, you can't appeal to the Secretary of State to weigh in on every issue. So lacking that option, the best you could expect was some compromise between contending positions. If the local ambassador was opposed to the reduction, the battle was that much harder. Fortunately, my time in the office was short since I was asked to chair one of the promotion panels for Foreign Service Officers. Upon completion of that task, I was assigned to be the Director of the Office of Performance Evaluations which controls and manages the promotion panels and the promotion system. This proved to be my third assignment in the Office of Personnel and did round out my experience with the Foreign Service Personnel System.

Q: What did you do in there really, what does that mean?

COBURN: The Performance Evaluation System is organized to review the performance files of all Foreign Service personnel once a year to determine which of its members should be promoted, which should be separated for poor performance and to advise the Director General on areas which the panels identify as needing attention in the operation of the System. The effective operation of this process is key to the health of the Foreign Service since the end result could be the retirement or separation of its members who are not competitive. Rewarding the talented personnel with advancement to the next rank also provides a fresh group of people who would become eligible for assignment to the more demanding jobs in the Department and in overseas posts. The first step is to identify good and well respected personnel to staff the panels. These employees know what skills are needed in the various specialties and can read the performance files to identify those who possess them. In addition, we had to identify and train persons outside government service to be the public member. Each panel had to have one non-Departmental employee to participate. In addition each panel had to have minority and female representation. Just finding the right mix for the great number of panels that we had to support was a difficult task. Each year, the Director General had prepared what was called the "precepts." The precepts instructed the panel on the qualities that the Service needed and was the "marching orders" for the various panels. Once their work was done, then we had to have the proposed promotee vetted by the security office and the equal opportunity office to ensure that no promotee was under investigation for some offense. Q: Let me ask you this question. Apart from time in class when someone runs out of a certain number of years to get promoted, does anybody ever get removed from the Foreign Service for cause?

COBURN: Yes.

Q: What is the cause or for low rank, in other words, low rank would essentially mean incompetence. In those two categories, cause and incompetence, what kind of percentages would you say there are? I believe that there are roughly 3,000 Foreign Service officers. How many a year would you think were removed in those categories, cause and low rank?

COBURN: Cause is not a personnel evaluation issue. Removal for cause would result from a security or law breaking event. The selling of visas for example is a classic reason for an officer to be fired and jailed. Similarly selling classified information to unauthorized people would result in a similar act. These things are done outside the evaluation system. What we were doing was low ranking personnel as marginal performance in relation to their peer group. Each panel was instructed to identify the lowest performing individuals in each class.

Q: Was anybody ever removed for low rank?

COBURN: Yes. Every year there was one or two who were forced out.

Q: One or two people a year, of the 3,000 potential, is found incompetent?

COBURN: That is correct, but the end result is achieved after a process that is full of safeguards. The first panel, which identifies the low rankers, is then followed by the formation of a second panel which reviews the same information, without knowing beforehand which of the files it is reviewing has been identified for separation. If that panel finds the same file weak enough for low ranking, the decision is confirmed. Of course, then the employee can grieve the result and attempt to have material removed from the file which caused the action. So yet another panel reviews that request before the final separation action is taken. After that, an employee, if they so wished, could file a law suit against the Department.

Q: Then you have to be low ranked for at least two years or something for that to happen? If it happened the first year.

COBURN: Yes, it has to be two different panels.

Q: Two different panels, right.

COBURN: I had an experience when I was on the panel where we low ranked someone who had been in grade something like seven years and the very next year when I was the director of the personnel evaluation systems, the panel promoted him because he'd been in grade for so long. His file was very weak. But that's what the panel system is all about because you get different personalities. Some have compassion and some are tough.

Q: Well, that's what I was going to say. In effect, the way the present system, for better or worse, the way the present system runs is that the people that come in as junior officers and they have to go through a tenuring process and some are eliminated there. But essentially if you go from there to mid-rank it's safe to say that you have a lifetime guarantee except for issues of cause. I'm not saying that's bad, but that is.

COBURN: I think it's important to put on the record that the reason this happens, I think, is the murder of the family of a Foreign Service officer which occurred in Potomac, Maryland in.

Q: The Bradford Bishop case?

COBURN: The Bradford Bishop case. Bradford Bishop was a political officer and he was not promoted and he went home that night and killed his wife, three children and his mother.

Q: Allegedly, we have to say in a sense that he disappeared thereafter.

COBURN: He disappeared thereafter and the bodies of his family were found in the Great Smokey Mountains of North Carolina. He's never been seen since.

Q: So, you never accepted the theory, there was a theory that he had gone off to the Smokey Mountains himself and he killed himself out in the woods or starved to death wandering around the back hills of Tennessee? That never struck you as likely?

COBURN: No, I always thought he had probably planned for an escape. He had worked with the DIA and could have been given false documentation as a cover, which he kept.

Q: But this happened at the very time he heard he wasn't being promoted?

COBURN: Right.

Q: There's also the famous Thomas case in which the poor officer didn't have enough time quite in for retirement in those days and killed himself. They've changed the system subsequently so that basically anybody that got to the mid-level would get enough time in to get to age 50 and retire and get a pension. Under the old system you could be tossed out in your 40s which is ultimately what happened to poor Thomas who then killed himself.

COBURN: Right.

Q: So, you think those events led I mean people on assignment panels were aware certainly of the Thomas case, that that led people to be more sympathetic.

COBURN: Career-wise, a lot of people had personal problems and you just don't toss them out on the street and assume that they somehow will survive. So you carry them through to give them a minimal retirement and they can live for the rest of their lives the best that they can.

Q: Right. So, the system was done in that way. So, you did this for two years. Were there any particular oddities or events which strikes you from that period?

COBURN: No, in fact the period was a very tranquil. The only problems I had in that job were trying to get people to serve on the panels because once again you want the best Foreign Service people you can get to do it. The best Foreign Service people are usually in demanding jobs. The director general at the time was really an AID officer who had come in and been assigned to the embassy in Africa and then the embassy in South Africa and then he'd come back and had been named director general. As opposed to some director generals, he didn't know the senior officers in the Foreign Service or the State Department that well. You couldn't use him to get some of the top officers you wanted on your senior panels. It was always a struggle to get somebody to participate. We would tell them you've been nominated and please report. Then they'd call in and say the foreign minister is coming over next week, war is going to break out in three weeks, I can't leave the country, etc. At my level I couldn't force them and he didn't know them well enough to do it. We were always struggling with that kind of effort to get good people.

Q: I always had a theory on which you can give me your comments. I felt that the State Department promotion system worked somewhat in a fallen way, that everyone of talent got promoted in the Foreign Service, but no one that you would point to that you knew when you said this is really a good officer did not go pretty well along in a career. It doesn't mean that they all got to be ambassadors or even got to be the very top grade, but people with talent really could go long. But that a number of incompetents also went along and that was just how the system was. It did not fail to identify people with ability and move them up, but a number of other people also swam along. Is that a fair characterization?

COBURN: Well, you know, I would have said that, but my last assignment in which I dealt with an ambitious political officer who led me to believe that maybe the system is played a lot more than I thought it was. In our day you got an efficiency report and you were able to comment on it and say "I think that's a little harsh, could you moderate that somewhat?" The efficiency reports were always full of water, everybody knew that. So, we were looking for things in the efficiency reports that would give you some sense as to what the reality of it was, but then in my last assignment, I had officers coming to me, the political officers who were very ambitious and hard charging. I remember one saying, "I would like you to say I am so pleased to have so and so work for me." I said, "Well, I'm not, so I can't say it." He said, "You're hurting my career." I said, "You have to prove to me that you deserve a career." He said, "I am not happy here and my wife says we have to leave." I said, "Well, I'm sorry you feel that way, but this is an organization and you're part of it, you don't tell supervisors what to write."

Anyway, he left. I had another one come in, not quite as bold as all of that, but again, trying to draft their own efficiency reports so that they could be competitive in the next promotion. When you read the political officer's files in the promotion panels you see that the adjectives were straining with enthusiasm. I guess I was educated dealing with these people because I'd never experienced that in my previous assignments. I'd never really been in a political section. Maybe that is part of the culture of political officers, they're all striving to outpace each other.

Q: Well, that's what I mean to say. A number of people like that or in some similar temperaments or other cones will get it, but I mean did you have a sense of cases of people who had great ability or very high ability that did not get ahead of the system, that somehow the promotion system did not identify people like that correctly and really held them back for years?

COBURN: Generally, you're right, but I think there were cases of personality conflicts caused either by the boss or the subordinate, I don't know which. I remember one case when I was on the panel that was very troubling to us because the officer was in El Salvador during a terrible time and was given a very harsh report. He rebutted it in which he talked about his inability to stand aside and watch the embassy look the other way while people were being shot down in the streets. We spent, I think, five hours on that one report debating the validity of his comments and the validity of the report and looking at the totality of his career. We ended up recommending him for promotion.

Q: But that's my point. So, the system at least in your experience does pick up on some of these things and makes a concerted effort in the promotion system by being fair about it.

COBURN: I think because you could say one panel would overlook it, but then you have another chance with another whole fresh group of people.

Q: Right. Obviously the rest of his file must have been prettimpresive.

COBURN: Yes.

Q: Now, let me ask you one other question. There's a myth that I always heard or a story that I always heard that once promotion lists were ready and they went up to the director general's office that some kind of book cooking could go on, that somebody whose name hadn't been sent up suddenly moved up the list or somebody else's name moved in. Would you comment on that for historical purposes?

COBURN: For historical purposes, I think that is balderdash.

Q: So do I, but people often said that.

COBURN: Of course. I think the lists were tightly held, nobody to my knowledge knew about it until it happened. They were vetted by two offices, the security office and the Equal Opportunity Office, and then were released. If somebody's name was taken off the list because of security, they were notified about it and told what recourse they had, but nobody penned in a name at the last minute. I mean, to my knowledge, it never happened.

Q: No, that's all, that's fair, I'd like to get that on the record because people often felt that somehow or other someone would get moved up or the line would go down to catch somebody further down.

COBURN: No, I might talk about that because I don't know how much people know about the process itself. When the panel goes in and starts reading the files, they're told to do a rough pass/no pass. After they get rid of the no pass files, they go back and read the files again. Each member of the panel has to give a number, one, two, three, four, whatever and you go around the room and each member of the panel will say a number from one to ten, one being the best. If people say two and somebody says eight, then the person who says eight has to give a presentation as to what he saw that might have been overlooked. Then you have a debate about that and you come up with a consensus as to what the number should be, four or three or maybe two. When you get through this whole process which takes a long time, you have a rank order of one to 200. Then you go into my office and say we're ready now, what is the promotion number? For example, say the promotion number this year is 36. Then you look at your number and you see everybody above 36 is promoted and everybody below is not. So, you take a number, I forget what it was, five above or five below or ten above and ten below and you look at that group right on the cusp and you revote them. Now you know how many promotions are there. So, then you reassess the group around the promotion number and reorder it. Then you submit the names and that's the promotion list which is actually published.

Q: Interesting.

COBURN: Did you know that?

Q: Yes, I did, but I'm glad to get it down here because I don't know whether other people have discussed that. I did some assignment panel work myself although they were special panels. No, I thought that that end of the system on balance ran extremely fairly and that the system worked about as well as it could. I'm not saying, sometimes before the opening of a panel you had to run around and find peoples' files and that kind of thing, but a lot of effort went into that and the panels took their deliberation very seriously. They were very carefully constructed because the outside members were very important and the system went to some effort to get them because it brought a distinct voice in.

COBURN: I was on two promotion panels in my career, and mostly the public members as they call them were completely flustered by the process. They took the lead of the Foreign Service people. Sometimes they did bring in aspects that we might not have thought about. You had to spend much time explaining a lot of the details of how the Foreign Service worked.

Q: Usually I think they ended up quite impressed with the system.

COBURN: They always were impressed with the people that they read about because, as tourist travelers, they didn't know what was going on in an embassy. Just to finish up on this I'd like to mention briefly we had special panels. As a result of grievances you had to look at a file again because something was taken out or something that was taken out had been put back in. You would run these special panels. We also had the junior officers for tenuring.

Q: Tenuring.

COBURN: The tenuring process. We ran those panels as well.

Q: So, you were in there for two years and then? Now this brings uup to the summer of 1992 basically?

COBURN: 1992 when I was looking in my in basket and a memo or a telegram directed to the senior officers assignment in FCA was in my in basket from Rome saying aren't there any other candidates for political counselor? I said, there are no candidates for political counselor in Rome? So I put my bid in to be political counselor in Rome and was subsequently assigned there.

Q: So, how long was that assignment going to be for?

COBURN: That assignment was going to be three years which would be the end of my career unless I was promoted to be a career minister. Since it was unlikely that I would get that kind of promotion as a political counselor in Rome, I knew my career would end in Rome.

Q: Or unless you got a presidential appointment or a ambassadorship, which goes beyond the normal time limit.

COBURN: Oh, yes, but it was unlikely that either a promotion or an ambassadorship would come my way at that time of my life. I knew when I went to Rome that I would be completing my time in the Foreign Service at the conclusion of the assignment in 1995.

Q: So, you had left Italy previously in 1976 after having spent six years there in FAO in the consulate in Florence. You return in '92 as political counselor and what do you find about Italy?

COBURN: A country in crisis. The whole system was on the verge of collapse.

Q: The political structure.

COBURN: The political structure.

Q: The economy just went on about its business.

COBURN: Well, they were disconnected and always had been.

Q: Right.

COBURN: Judge Falconi, who was an anti-mafia investigator, had been assassinated in May before my arriving in Rome.

Q: In '92?

COBURN: Yes.

Q: In Sicily?

COBURN: Yes. We arrived in August. The parliament was in a long drawn out process to elect a new president of the republic. Something that happened every six years. One of the leaders of the Christian Democrat Party, Giulio Andreotti, who had been over the years prime minister, foreign minister, and held other cabinet posts was seeking to be elected president of the Italian Republic. The election is held in the parliament and the contending political forces vote for the chief of state.

Q: This was in 1992?

COBURN: Yes. Andreotti was one candidate and Benito Craxi, the leader of the Socialist Party, was another. Craxi had skillfully used the position of the Socialist Party in the middle of the political spectrum to gain power and influence. However, the shock to the political system of the assassination made the politicians realize that the game had changed. Italy needed a new face to lead the country, one who had no history of involvement in the various political machinations. To the public surprise a little known backbencher, Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, who had been in parliament since 1948 but hadn't belonged to any political faction, was elected. He was criticized by some as being too closely associated with the Roman Catholic Church.

Q: Was he a Christian Democrat?

COBURN: Yes. Some felt that he was "too religious" to be the head of the state. He was recognized as an honest man who wasn't associated with any of the many scandals that had plagued the country since 1948. The leading politicians felt he was a good symbol of Italy reeling from the Mafia assassinations. The first thing President Scalfaro did was block the appointment of Craxi as prime minister.

Q: Keep him from being Prime Minister?

COBURN: Prevented him from being leader of the government. Having a practicing Catholic as president forced many to believe that a socialist should be prime minister. Otherwise the strong anti-clerical political forces would make life difficult. To solve the dilemma, Giuliano Amato, a socialist advisor to Craxi, was named prime minister. Amato was very smart and a trained economist. In addition, he spoke excellent English, a rarity for an Italian politician, and had good contacts in the United States where he had studied. He actually lived across the street from our embassy on Via Veneto and was a charming man with an intelligent and attractive wife. Amato used his time in office to try and make some economic reforms. What was more important was that two honest men were at the helm when the "clean hands" investigations took place. The common impression was if Craxi had been prime minister, Antonio Di Pietro, the investigating magistrate who uncovered widespread corruption would have been transferred to Sardinia before he could have documented all the crime he discovered. Di Pietro's investigations spread widely and resulted in scandal, suicides, arrests and the destruction of the old political system.

Q: This is in essence a tremendous kind of political bribery, like a huge octopus with arms all over the political business structure of the country and it all just began to pour out around the fall of '92 and the beginning of '93?

COBURN: Exactly. That was the time that this was all happening. Everybody had known that there was corruption operating just under the surface but it had never been exposed to the public in such a dramatic way. So many people were disgraced as a result that the whole political dynamic of the country was altered. The Christian Democrat Party split, new parties were formed, and by the time of the next national elections, the past most powerful politician, Craxi, was gone.

Q: Craxi went into exile?

COBURN: Yes, he went to Tunisia, where he had a vacation villa and spent the rest of his days there until he died. The Socialist Party disappeared and various factions surfaced with new names. Alone untouched by the scandals was the Communist Party because it had always been kept out of government. But even that Party changed.

Q: The Communist Party changed its name and split itself though, not because of corruption, but after the fall of the Soviet Union, right?

COBURN: At the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the fear of Soviet domination disappeared and this was one of the key elements that kept the Communist Party out of government. As a relatively "clean party," the prospects of the Party increased with the meltdown of the other political forces in Italy. They changed their name to the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS using the Italian initials) and strived to make themselves more presentable to the middle class. By doing so, they also lost the more radical members of the old Communist Party who left and reconstituted themselves as the Refounded Communist Party. Into this confused situation strode the richest man in Italy, Berlusconi, who used his considerable wealth and business experience to organize a political force which he named Forza Italia. This term, which means either Go Ahead Italy or Hurray Italy, was a slogan used to urge on his soccer team to victory. Berlusconi forged alliances with an anti-establishment party located in the north of Italy and the old far right party together with the pieces of the old center parties to form a conservative balance to the newly organized PDS.

Q: Mussolini's granddaughter was a member of that far right party, right?

COBURN: Yes, she was one of the more photogenic members of the party and a relative of Sophia Loren which meant she received lots of press attention.

Q: What was the attitude of the United States government toward this whole swirling thing that was going on in Italy? COBURN: We were very supportive of the efforts the Italians were making to clean up the system. At the time all this was happening, we had a change of ambassadors. When I arrived in 1992, a political appointee from the state of Michigan was the ambassador. He was a wealthy businessman who had been a key supporter of George Bush and been helpful in the president's victory in the state of Michigan. He was a first generation Italian, very proud of his ancestry even though he couldn't speak the language. He was a man larger than life in many respects, but somewhat difficult as a leader of men. First of all, he was more interested in the social aspects of the job than he was in anything having to do with internal politics. He spent a good deal of time traveling around the country but never brought back information which could be used in our political reports. The DCM at that time was also from outside the traditional Foreign Service, a man who had an economic background. There wasn't much reporting being done during this period. The ambassador gave great parties and used to import food from Michigan for his affairs. I remember one party he gave which had an "old west" theme. The Ambassador got horses and cowboys from I can't guess where and lit bonfires in the gardens of the residence to have cookouts. We as hosts were given cowboy hats and plastic pistols to give to the Italian guests as they arrived at the hoe-down. It fell to me to give to the somewhat puzzled head of the Bank of Italy (and subsequently President of Italy) a cowboy hat to wear and to his wife, a pistol to hold. The Italians all dressed up in their finery were somewhat puzzled as to what they should do with this equipment as they entered the gardens to enjoy an old west experience. Shortly thereafter, I was in a car being driven by one of the embassy's Italian chauffeurs who said to me in Italian, "Mr. Coburn, do you mind if I ask you a question?" I replied, "No, what?" "I would like to know why the American government sends us Italian Americans as ambassadors. These people couldn't make a living in this country and had to leave to find work. Then they return and tell us how to run our country. It doesn't make sense to us." I said, "Well, we think they have a certain empathy for their country of origin." He replied, "You don't understand Italy at all if you think that." I have always remembered that conversation and wondered how widely that feeling was held in Italy. But the Ambassador had a style all his own. He was a big buff man who didn't hold the Foreign Service or the Government employees from any agency in high regard. He found government procedures bothersome and all the rules an inconvenience.

Q: Well, I mean as the political thing was going on, did the Italiapolitical structure look at all to the Americans, I mean.

COBURN: They were always looking at us at everything we were doing. Many saw the United States as the "protector" of Italian democracy. At the same time many resented the U.S. Italians had a superiority and inferiority complex at the same time. As the inheritors of an ancient civilization, they tended to look down on Americans who could only speak one language who had, in their minds, a limited education. On the other hand, they saw themselves as a country lagging behind Europe with a political structure that was, to say the least, dysfunctional. Many of the Italians I talked to spoke of the Common Market or European Union as the salvation for Italy. They saw it giving Italy the discipline it needed. I was told on several occasions that "we need the discipline that comes from being part of Europe." Also implied in this statement was the thought that we will not need to depend on the United States once Italy is firmly in the European family.

Q: How did the United States present itself then to the Italians in this situation? I mean what, did we try to influence it or did we simply say, look it's up to you, you deal with it or what? How was it handled?

COBURN: We always publicly supported what was happening and in private told the Italian political leadership that we believed that the Italians had the strength and courage to handle the developing situation. So everything that we were doing at that time was to help Italy get through a difficult period. After all, a strong Italy could only strengthen the Western Alliance. Q: And you didn't have any sense that behind the scenes the United States was pushing for a particular solution to this or favor a political coalition or group or anything like that?

COBURN: No. We didn't have any favorites in the political realm and as it turned out, the natural tendencies of the conservative forces to coalesce resulted in the development of the closest version of a two party system that Italy had ever experienced. The elimination of the threat of a Soviet takeover had allowed social and political interests to break down into liberal and conservative groupings, as it found in most countries.

Q: So the political ambassador left at the end of the Busadministration?

COBURN: He made a big point of departing Italy at 12 noon oinauguration day.

Q: The day Clinton was being inaugurated? So what happened then afar as the embassy was concerned?

COBURN: Without an ambassador, the DCM became the charge. He indicated to the staff that his only goal was to make the embassy into a first rate institution by the time the new ambassador was in place. The interregnum lasted for about six months. The new ambassador was a senior State Department official. I can't say he was in the Foreign Service because he never was but he was in the State Department system for some time. When he arrived he was quick to tell us at the morning staff meeting that he had taken and passed the Foreign Service exam but had gone on to other things. Later in his career he had come to the State Department as an analyst and had, at one time worked for the Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger. He spoke excellent Italian and his wife, a native of France, was welcomed into the Roman society where all the top officials spoke French but not all spoke English. Since both the ambassador and his wife were comfortable in French, they moved easily in the highest levels of society and had access to the kinds of people that their predecessor never could manage. The new ambassador did a lot of political reporting on his own based on personal conversations he had with the political leadership of the country. However, the new ambassador was somewhat aloof and kept his distance from the staff. I remember when he entered my office while I was holding the morning political officers meeting and told us all to stand up. His visit was unexpected and his approach expressed his view of his position vis a vis the staff. He did not encourage a spirit of fellowship among his senior staff, even though we saw him every morning and usually several times during the day. He did not want to "waste his time" on lesser priorities and required that I screen his invitation to ensure that he only went to the most important events. At one cocktail party, his wife came up to me upon entering and directed me to identify the "important people" to whom she should converse. Another time I recommended he attend a dinner at a second level embassy, but an important ally of the United States in the Far East. The next day I was the carpet since he considered the evening not very useful. He also cooled morning discussions when after a section head made a report, he would reply with the statement "don't tell me something I already know." To be fair, he probably learned some of these techniques at the foot of the master in Washington. However, overseas where teamwork is an important factor in the morale of the staff, affections of imperial style undermine the cooperation of the key elements of an embassy and cause muttering in mid and low level staff. The number of requests for curtailment of tour and transfer during his presence in Rome should have indicted that a change in style of was needed. In spite of these personality problems his obvious intelligence, knowledge of the language, and skill in developing contacts with the local important political and economic leadership, made his presence in Italy at such a crucial period important for the successful attainment of our goal to strengthen the Italian political process. In addition the fact that he had made the confidence of the leadership in Washington made the ending of the veto on contacts with the far right and far left parties much easier to attain.

Q: Let's talk about that because it is quite interesting. H"recognized" both parties at the same time. Is that a fair statement?

COBURN: Yes, we made formal and public contact with the leadership of the Reformed Communist Party and the neo-fascist party at the same time, thereby neutralizing any criticism from either the left or the right about our actions.

Q: But wasn't there the famous thing July 4th party where political leaders, never before invited, showed up? Let's talk about that a bit because I don't think that people realize these social functions sometimes carry very portentous implications.

COBURN: The first year I was in Rome during the start of the anti-corruption "clean hands" investigation, I purged the guest list of all the politicians and other figures who would have been implicated in the scandals. So, that year a lot of the Christian Democratic political leaders didn't come. I felt that it was important for the United States to show that it was a new day and we would be dealing with those politicians who had good reputations and would hopefully become the future leaders of a strong Italian democracy.

Q: Italians watched this very carefully? Am I right? I mean they would know the people who went to that event.

COBURN: In political circles they would know. Since so many of the political class was at the party, the absence of some of the implicated figures would be obvious.

Q: They would know okay, so then.

COBURN: We were sending a subtle signal that the invitees were the responsible political leaders and we look forward to dealing with them while the others were less than welcome. At the same time, we were reaching out to the parties on the far right and far left which had been ignored in all the post war years. My deputy was one of the political officers who established contact with the far right party and arranged for a visit of three of their leaders to the United States on a visitor grant.

Q: We think of that group as the inheritors of the fascist party but they didn't call themselves fascist, did they?

COBURN: No, the name of the party was the Italian Socialist Movement or MSI, in Italian. They were called neo-fascists by some of their opponents and fascists by the communists.

Q: Right. None of them had ever been formally attended to by the embassy? They were invited to social events or anything like that? They were treated in the same way, in effect, as the communists had been for all those years.

COBURN: Yes. We concentrated our efforts on the party in the center of the political spectrum and ignored the far left and far right until the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet Empire. Then our political section established contacts with middle ranking officials in the communist and MSI parties to learn of their plans and how they saw the political situation in Italy evolving. We did invite the leadership of the communist party of PDS to the Ambassador's residence.

Q: This was the big July 4th event?

COBURN: No, no. This was a private meeting which we expected would become public at some point. It was a face to face meeting between the Ambassador and the leadership of the PDS.

Q: The former communist party?

COBURN: Yes, the former communist party. The Ambassador and his senior staff met with the Party Secretary, Massimo D'Alema, for a social encounter. It was just a chance to chat and express our interest in meeting with him for time to time. Of course, this was all done in Italian because the PDS leadership did not speak English, although reportedly, some of them spoke Russian.

Q: What year was this? This was probably in '93 or '94?

COBURN: I think it was 1994.

Q: Yes, early in 1994. Okay. So, you talked with them for about 3minutes?

COBURN: That was it. From then on we could have regular contacts aall levels of the embassy.

Q: But the signal went around in the Italian political class that the Untied States was now prepared to accord some recognition or attention to this entity.

COBURN: We were dropping any objection we had to the ex-communisparty.

Q: And we didn't see them as any threat to Italian democracy.

COBURN: Right. With the end of the Soviet system and the potential threat to a takeover in Italy, the Italian political system could now operate in a more normal manner with the possibility of governments changing from conservative to liberal. Having a left wing or liberal government in Italy would not destabilize the Western alliance.

Q: The PDS itself was no longer running around saying NATO must go and all that type of propaganda?

COBURN: The PDS was acting more restrained but to the left of them was the Refounded Communist Party, which had broken away and still maintained the old anti-U.S., NATO, etc. line.

Q: But wasn't the head of the Refounded Communist Party at the July th event which I know the head of the MSI was present.

COBURN: What year are you remembering?

Q: Yes, this was the summer of '94 and because it was felt, and I remember the discussions, it was felt that in the staff meetings that I went to that if he was going to have the PDS at this event, that it was now time to have the MSI. I remember the ambassador coming to the staff meeting the next day and saying that he had shook the hand of the leader of the MSI.

COBURN: I am glad you remember that because I don't.

Q: That was in effect the balancing that if you had one party on the far left, you needed one party on the far right and therefore we would now talk to everybody. So these social events do have meaning.

COBURN: The July 4th party was the high point of the social year. It was always a grand affair held in the gardens of the ambassador's residence in the Parioli section of Rome. The villa was once the property of a cardinal and was beautifully laid out amongst the gardens. Do you remember the party after the departure of the political appointed ambassador? It was one of the best.

Q: No.

COBURN: It was a good opportunity to meet and mix with all the leaders of government, industry, and society. There were bankers, movie stars, politicians, industrialists, top governmental officials, etc. The setting was spectacular and the music and food were always top notch. Everyone came because they knew that it was a place to be seen.

Q: So, you think the embassy handled this Italian political crisis correctly and that it redounded to our good, to our reputation, that we did so?

COBURN: I think we steered through very choppy waters with a firm hand. We didn't interfere in the domestic political situation but made it clear by our public statements that we supported efforts to clean house and establish a healthy political system that could meet the needs of the Italian population.

Q: But the ambassador was, I mean it seems to me that this was a pretty good argument for having a very highly experienced professional at post. There were a lot of legends about how he got that job but, however it turned out, it appeared to be a reasonable choice, a good one, you know.

COBURN: Yes, it was. The Italian-American Foundation had said in public that they would only support an Italo-American for the post of ambassador. The new ambassador, as it turned out, had an Italian heritage so there was no objection on the part of the Foundation to his nomination. He also had good contacts in Washington and was well known from his previous jobs in the State Department by all the senior officials in the building. With that kind of background, he had credibility in both Washington and Rome. Q: Does it make a difference individually? Because you see where somebody who couldn't handle himself could really have gotten in trouble.

COBURN: I suppose you could speculate on how things might have been different if we had a political appointee as ambassador at this time rather than one as well connected as the professional who was in place. Each embassy tends to evolve depending on the roles and interests of the principals. With an ambassador like we had who had a strong interest in the political developments of the country, the key leaders dealt with him directly and he reported on his conversations with little input from the rest of the staff. Lesser political figures became the contact point for the DCM, who was an old political officer. My main contacts were working level figures in the prime minister's office and the office of the president of the republic. My staff had working relationships with the desk officers in the foreign ministry and some of the political officers in the other embassies in Rome. I had excellent contacts with the political counselors in the British, French, Canadian, Indian, and Pakistan embassies. If you have a political appointee as ambassador and one who doesn't speak the local language, then the duties within the embassy are much different with the DCM and political counselor picking up much of the work.

An aspect of my job not well understood was the coordination role I played with the law enforcement elements and the military attaches. Our law enforcement community included the CIA, FBI, INS, Customs, the Secret Service, and the intelligence arms of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, with the addition of a special representative of the Attorney General. All of these people were dealing with counterparts in the Italian government. One of my jobs was to try and coordinate the information they all had so that we were sending the same message to various parts of the Italian government. As you know from your own experience, knowledge is power and trying to get each agency to share information was difficult. There was always a lot of reluctance and meetings sometimes resulted in merely sharing information on arrivals of various officials from Washington or other posts. We also had an intelligence committee which was chaired by the CIA station chief. This was just as difficult although it did provide a venue for members of the various elements to get to know each other. The staff of the embassy was so large that it would be possible to spend weeks without seeing someone unless there was the reason of a meeting.

With regard to the military, we constantly had to deal with parochial views among the various elements stationed in Rome and with military visitors who would arrive in Rome and sometimes try and act as if they were in the United States. We would have to remind them that they were in a foreign country and permission is required to do many of the things that they wish to do. At the time I was there we still didn't have a formal status of forces agreement which would regularize the rights and duties of the American forces in Italy. We were quite concerned that if a left leaning government ever came to power, there was no agreement to protect the military facilities which we had in the country. Negotiations on this agreement had been going on for years but little progress had been made. Fortunately a military officer who was assigned to the embassy at that time made it his personal crusade to get it done. To his credit he got it done before he was reassigned to Germany and promoted to General. He was one of the quality military people I met and I am glad that he was the right person at the right time. All too often the military assigned to Italy saw it as a pre-retirement post and enjoyed the country more than the job.

Q: As you said, it is very difficult to coordinate and obviously a big NATO presence. I remember there was a coordinating committee for Yugoslavia that was composed, I think, of the United States, England, and Russia, but not Italy. Yet all the bases that the U.S. was using were out of Italy. If my memory is correct this was a real question that the ambassador worked on intensely to get Italy into this committee.

COBURN: You are right. Italy felt that it was not being taken seriously and yet was expected to cooperate on all of these issues. France, Germany, and the UK were the leading European powers we always consulted. Italy wanted to get into that circle and complained to us often about imagined slights. When the Secretary of State or Deputy Secretary visited Europe, Italy always wanted to be a part of the visit. Since we expected Italy to provide resources, we really felt that Washington should be more forthcoming with the Italians and the ambassador worked on this directly.

Q: Were there any specific political issues that you remember?

COBURN: A few. One involved Ustica, which is an island off Sicily. An Italian domestic airliner crashed near there killing all on board. Immediately after the crash, there were charges that U.S. forces somehow were involved in the downing of the plane. This could be important in the law suits which followed for if the plane had been shot down, the insurance question would be different than if mechanical or pilot error were involved. Various conspiracy theories were put forward by the press including the speculation that the aircraft carrier stationed in Naples was part of the story. Someone in Naples, writing that all weddings in the city resulted in pictures being taken of the bridal couple with the bay in the background, suggested pictures of that day be produced to prove the aircraft carrier wasn't in port. Pictures were found and they showed that the carrier was in port that day.

Another continual political issue resulted from the arrest and imprisonment in the United States of an Italian woman terrorist, Silvia Baroldini. She had come to the U.S. as a baby and gotten involved in a bank robbery to support some radical movement. She was arrested and received a stiff prison sentence.

Q: Well, I think a policeman was killed in the robbery, right?

COBURN: She was the getaway car driver. She didn't fire the shot, but the men with her did and so she was an accessory. The Italians thought her imprisonment was harsh and there were committees seeking her release or return to Italy. Even the Pope got into the act. We had groups coming to the embassy with petitions all the time. Finally, it was agreed that she would be returned to Italy to finish her sentence in an area where her mother and other relatives could visit her.

Finally, when Yugoslavia did break up, Slovenia, which was on the border with Italy.

Q: Being the northernmost state or component of Yugoslavia.

COBURN: Yes, many Italians had lived there and at the end of World War II were expelled and their property was seized by the Yugoslavs.

Q: This was in the northeastern quarter of Italy?

COBURN: On the Adriatic. In this area you found a strong support for the far-right MSI party because of the number of refugees who had spent years looking across the border at their villas which had been seized by the Yugoslavs. Once the country dissolved, the Italians made appeals and put pressure on the Slovenians for recompensation for lost property and for adjustments to the border in such a manner to facilitate better border control. Our embassy in Slovenia got involved in some tiffs and we tried to keep them from escalating. Italian diplomats made several trips to try and resolve all these issues.

Q: Yes, my memory is that Italy particularly was preventing Slovenia from getting into the European Union and because it had some kind of veto. Their argument to the Slovenians was that we want some kind of agreement on the property and the refugees complaints before we are going to let you in.

COBURN: Susanna Agnelli was the foreign minister. She was the sister of Gianni Agnelli, the owner of Fiat and she was quite a strong character. I remember her first meeting with the ambassador where, contrary to all diplomatic protocol, she was forthright and in dramatic terms said, "You have got to stop pushing us around because we're going to push you right back." I think our ambassador was a bit taken aback by her attitude. However, the government didn't last all that long and she wasn't around to follow up.

Q: Yes, it only lasted about seven months and then the northern separatist leader fell out with the prime minister and they had a government of technocrats for quite a while.

COBURN: I think Dini, who was the treasury man, became the technocrat prime minister to do the budget and keep things more on line until they could have another election and that's the one I think that Prodi supported by the ex-communist party, came to power because the Christian Democratic Party which had always had a conservative and liberal side to it, but it was held together by the church and by the fear of communist takeover. Once that fear dissipated then the Christian Democratic Party split into its natural parts with the social sensitive part going into the left coalition and a more conservative part ending up as part of the newly organized force of Berlusconi.

Q: So, Italy as usual goes on with not much government in a way actually, the native ability and the energies of its people carrying it along?

COBURN: That's right.

Q: It's an amazing place.

COBURN: It's a survivor's paradise.

Q: Fifth or sixth biggest economy in the world. Incredible.

COBURN: Must be on its 58th or 59th government since 1948.

Q: Right and to no noticeable difference I suppose for anyone.

COBURN: Well, the last time I was there it was just humming along. In fact it seemed to be much better and the streets were cleaner, the buildings were cleaner. They have I think maybe gotten control of their budget and they're doing a good job.

Q: And Berlusconi is now back as Prime Minister.

COBURN: Yes, and stronger than ever.

Q: So, any other observations you'd like to make about your career your view of the State Department?

COBURN: I enjoyed my career in the Foreign Service. I consider myself fortunate in the friends I made, the posts I had, and all the events I experienced. There are not all that many careers that allow you to represent your country, travel and live overseas with your family, to meet top level people in the countries where you are assigned, hopefully make a difference. The Foreign Service is composed of some of the brightest and most ambitious Americans you will find anywhere. Unfortunately, political appointees tend to see the members of the Foreign Service as untrustworthy. On several occasions I have heard political appointees question the loyalty of the members of the Service to the political aims of whatever administration was in power at the time. This distrust harmed the effectiveness of whatever goals they were trying to achieve since many, but not all, of the political appointees I worked for were not of the caliber that you would hope to see in key positions. They owed their appointment to either money or work in the political campaigns. Often, they were not really interested in the jobs to which they were appointed. While the Foreign Service has quality people, the same cannot be said for the Department of State where many of the jobs held in Washington were filled with 9 to 5 types who didn't go out of their way to respond to the concerns of the staff assigned overseas. Not understanding the stress that overseas living can place on family members, there was sometimes a sense that overseas staff are spoiled and want to be taken care of all the time. The program to place some domestic staff on temporary duty overseas might go a long way to break down this feeling and give them a realistic taste of life on the front lines of diplomacy. Given the negatives and positives, I still believe that the Department of State, on balance, is the best organization in the federal government. My children had experiences that were unique and while many times they didn't appreciate being away from America, I hope that in the long run they will find that they gained more than they lost by being diplomatic vagabonds.

End of interview