

Interview with Maurice Bernbaum

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

AMBASSADOR MAURICE BERNBAUM

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

Initial interview date: January 13, 1988

Copyright 1998 ADST

Q: Mr. Ambassador, what brought you into the Foreign Service?

BERNBAUM: When I was a senior at Harvard I became friendly with an English graduate student from Cambridge. I was interested then in going into investment banking. He came from a Foreign Office family. His father, grandfather, brother, were all in the British Foreign Service. So we used to have great debates about which would be more interesting.

After I was graduated . . .

Q: You graduated what year?

BERNBAUM: In '31.

Q: Class of '31.

BERNBAUM: The economy just fell apart.

Q: That's not a good time to be an investment banker.

Library of Congress

BERNBAUM: No. Investment banking virtually disappeared, and at that point I recalled my conversations with this English friend. And so I applied to take the Foreign Service exams. My first application was made a bit late, so it wasn't accepted. That was in 1932. And I applied again in 1936. I took a cram course for about one month, and then took the exams and passed them. And I was appointed as Vice Consul at Vancouver at the end of '36, and I arrived there just before New Years.

Q: Was this a system where you took the exam and then you were told to go from your home straight to Vancouver? Or did you come for training here in Washington before you went to Vancouver?

BERNBAUM: I went to Vancouver first, and then came to Washington for training at the Foreign Service School. That lasted about three months. But Vancouver was more or less a training and probationary post for me, and I was put through the various paces.

Q: How did you find that system worked?

BERNBAUM: I thought it was very good. I thought it gave us a pretty good idea first of what being in the Foreign Service was like. I was a Vice Consul at Vancouver, and I learned about just what the functions were, and so I was in a better position when I arrived at the Foreign Service School to appreciate the training that we got there.

Q: Some practical knowledge beforehand, I think, does make a great deal of sense.

BERNBAUM: Yes, it made a great deal of difference.

Q: Did you find the entrance examination rather rigorous?

BERNBAUM: It was quite rigorous. It lasted for three days, about six hours each day. I believe there were about 2500 or 3000 applicants, of whom about 120 or so passed the written exam. And then we took an oral exam later. And about 22 of us survived.

Library of Congress

Q: Did you have any thoughts of what you wanted to do in the Foreign Service, both before you took the exam and after you finished in Vancouver?

BERNBAUM: No, nothing specific. I had a good economic background, and so I hoped that I'd be able to capitalize on that. But I was interested in just the Foreign Service, the romantic aspect of it, I think, attracted me too. The idea of going to far away places. And, as a matter of fact, my choice after going to Foreign Service School had been Singapore. That always seemed to be a rather romantic place. And it was an interesting place.

Q: How did you go, I mean sort of tasted the romance of the Far East. How did you find yourself moving into the Latin American circuit?

BERNBAUM: Well, that was interesting. I got married and I had been slated to go to Algiers, and then war was then on.

Q: Oh, yes. This was when?

BERNBAUM: This was—I returned from Singapore just before Pearl Harbor. And we were in the war shortly afterwards. I was slated to go to Algiers, but because I got married, apparently there were second thoughts in Personnel, and they sent me to Caracas, Venezuela instead.

Q: As I recall, we had a large number of Vice Consuls in Algiers who were basically the equivalent of CIA people at that time, reporting on the situation prior to our landing because of Vichy, France.

BERNBAUM: That would have been the FBI then.

Q: So, it was more by happenstance that you were assigned to Latin America—had you had any Spanish?

Library of Congress

BERNBAUM: No. I spoke pretty good French, pretty good German, and as a matter of fact, when I left Vancouver I made a bet with one of the non-career vice consuls that I would not go to Latin America. I won the bet, and then I had to pay him back after I went to Caracas.

Q: Well, in Caracas, what would a foreign service officer be doing in a post like that during the war? You must have had duties other than just the normal peace time duties.

BERNBAUM: Yes. I started there as a vice consul. The Consulate and the embassy were separate. And then because of my interest in economics, and my background in economics, I was assigned to the embassy as third secretary, where I did primarily economic work. And part of that was the blacklist.

Q: This was prohibiting exports to the Axis countries, is that right?

BERNBAUM: That's right. We collaborated with the Venezuelan government in preventing that, and also putting restrictions on the activities of Germans in Venezuela, German firms in Venezuela.

Q: Did Venezuela enter the Allied cause during the war?

BERNBAUM: No, no. It supported us. It was with us, but it was not a participant in the war.

Q: Then you had a series of other appointments. I note here, including one as a DCM in Ecuador. You had a chance to sort of taste both of the places where you later served.

BERNBAUM: Yes, that's right. Again, that was happenstance. I went to Managua, Nicaragua, although I had wanted to go to the war zone. I was particularly interested, I think at the time, in Istanbul. But there was a great need for a victim in Managua, Nicaragua, and I was it. As it turned out that was one of my more interesting assignments.

Library of Congress

Q: What type of things were you doing in Managua?

BERNBAUM: Well, I started there as Administrative Officer in charge of the Consulate. And then I became Political Officer, because the Political Officer had left. And eventually I became DCM there, in the absence of a formal DCM.

Q: You must have been a relatively junior officer, I'm sure, at that time.

BERNBAUM: Yes, I was. And that's where I learned Spanish, really. Because I found myself dealing with political figures. The embassy was a center of political activity. All the politicians would visit the embassy to speak with the ambassador. I was in the adjoining office, and I would speak with these people while they were waiting to see the ambassador. And so this, of course, sharpened my Spanish, and I probably learned more Spanish during that period than at any other time.

And when the ambassador was assigned to another post, I became Charg# d'affaires. I remained the Charg# d'affaires for about 13 months, and this was during a very interesting period when Somoza staged a coup against . . .

Q: Was Somoza the father.

BERNBAUM: The father, yes; he staged a coup against his wife's uncle, whom he had helped elect. The old man, his wife's uncle, had proceeded to put pressure on Somoza to leave the country, and that produced a coup against him. And I was in charge at that time.

Q: Well, did you find were we involved in giving support to changes in the government there?

BERNBAUM: Well, that issue came up as the result of the Braden experience in Argentina. The question arose as to whether we should use non-recognition.

Library of Congress

Q: The Braden experience concerned Peron, didn't it?

BERNBAUM: That's right. And the problem arose as to whether we should continue the policy of using nonrecognition as a device for influencing governments to have democratic systems.

I was there for 13 months, and during that whole period, while maintaining an open posture of nonintervention, my efforts were always devoted to trying to convince Somoza, whom I used to see quietly, we had no formal relations, to get out. He was just a bit too smart for us.

Q: Well, were you getting any particular instructions from Washington? Did you feel that you were more acting on you own, or were you under rather firm guidance from Washington at the time?

BERNBAUM: More on my own, I think.

Q: Little interest.

BERNBAUM: In other words, to the extent that I took the initiative, people in Washington were quite content to let me do it.

Q: Well, something that will come up later on, and so I'm sure that your Nicaraguan experience must have had an effect on how you looked on the world, how did you find the influence of American business interests in Nicaragua? Did you come away with any particular feeling towards them?

BERNBAUM: By and large the business interests tended to collaborate with Somoza. It was more convenient to work with a man with whom you could speak, get a final decision, and know that decision was going to be upheld. And so by and large I had the feeling that

Library of Congress

the business people, and there weren't very many in Nicaragua, but those who were there tended to support Somoza.

Q: More for the very practical matter of getting on with the work at hand?

BERNBAUM: That's right.

Q: Did you know at the time there, or was there sort of under-lying resentment from the long period of US Marine rule, in Nicaragua?

BERNBAUM: That's very interesting. I rather expected to find that, but I didn't. I suppose there was a great deal of resentment, probably in the more left wing circles, especially in the Communist party. And during my early days in Managua, I tried to make contact with the Communist party people to find out what they were thinking about, but they wouldn't have anything to do with me. But by and large I did not find any anti-American feeling because of the intervention. Not at that time anyway.

Q: How did you look upon the career? I notice your next posting was—you went from Nicaragua as DCM to Ecuador. Did you feel you had to lobby or push to get a job?

BERNBAUM: I never did.

Q: Did you feel that there was a—if you did your job you were given further responsibility, that there was a clear career pattern there?

BERNBAUM: Yes. Very definitely.

Q: Because one has the impression that today this is beginning to break down.

BERNBAUM: That started some time ago.

Q: Yes. But, then we'll come back to when you were in Ecuador as ambassador. You were DCM in Ecuador, and then DCM in Venezuela. Were you picking up things as a DCM

Library of Congress

saying, "I will never, never do such and such as an ambassador," at that time? Did you feel that you were training yourself to be an ambassador?

BERNBAUM: Well, yes in a sense. At each post I found myself the Charg# d'affaires for quite a long time, and so I more or less had both functions. And the feeling I had was it was much more difficult to be a Charg# d'affaires than it was to be an ambassador.

Q: Why was that?

BERNBAUM: Because you knew that the ambassador, had very definite ideas about what he wanted to do, and you would find situations arising that were not necessarily consistent with his ideas. And so the question was, would I do what I thought the ambassador would want me to do, or would I do what I thought was the thing to do, which is not a problem an ambassador has.

Q: After some time in the State Department you were in Argentina as DCM in 1959 to 1960. What was the situation in Argentina at that time?

BERNBAUM: Well, Peron had just been overthrown. Actually he had been overthrown when I got into the State Department from Venezuela, and I was in charge of the Office of South American affairs. And I got to know the Argentines quite well. We devoted ourselves after Peron's overthrow to reestablishing good relations with the Argentines. I played a rather key role in that. And so I got to know many Argentines.

Q: When you say you played a rather key role, how?

BERNBAUM: Negotiations with the Argentines. We had economic negotiations with them to settle outstanding economic problems, and through that I got to know quite a few of the Argentine people, who I knew later when I went there.

Library of Congress

I was assigned to Buenos Aires because the previous DCM, who hadn't been there very long, didn't seem to get along with the ambassador.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

BERNBAUM: Willard Beaulac.

Q: He was a career officer.

BERNBAUM: A very highly respected career officer, with a great deal of experience and with a lot of prestige in the foreign service, but a man who had very definite ideas about how he wanted to run things. Apparently my predecessor and he didn't get along very well. So very much to my surprise I was asked whether I wanted to be DCM in Buenos Aires.

Well, I'd already been in the department for about three years, it was time for me to go, and so I said, "Fine."

Q: Well, with Beaulac, what was our policy and what was Beaulac's attitude towards dealing with Argentina at this critical stage of change of government?

BERNBAUM: Well Beaulac was very much interested in continuing with this policy of strengthening relations with the Argentines. He also had ideas about getting things done. His principle was you got to a country and you found certain problems, and then you devoted yourself to solving these problems. One of them was aviation relations. But at that time when I arrived there we had started a stabilization program with the Argentine government, headed by Arturo Frondizi. He was president of Argentina. Beaulac was very much interested in insuring the success of the stabilization program, and I was heartily in accord with that. This is what we emphasized throughout our period there.

Q: What was, just to get an idea, Beaulac's way of using you as DCM. A DCM is whatever an ambassador wants him or her to be. And how did he use you?

Library of Congress

BERNBAUM: Well, I think he more or less checked me out to see how much he could rely on me. As he began to feel he could rely on me, then I got more and more responsibility. My primary function as a DCM would be to manage the embassy as executive officer. But then he used me for political purposes as well. He had more or less a hierarchical idea of contacts. He would see the ministers, and then I would see the number twos. And he depended on me more and more to develop these contacts in the Foreign Office and other government departments.

Q: Well, how did you find running the embassy, the management of the embassy? Was it a difficult job?

BERNBAUM: No, no. It wasn't at all difficult. We used to have staff meetings every morning. They was attended by the heads of the various sections of the embassy. Decisions would be taken at these staff meetings, and I would see to it that they were carried out. That was part of my responsibilities, and I'd always check back with the various people who were given the action responsibility for the things.

Q: So you felt very much a manager. One of the complaints sometimes is that DCMs turn into a second Political Officer, and leave the management to one side.

BERNBAUM: This varies with people. It varies with the ambassador, and it varies with the individual DCM. My principle later, when I became ambassador, was to use a DCM as the executive officer. I expected him to be the Embassy bastard.

Q: Yes.

BERNBAUM: He was the one who was expected to see to it that things were done, and not to have them referred to me if they were internal problems involving difficulties with staff. This is one thing I was very careful to do when I was DCM. I took the responsibility for doing things, and avoided having the ambassador faced with unpleasant problems.

Library of Congress

Q: A question that we'll turn to in the early posts as ambassador, but I might raise it here. How did you find the embassy staffed? Was it too big, too weighted on the military or the AID side? Or I'm thinking of Lincoln Gordon and his operation Topsy, which he cut out a significant portion of the embassy Brazil.

BERNBAUM: Jack Tuthill before him.

Q: Excuse me, Jack Tuthill.

BERNBAUM: Well, it varied. When I was in Ecuador as DCM, we had a small, lean staff. I thought we functioned very well. I was DCM executive officer, occasionally I'd write political reports, economic reports; always working with the people in charge. Actually at Quito I was also Political Officer as well as DCM.

When I returned to Quito as ambassador I found a great many more people there. I didn't have the feeling that we were much more efficient.

Q: This is a charge that has often been levied. Why had it grown?

BERNBAUM: Well, bureaucracy, the demands of Congress for information, the progressively greater curiosity of the State Department, the interest of the other government departments to have representation. We would find commercial attach#s there. Of course, we always had military attach#s, but one good example of this; when I arrived in Quito as ambassador, we had one armed services attach#, who covered the three services. I think after the Bay of Pigs problem, President Kennedy was supposed to have made some comment about our ability to have good relations with the military, to know what they were up to. So I had a request to appoint an air attach#. I checked around with our armed services attach#, who in effect said we didn't need one. And after exchanging about two or three telegrams each way, I found myself forced to accept one. Well, the man had nothing to do. He was just a pest, he was always on the back of the MAG to fly their plane and to do things. Eventually I had a request to appoint the Naval

Library of Congress

attach#. Here we were, two miles above sea level, and they wanted a Naval attach#. Well, I was able to ward that one off.

I learned later, this is very interesting, that after I left Ecuador we had a reduction in force. And there was an effort to eliminate the air attach#. And our ambassador had become accustomed to having an air attach#, fought tooth and nail to keep the guy, which was an indication of how things worked.

Q: Well, my understanding, I speak now as a professional Foreign Service Officer too, that the prime function of an air attach# is to have an airplane which can fly you around the country, and for an ambassador often this is considered desirable by an ambassador who likes to use the air attach#'s airplane.

BERNBAUM: Well, it's not really the real function of the air attach#.

Q: Granted. But I would say it's conceivable that this is the practical use of one.

BERNBAUM: Actually when I was in Ecuador I did have access to US airplanes, but they were in the Air Mission there, and they were always ready to collaborate with me whenever I felt that I needed a plane to furnish one.

Q: If we could now go to how did you become, get appointed, to Ecuador as ambassador? We're talking about the fall of 19 . . . ?

BERNBAUM: This was in the fall of 1960.

Q: 1960?

BERNBAUM: Yes. Well, I think probably one of the reasons was that I had been in Ecuador before. We were having the problem of an inter-American conference at Quito. And we had a boundary dispute between Ecuador and Peru. The political appointee who had been appointed to be ambassador.

Library of Congress

Q: David Kerrick, who had been Commissioner of the District of Columbia.

BERNBAUM: That was it.

Q: He died four days after being sworn in as ambassador.

BERNBAUM: That's right. And so the question arose as to whom we were going to send. I think probably people in the bureau who were conscious of the need to have somebody with experience and background in Ecuador, because of the inter-American conference that was going to take place there, particularly through Ecuador's dispute, decided to recommend me. The first thing I knew about it, I had no indication whatsoever that I was going to be tapped was a telephone call from Loy Henderson asking me whether I would be interested in being an ambassador.

I might say my wife was devastated. She wanted to stay in Argentina, enjoying it. She said, "Can't you hold it off?" I said, "Lightning doesn't strike twice in the same place."

Q: Of course, this appointment was under the Eisenhower administration.

BERNBAUM: Yes. And it was reconfirmed. I had not yet been confirmed by the Senate, so after arriving in Ecuador as an interim appointee, I was asked to return to Washington to be confirmed. I was then sized up by the Kennedy group in the White House, who apparently decided I was all right. And so the appointment was renewed and confirmed.

Q: When you went to Quito in 1960. Did you have any instructions of things you were supposed to do? Goals, problems to solve or to be aware of?

BERNBAUM: Specifically the Peru-Ecuador boundary dispute and the inter-American conference to see what I could do to minimize the friction between the two countries.

Library of Congress

Q: Looking at it from some hindsight, but how did you feel about the Peru-Ecuador boundary dispute as an American having served in Ecuador? How did you deal with it?

BERNBAUM: Well, I felt that we were placed in a very difficult position, because when you get into boundary problems you have a tremendous amount of nationalism and emotionalism. And rational arguments don't frequently prevail. My feeling was that the best way of trying to resolve the problem was to get the two parties to talk. And, if necessary, to go to arbitration, with the idea that if they agreed to an arbitration, perhaps the decision would settle the problem—take say the Ecuadorian government off the hook, or the Peruvian government off the hook. This was one of the main things I was trying to do while I was in charge of South American affairs, and I became very much involved in the Peru-Ecuador dispute. Made a number of trips to both countries. On a few occasions almost got them to talk to each other, and then things would fall apart.

But this was really the basis of our policy throughout the whole period. Not to take sides, but to get them to talk. And I remember two conversations. One when I was on my way from Buenos Aires to Quito when I stopped off at Lima. Had dinner at our embassy, where I stayed, and the Peruvian foreign minister had been invited, so that we could talk. I listened to him, and he said their legal position was absolutely impeccable. And I said, “Well why then wouldn't you be ready to accept some kind of arbitration? You know, wouldn't this settle the problem for you?”

And he said, “If I were to try that, the government would be overthrown.” He said, “Because Peru has been in the position of having lost wars to Chile, having lost territory, and this is the first time we beat somebody. And we're not going to let the spoils of that victory go, even take a chance of having that happen.” He said, “The military wouldn't stand for it.”

Later, after I arrived in Ecuador, I made a point of seeing the various past presidents. I mentioned this problem to one of them. He said that he had learned that the only way you

Library of Congress

could solve a boundary dispute was to have two strong governments in power who could take the flak from a decision which might not be approved by everybody. He said you've never had a strong government in Peru, and one in Ecuador. They've never coincided, and you never could get a decision.

Q: Well, the situation was—Peru had fought a small war with Ecuador?

BERNBAUM: They'd invaded Ecuador, and got as far as Guayaquil. They were interested in annexing a large part of Ecuador, and that's when we stepped and the other guarantor countries stepped in.

Q: This is the Rio Pact of 1942, is that it?

BERNBAUM: Not the Rio Pact. That's just what it was called. But the war was on.

Q: We're talking about World War II.

BERNBAUM: Yes, World War II was on. This happened in about '42, and so we forced, well more or less coerced the Peruvians to withdraw and to accept far less than they had originally wanted, and in a sense we would coerce the Ecuadorians to accept some loss. The result was that the Ecuadorian president and foreign minister, who signed that treaty were killed politically.

But we and the Brazilians and the Chileans became guarantors of this treaty. And the demarcation, or the boundary, was proceeding when an aerial survey conducted by our Air Force revealed the existence of a watershed that had not been known before. And the Ecuadorians seized upon that as a basis for attempting to renegotiate the boundary.

Q: This was by the time you had arrived, or just before?

BERNBAUM: This happened before I arrived. And that was one of the problems. The Ecuadorians were interested in revising the boundary so that they would have direct

Library of Congress

access to the Amazon, whereas under the old agreement they would not have had access. The Peruvians claimed that the old agreement was theirs signed, sealed and delivered. The boundary markers were being established and there was no reason not to proceed. So they wouldn't talk with the Ecuadorians about it. And our problem was to try to get them both to talk about it.

First to, perhaps, sign a commercial treaty, because they had no commercial relations across the border. And the idea was if we could get them talking on the basis of a commercial agreement, perhaps then there would be more of a basis for continuing the conversation politically. And when I was in Peru at one time I saw the Prime Minister and various people. I thought that he had become convinced that this was the thing to do, and I left feeling we were going to have a commercial agreement, but apparently the opponents prevailed on him and he cancelled the idea.

Q: Well, by December of 1960 you, I think, at that time you'd just about arrived, hadn't you?

BERNBAUM: I arrived about October.

Q: Ecuador had abrogated the treaty?

BERNBAUM: No. The new president, Velasco Ibarra, made a statement saying that he would not honor the treaty. That the treaty was null and void. And that presented us with a problem. The Peruvians were pressuring the guarantors to denounce the Ecuadorian statement as a violation of the treaty, and my problem was to try to get our government to abstain and not take a position. But we did take a position against the Ecuadorians, and as a result the embassy was stoned, attacked, and we had quite a messy situation.

Q: Yes, I notice on this the State Department spokesman, Lincoln White, came out regarding possible collective action if Ecuador maintained its position opposing the treaty.

Library of Congress

BERNBAUM: I don't remember that strong a statement.

Q: Anyway, I read this in a paper.

BERNBAUM: But I do remember that we made this statement supporting the Peruvian position. I remember speaking with our assistant secretary at the time. I said, "For goodness sakes, you know damn well it's not going to solve the problem. By taking sides we're going to be on the wrong side of a nationalist issue in Ecuador, and we're going to have an awful lot of trouble." And he said, "I know," but he said, "the pressure here is too great."

Q: Well, where was the pressure coming from in Washington?

BERNBAUM: The former ambassador to Peru had become Counselor of the State Department.

Q: Oh my.

BERNBAUM: And he was predisposed . . .

Q: Who was this?

BERNBAUM: Ted Achilles.

Q: Ah, yes. Yes. This is a case of localitis, you think?

BERNBAUM: Yes, this was localitis.

Q: But this was not coming from business interests, or from the president, it was really internal?

BERNBAUM: It was an internal matter, and one problem the Ecuadorians always had was that they were always outmaneuvered diplomatically by the Peruvians. The Peruvians

Library of Congress

would have an ambassador in Washington who had been there for 15 or 20 years, knew everybody. They did the same in Brazil. Same thing in Chile. The Ecuadorians were always changing their ambassadors. So they never really did have the kind of clout in these capitals that would permit them to get their viewpoints across effectively.

Q: Well how was this resolved?

BERNBAUM: It's never been resolved.

Q: But I assume the stoning of the embassy stopped at a certain point.

BERNBAUM: Well, they had gotten it out of their system. We had a bill for broken windows and so forth, and as a result we instituted security measures. We built a fence around the chancery, which was very ugly and I always tried to get rid of it, but I think it's still there. Other security precautions were taken. But we never did have another problem of that kind, because this one event demonstrated to me that we should always make every effort possible to stay on the right side of a nationalist issue, and certainly not to be on the wrong side, because the only thing that would get the crowds moving was nationalism. And we had other problems.

I think of the Bay of Pigs.

Q: How did the Bay of Pigs, we're talking about the Bay of Pigs in Cuba, the American sponsored attempt to overthrow Castro. Well, how was that a problem as far as we were concerned in Ecuador?

BERNBAUM: The left wing elements in Ecuador used that to try to rally the crowds against the embassy, but they couldn't do it. The people just weren't that interested, whereas they had been greatly interested on the boundary dispute. It was a nationalist issue involving Ecuador.

Library of Congress

Q: Well, did the boundary question come up every time you had a conversation in Ecuador, or did it sort of die down after a while?

BERNBAUM: We were continuously making efforts to try to get them to negotiate a commercial agreement. The Ecuadorians were always very partial to that. We never had any problem with them. The problem was to get the Peruvians to do it. And after my effort had failed, the Brazilian foreign office tried it. The foreign minister made a trip to both countries—that failed. Then later apparently the Peruvians had a change of heart, and they sent an ambassador to Quito who had Ecuadorian relatives. I think one of his grandparents had been Ecuadorian, and the idea was that through his contacts in the place, he would be able to work out an acceptable agreement. And I, of course, worked with him for that. But that never went through.

Q: Well, what were our other interests, besides keeping from getting involved between Peru and Ecuador, what were our interests in Ecuador?

BERNBAUM: Well, very early in my period there we had the Alliance for Progress. Our prime interest was to further the Alliance for Progress in Ecuador—to get them to accept our assistance and make use of it. We had a problem there.

The Ecuadorian government, of course, was very much interested in whatever assistance we could give them. They were always a bit suspicious of our motives; they never could quite believe that we didn't want to get some political advantage out of it. I always tried to assure them that wasn't so. But one of their big problems was that they had most of their revenues earmarked for autonomous agencies. It was very difficult then for the government to furnish its share of the projects which were being financed under the Alliance for Progress. That was one of the problems that I had all the time. I used to travel around the country pushing for collaboration. I used to spend a lot of time with the president, who was not very pro-American. He had had problems when he was in the Embassy in Washington.

Library of Congress

Q: Well now, you were also there at the time when there was a overthrow of one president, and the vice president was put in.

BERNBAUM: This is the president that I am referring to.

Q: Arosemena?

BERNBAUM: Yes.

Q: And that must have put a bit of a strain on our American relationship, because he came out of the left the same time when we were concerned about Cuba and all that.

BERNBAUM: He was a really complicated individual. His father had been president of Ecuador. He came from one of the first families in Guayaquil. He was more or less a maverick in his community. He was addicted to drinking. He was a dipsomaniac. And somehow or other he always seemed to be interested in stirring things up.

I remember one time as vice president when he insulted the Chinese ambassador, he was a bit drunk at the time. And another time when he insulted the Colombian ambassador. He always wanted to stick needles in people when drunk. We used to have some conversations about that. His problem was that he couldn't stay away from the bottle, and that made life with him somewhat difficult.

Q: Well, I read that he is described as being a leftist. I mean, was this real, was it because he was just being contrary, or was there concern that he might move closer to Castro when his brand of communism?

BERNBAUM: Well, that problem did arise. I had a feeling it was more based on his own personality than any ideological preferences. He was under pressure from the military to break with Cuba, and he didn't want to break with Cuba. I'll always remember this, I can tell it now.

Library of Congress

I was playing golf one Saturday, and his aide came along to say that the president wanted to speak with me. And so I left the course. This was always a topic of conversation between us. He was always kidding me about playing golf. And I said, "Mr. President, you did a terrible thing. I was about to win that tournament, and you pulled me off the golf course."

He said, "In a good cause." He said, "I'm being pressured by the military to break relations with Cuba. What do you think about it?"

I said, "That's your baby, not mine." And he tried in every which way to get me, to commit me, to tell him what to do, and I wasn't going to do that. And finally he said, "I'm wondering whether I shouldn't have a plebiscite in the country on that subject. What do you think about it?"

I said, "I will then express an opinion. You'd just divide the country. It seems to me that would be silly. In that case I'd suggest it would be far better not to break, then to have a plebiscite."

That ended the conversation. Later that evening the Minister of the Interior visited the embassy to tell me that the President had broken with Cuba.

Q: Well, what was he trying to do? To get you to commit yourself and then to say . . . ?

BERNBAUM: He was probably trying to be able to say that he was forced by the US to break.

Q: Well, at that time it was our policy, wasn't it, was it at Punta del Este or someplace? Wasn't this our policy to try to have the South American countries break with Cuba?

BERNBAUM: Oh sure. But the question was, how do you do it. We had Adlai Stevenson visiting. He made a swing around Latin America shortly after Kennedy was elected.

Library of Congress

One of his purposes was to convince the various governments to break. I remember a conversation we had with President Velasco Ibarra, who was not at all sympathetic. He thought we were a country of cultural barbarians. He was more or less a Francophile, and an Americanphobe. But he did respect Adlai Stevenson, who was one American he thought was a really fine individual. Every time Stevenson would make a point, the old man would rebut him by saying, "Well, governor, in page so and so of the book you wrote, you said something to the contrary." Or, "You made a speech on a given date where you said something to the contrary." And finally Stevenson had to give up.

But aside from that, we never expressed an opinion to the government about what they should do.

Q: Then Washington was not pressing you to do anything, or were you saying leave it alone, or how was this working, because it was a problem for us at the time?

BERNBAUM: I was not being pressured at that time, no.

Q: And were you getting much direction from Washington under the early days of the Kennedy administration?

BERNBAUM: Well, there were two problems. One was that President Kennedy had made an imprudent comment to Arosemena's brother that he might invite the Ecuadorian president to visit the United States.

When I heard about it I wrote to oppose the invitation because of Arosemena's dipsomania and corresponding unpredictability. So the invitation was held off for quite a long time. Finally the Ecuadorian president let it be known that he was awaiting for an invitation.

There was another problem when there was pressure from Washington interests to get me to do something when Velasco Ibarra was overthrown. At that time there were three candidates for the presidency. The vice president, who was then in jail.

Library of Congress

Q: *The vice president was in jail?*

BERNBAUM: He was in jail.

Q: *Why?*

BERNBAUM: On the ground that he was plotting against Velasco. The president of the Supreme Court was another candidate for the presidency. And I forget whoever else. There were three candidates. The situation looked rather hairy in Washington, and so I had a few phone calls asking what we should do. I advocated not doing anything. I didn't care who was president. Any one of them was perfectly all right, and there was no reason why we should in any way get involved. They accepted that. And eventually it turned out that way. Arosemena became president, and things worked out well until he was overthrown.

Q: *Well, we at least weren't tainted with having meddled.*

BERNBAUM: No, we stayed out of it. We just refused to get involved. And there was absolutely no reason to get involved, because any one of these people would have been a perfectly good president from our viewpoint.

Q: *Well, turning again to the coming in of the Kennedy administration. You had been a relatively short time in Ecuador.*

BERNBAUM: Yes.

Q: *And you were brought back. Do you feel was Kennedy sending out a signal that he was going to use the Foreign Service more, as ambassadors?*

BERNBAUM: Well, there were directives. One written by Eisenhower earlier, and one written later by Kennedy. And the idea was to emphasize the predominant role of the ambassador in embassy operations, in that his views would override those of other

Library of Congress

agencies that were represented in the embassy. This was a very difficult thing to enforce, but, generally speaking, I never had any problems with any of the representatives of the other agencies. We all collaborated very well.

Q: Well, I'd like to ask, because of the Kennedy directive, which as you say, and just before that the Eisenhower directive, really the first time there were strong signals from the presidency that the ambassador is in charge. But again, this is an unclassified interview, but how well were you served by the CIA do you feel?

BERNBAUM: I never had any problems with them. Any time a proposal was made to conduct an operation, I would query them for the reasons. If there was no really serious security involved, say for example something involving the Communist party, I saw absolutely no reason whatever for a intervention, a project by the CIA. And invariably the station chiefs would always say "Fine, we just won't do it." Sometimes they would be asked by their home office to consider the problem, and in a sense I was taking them off the hook. But I never had any problems with the CIA station chief, nor with anybody else.

Q: You weren't embarrassed by something taking place that you didn't know about?

BERNBAUM: Well, I think there was one case shortly after I arrived. There had been rioting in Guayaquil. And at that time we had a station chief who seemed to be running for election in Ecuador. He wanted to be a very popular fellow. He was a very attractive personality.

A Jesuit priest was caught in Guayaquil with ammunition, guns, and was accused of fomenting rioting. He was quoted as saying he was doing it under the supervision of the CIA. I asked our station chief about that. He said, "Absolutely not." I never was sure that this was so. I remember the Minister of the Interior calling me to complain about it. I reminded the minister that some time before, during a previous administration, he had headed a delegation to me asking whether we would support a coup against that government. I then said, "You remember what I said, don't you? Lay off. It's not the thing to

Library of Congress

do.” And I said, “Do you think that an embassy that made that kind of a recommendation in the past would support any of the activities that this priest said we were engaged in?”

He said, “Forget it.”

But I was never sure about that station chief, whether he told me the truth.

Q: What about the American military? The military in the Latin American countries always plays a major role, and when our military people go there there's often the complaint, the accusation or what have you that when military man talks to military man, sometimes it's more in the interest of the military, whether it be American or the other country, than in the interests of the country. Did you feel you had control over our military?

BERNBAUM: I had heard those statements, but I never had any reason to feel that was true where I was, either Ecuador or Venezuela. We always worked closely together. I always had confidence in the military people there, that they were following our policy, and not bypassing it.

As a matter of fact, there's one factor that I think limited strong military influence. That was the fact that by and large our military people were not well equipped to do their jobs. Very few of them spoke Spanish.

Q: That's amazing.

BERNBAUM: The Army attach# I mentioned earlier was a great exception, and his relationships with the Ecuadorian military were very warm and cordial. But very frequently when the question of an assignment arose, I'd have to say “No, I won't accept this fellow. He doesn't speak Spanish.” I must say that the commanding officer in Panama, the first one I dealt with, supported me entirely. But the later one prevailed on me to accept a few people who didn't speak Spanish. They were not successes.

Library of Congress

Q: Did we have much of a military aid program, a MAG?

BERNBAUM: We had a MAG, yes.

Q: MAG stands for . . . ?

BERNBAUM: Military Assistance Group or something. Mill group we used to call it.

Q: Were we giving much equipment to the Ecuadorian military?

BERNBAUM: Training. It was mostly training, and there would be some equipment, usually on a sale basis.

One of our problems with the Ecuadorians, particularly after the military junta took over, was to prevent them from buying military equipment. We refused to sell military equipment. We didn't think they needed it or could afford it. I do remember one occasion when they were thinking of buying some war ships from England. I went to Washington and used that as a basis for returning and saying "We take an awfully dim view of this, because you need every cent of your money for the economic development of the country." I do recall they refrained from buying the war ships.

Q: To backtrack just a little bit. You said that the Kennedy administration brought you back to sort of look you over. What were they looking for do you think?

BERNBAUM: What I looked like. How I spoke. And I think the man with whom I spoke . . .

Q: Who was that?

BERNBAUM: Ralph Dungan, had a pet problem—the AID Program. The "servicios". He had strong feelings about the "servicios", he thought they ought to be abolished completely.

Library of Congress

Q: The “servicios” are what?

BERNBAUM: Technical assistant units.

Q: Technical assistance?

BERNBAUM: This would be an organization set up to train people in the various ministries to do their jobs. The idea was that this would be a funnel. You'd get the Ecuadorians to go through this training period so that they could be qualified to do their jobs within the government. And apparently the system had become a bit hardened to the point where the Ecuadorians who were going through the system became officials of the system. And so you didn't have that training advantage that we used to have before. They became more or less adjuncts of the ministries. Dungan was zeroing in on that, and I happened to agree with him that the system had become hardened. But when Dungan asked me if I thought we should abolish it, I said no. “It can serve a useful purpose—the thing to do is to reform it, not abolish it. Apparently that wasn't strong enough to make him feel that I was unqualified to do the job.

Q: But did you feel any sort of change in the way you were conducting yourself or your mission between Eisenhower and Kennedy, as regards dealing with Ecuador?

BERNBAUM: The only difference was the Alliance for Progress. That became the dominating feature of our policy. Other than that no difference.

Q: How effective was this in Ecuador, and what form did it take?

BERNBAUM: Well, intensified training and the granting of loans to do the job that we thought should be done in the country and that they wanted. The main obstacle to that was what I described before. The inability of the Ecuadorian government to furnish its part of the cost. We were asking them to furnish only about 20% of the cost of these projects, and

Library of Congress

we were extending loans on the basis of no interest for ten years, and in fact were gifts. But I do think that a lot of good had been done, but eventually it deteriorated.

Q: I read a book quite recently in which the author made a tour through Ecuador, and referred to corruption being quite endemic in this place. Did you find that this was a problem?

BERNBAUM: Especially down on the coast in Guayaquil area, yes it was bad.

Q: How did you deal with this?

BERNBAUM: By trying to maintain tight control over these projects. Every so often I'd find somebody, you know, some prominent local businessman who'd try to take advantage of the program. For example, through currency exchanges. They'd want to be paid in dollars instead of sucres, dollars being worth more than the sucres in terms of the number of sucres they'd get. I remember on some occasions having ministers intervene with me to try to get us to do it. I'd always say, "Look, if you want to feed the kitty of some local businessman, do it yourselves. Don't ask us to do it."

Q: And this was accepted?

BERNBAUM: I remember one time the president called me and one of his cronies . . .

Q: Was this Arosemena?

BERNBAUM: Arosemena. One of his cronies down in Guayaquil had tried to get one of these special arrangements. The minister, who was very close to the president, had tried to get me to agree to it. I refused. Finally the president called me in and he asked me about it. And I said, "I told your minister the reasons why we can't do it."

He called the minister and said, "Is this true?"

Library of Congress

And the minister said, "Yes."

The President said, "All right, I'm embarrassed. Forget about it."

But obviously you couldn't prevent corruption, but to the extent we could, we tried to get strict compliance with the loan agreements..

Q: How did you see the left wing anti-American force in Ecuador? Did you find it threatening to you, to our purpose there?

BERNBAUM: I think the most threatening period was during the early part of my stay there. During the Velasco Ibarra period. He had a few left wing ministers in government who were quite anti-American, and who were in some cases, particularly in the case of the Minister of Education, interested in getting the Communist bloc in there to do some technical assistance. We always maintained cordial relations with the ministers, but let them know that if that was what they wanted, they were on their own, and they weren't going to get any help from us. Usually those projects were frustrated. After that, I don't think there was any particularly strong left wing influence in the government.

Q: Were the Cubans sponsoring guerrillas or anything like that? I would not think that Ecuador was a prime target.

BERNBAUM: We had some minor guerrilla activity, that, as far as I remember was not very serious. The Cubans were implicated but I was never sure to the extent to which the implication was based on logic or fact.

Q: Was the tuna war going on while we were there, or not?

BERNBAUM: Very much.

Q: How did we handle that?

Library of Congress

BERNBAUM: That was one of my big problems.

Q: It was on the front page of the American papers for a period of about ten years.

BERNBAUM: Well, the three Pacific countries, Ecuador, Peru and Chile, were acting in concert about tuna fishing. Their objective was to assess very high license fees on tuna fishing in their waters. They claimed they had a 200 mile limit on the ground that we had started the problem by claiming a 200 mile limit off our coast for petroleum drilling. We had a continental shelf, which goes out about 200 miles and permitted the exploitation of petroleum.

As the Ecuadorians explained to us, they had no shelf. Although they couldn't use a continental shelf as the basis for their policy, they claimed they had the same right to 200 miles that we did and that usually led to conflict, because they would impound US tuna ships outside of the 12 mile limit. The situation came to a head when during the Kennedy administration, the tuna fleet decided to force President Kennedy's hand, by sailing en masse into Ecuadorian waters, and were intercepted.

This happened while I was at home to attend my son's graduation from the Exeter Academy in New Hampshire. The Secretary wanted to send somebody there to negotiate the situation but the Ecuadorians refused to accept a negotiator on the grounds that it was really an internal matter. So I had to return. They couldn't refuse to talk to me since I was the ambassador.

I think the fishermen paid the fine, which we reimbursed. That produced a feeling on our part that we had to reach an agreement with the Ecuadorians on this situation. As a result much of my activity was confined to trying to reach an agreement. Fortunately I found a rather receptive ear in the Foreign Minister, who felt that the conflict was leading nowhere.

Q: Was this Arosemena?

Library of Congress

BERNBAUM: No, actually this happened after Arosemena. It was the military junta. We negotiated a confidential modus vivendi. A confidential modus vivendi, in which they agreed to the 12 mile limit, and established norms for the levying of taxes.

Before I left Ecuador, the next Foreign Minister suggested that we cancel the modus vivendi, and that the government would do its best to apply its provisions, but without a formal agreement. I thought that was a good idea, because obviously the agreement was eventually going to blow up. We agreed in Washington when I went back, to do that. But some way or another it never happened. I was in Venezuela at the time. It never happened. The modus vivendi did blow up, and the tuna war started up again.

Q: With this junta that took over, I noticed in the paper and reading for this interview that one of the precipitating factors in Arosemena's going was a banquet he had had with you, a dinner that he had had with you the night before. Could you describe what happened?

BERNBAUM: As background, Arosemena had been involved in various incidents due to drunkenness. One of them was when he met the Chilean president at the airport in Guayaquil and was drunk. It was said that if it hadn't been Christmas he would have been overthrown then.

Later, Admiral McNeil, president of the Grace Line, visited Ecuador with his wife. The president gave a banquet for them, because the Grace Line had participated in the inauguration of a new vessel. The president's wife had been invited to visit the United States.

His apartment was above the presidential office, so I showed up there, where I expected the party to take place. He was there with a few of his ministers, including the Foreign Minister. He was already half gone. As I walked in he said, "Ambassador, have a drink."

I said, "Well, Mr. President, let's go downstairs, we'll have the drinks down there."

Library of Congress

We got him down there, and he made a speech decorating the admiral. He neglected to mention my presence. Whenever he was annoyed with the US for one reason or other, he'd neglect to recognize my presence. So I knew something was up.

During the soup course at dinner, he arose—by that time he was really pretty much under the influence of liquor—and made a long rambling speech in which he attacked the US government for exploiting Ecuador without mercy. Well, of course, you can imagine the reaction at the table.

He turned to me and said, “You agree with me, don't you, Mr. Ambassador?”

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, so I said, “No, Mr. President. When you're speaking of the government, you're speaking of the American people.” He had spoken highly of the American people as being distinct from the government.

Then he turned to one of his ministers at the other side of the table, and said, “Paco, you agree with me, don't you?” Well, this minister at that point was studying the molding on the ceiling. Finally he said, “No, Senor President.”

Arosemena got up, and staggered out of the dining room. Dinner continued, and finally we finished. The various ministers came along and said, “You're not going to make anything of this, are you?”

And I said, “No, under those conditions. I don't know what brought it on, but I'm sure he wouldn't have done it if he was sober.” I remember it was a sub-secretary of Foreign Affairs who came along and said, “It makes no difference what you say.” He said, “The three chiefs of the armed forces who were at that dinner have just decided that this is it. This man's gone too far.” And they just threw him out of power.

Well, what happened the following day was that we were giving a farewell luncheon for our Armed Services attach#, and one of the members of the newly appointed junta, Colonel

Library of Congress

Gandara, came over to bring his wife. This is quite a coincidence, but it was interpreted by virtually everybody as indicating that we were in on the overthrow.

I asked Gandara at the time, "What's going on?"

He said, "Well, we decided that we just had to oust him." He said, "If we hadn't done it, the ranks would have done it." And then he left. Arosemena was flown to Panama.

I reported the incident to the State Department, and it was reported quite accurately in Time Magazine.

Q: How would you describe the military government that took over?

BERNBAUM: That was very interesting. Gandara visited me after the military government had taken over. And I asked him what their policy was going to be. And he said, "We want to take advantage of the Alliance for Progress. We don't have any great ideas about what to do, and we'd very much appreciate suggestions from the U. S. government, as well as financial help."

And I said, "How long will the junta stay in power?"

He said, "If we stay in power longer than a year, we will continue in power, because the appetite for the goodies will be too strong. So what we've got to do is to get things done and get out before the year's over." I reported that back home. That was encouraging, that this man was interested in implementing the Alliance for Progress. We did what we could, but our bureaucracy was a bit too cumbersome to get many of the things done that we'd hope would get done.

In any case, we recognized on the basis of that conversation, not the first, but more or less in the middle of the recognitions. At the end of a year I called on the Colonel, who had then become a general. I said, "How about it."

Library of Congress

He said, "It's too late. The appetite has progressed much faster than I had expected." There was a lot of graft going on. The chief of the Air Force and chief of the Navy were very much involved in graft, and this created some problems with us.

Q: To move on, how did your appointment to Venezuela as ambassador come about?

BERNBAUM: It came to me as a great surprise. I'd already been in Venezuela twice.

Q: This would be in 1965?

BERNBAUM: Yes. I'd already been there twice, and I had been in Washington for a meeting of ambassadors earlier. I was then asked by both the Secretary and the Counselor of the State Department whether I was ready to leave Ecuador. I'd been there for four years. I said yes. I remember telling Secretary Rusk that I'd never been to Europe when he asked me where I wanted to go.

He said, "Well, we ought to get you a European assignment."

I said fine. And I went to see the Counselor, and he said "Fine."

I went to see the Assistant Secretary, and he said "No." He said, "You're not going to Europe, you're going to stay in Latin America."

Q: The assistant secretary was at that time?

BERNBAUM: Tom Mann.

Q: Tom Mann.

BERNBAUM: He later became Under Secretary for Economic Affairs.

Well, I went back. I knew a change was going to take place pretty soon. And in due course I got the telegram nominating me for Venezuela. And the ambassador in Montevideo to be

Library of Congress

my successor. I do remember when I talked to Mann about the future I said, "I don't know where I'm going to go. But I want one thing. I want a post where I can pick my own staff. I don't want a post so unimportant that the staff will be thrust upon me, as the case was in Ecuador."

Q: This is something that I would like to ask. ARA has had a reputation in the Foreign Service of being a rather incestuous ...

BERNBAUM: Yes.

Q: . . . group. I'm speaking of the assignments to Latin America. An officer would learn Spanish and would stay within it, and because often events in Latin America are not of immediate interest within American foreign policy, there's a feeling that somehow many of the people there are sort of second rate. How did you feel about this?

BERNBAUM: Well, . . .

Q: Or are you aware of this?

BERNBAUM: Yes, oh yes. With my dealings with other government departments I'd always be made aware of the fact that they just didn't want to be bothered by Latin American problems. They had other fish to fry.

One of the problems was that every time an effort was made to move a Latin American to another area, the local old boys network would prevent it.

Q: This is within the Foreign Service?

BERNBAUM: Yes. For example the European area was the worst. I remember one of my colleagues. He was ready for an embassy, had been given to understand he would be going to Switzerland, which is not a very important place, but he thought that would be all right. But one of the Europeans wanted it. The only time a Latin American, to my

Library of Congress

knowledge, broke out of it was Bob Woodward, when he was assigned to Stockholm, and then later to Spain, which is more or less related to Latin America.

But this is a problem, I remember when I was leaving South American Affairs. I'd been tapped by the Department to go to Tokyo as DCM, and the ambassador there had his own man, one of the network. And so I didn't go there, thank God. And then I was supposed to go to Rome. They asked me whether I'd take a demotion to political counselor, and I said yes. I was interested in Italy. But then one of the men who later became one of my good friends was a member of the old boys' network got the job. I went to Buenos Aires. But this was a problem.

The other problem was that the Latin American governments, the political people, had become accustomed to having Americans who spoke good Spanish and who knew the country and with whom they could relate. So every time you got officers assigned there who didn't speak good Spanish, they'd make things difficult for them. This applied not only to ambassadors, but to senior officers. So we got in the habit of asking whenever nominations from outside the area came up for something like a DCM or a political counselor, how good was his Spanish? It wasn't whether he was familiar with Latin America as much as the language. Every so often somebody who spoke good enough Spanish would be allowed to come in and work.

Q: A quick turn back to Ecuador. How were relations between the Consulate General in Guayaquil, which has always been a rather prominent consular post, since the opening of relations with Latin America, and Quito and the embassy there?

BERNBAUM: They were always good in my time, both times.

Q: Was it a useful post there?

BERNBAUM: Yes, it was a useful and very important post. We always used to encourage them to give us economic and political information. Both the DCM and the ambassador

Library of Congress

used to go down to Guayaquil periodically to meet with the people there. That is to get to know our people in the Consulate General, and also to meet the leading citizens of Guayaquil. We never had any problems. There was one time during the McCarthy period, this was after I left, when a Consul General there, seemed to be a very staunch McCarthyite. I remember at a dinner party he gave for me, hearing him sound off in front of Ecuadorians about the homosexuals and the Communists in the State Department. That infuriated me. I wouldn't have minded so much if he had confined it to me, but here were Ecuadorians at the table and he made these comments. But that was the only sour note that I ever knew of in Guayaquil.

Q: Returning to Venezuela, did you have any instructions or any goals set when you went to Venezuela. Here you were moving from a relatively poor country to one, which in those days, was named among the rich countries, in which incidentally Japan was not included at the time.

BERNBAUM: I had no specific instructions. I think they assumed I knew Venezuela very well. I'd been there twice before, and the problem was to maintain good relations. And, of course, I knew that the big problem was the petroleum industry, as was the case when I was DCM there, I focused on the petroleum industry, and spent a lot of time on that. I got to know everybody in the industry, both in the American and British industry, and also the government people.

I had a very big advantage in going to Venezuela, because I knew a great many people there, including many of them who were in positions of power. So that facilitated my job a great deal.

Q: It was the Leone government?

BERNBAUM: Leone, yes.

Q: And this was a popularly elected government?

Library of Congress

BERNBAUM: Oh, yes. After Betancourt he was elected, and it was an honestly conducted civilian government.

Q: Well, what were our interests in the petroleum field there?

BERNBAUM: Assured source of supply. And then, of course, we were interested in the welfare of the American companies operating there. But the main thing was an assured source of supply at a reasonable price.

Q: Did you have any particular problems at that time?

BERNBAUM: Yes. We had a very serious problem. The Venezuelans had always looked upon themselves as an adjunct to the American petroleum industry, because so much of their industry was conducted by Americans. And so when we started to impose restrictions, starting with Canada, giving Canada preferential position, there was a certain amount of hard feeling about that. But then it became very strong when imports from Canada were taken off the top of the world wide quota, for which Venezuela was eligible. In other words, Canada was not only getting complete access to the market, but its access was restricting the Venezuelan access. I remember I made a point of traveling to all parts of Venezuela. I'd use the Air Force plane, and wherever I went the first question asked me was, "discrimination". I got to the point that I felt that sometimes the reporters themselves didn't know what "discrimination" was, but it became such an important part of the vocabulary, that was the question they asked. That was a big problem, and I did my best to try to solve that, working out one formula after another. Then the Venezuelans began to retaliate a bit. I recall when they started to do so through the establishment of reference prices, regardless of the price at which petroleum was sold, the taxes would be based on the reference price, which was usually higher. That was a problem.

I remember that after the failure of negotiations they established a very high reference price on fuel oil, which was something on which we were very greatly dependent for the

Library of Congress

New England industry. I remember complaining to the minister about it. "Look," he said, "we've tried to do it par lo bueno, now we have to do it par lo malo." Since you won't collaborate with us, we'll take measures into our own hands. As I had always warned the people back home, "We don't hold the trump cards. They hold them. All they have to do is make these decisions, and there isn't a thing we can do about it."

Q: Well, where was the preference for Canada coming from? Was this Congress? Or was this a political decision?

BERNBAUM: The utilities, along the northern tier were very influential in the legislature. They relied on Canadian oil very greatly for their refineries, and also for their fuel oil. They had enough clout, headed by Senator Humphrey ...

Q: From Minnesota.

BERNBAUM: . . . to get this through. Also there was always a feeling that we had big petroleum interests in Canada as well. Much of the oil coming in from Canada was owned by American firms anyway. This was an assured source of supply. We didn't have to worry about any political shenanigans taking place.

Q: Well, how did you find dealing with the Venezuelan government? Was there quite a contrast between it and Ecuadorian government?

BERNBAUM: It would be the contrast between a self-assured, wealthy government, and a government that depends on help. In a sense you might say it was easier to deal with the Ecuadorians because they were so dependent on us. I found that to the extent that the Venezuelans were dependent on the U. S. market for their oil, it was always possible to discuss problems with them. We never had any serious differences, aside from what I was telling you about when they established these reference prices, and hiked the proportional profits that they took as taxes.

Library of Congress

Q: That problem of discrimination was never solved while you were there?

BERNBAUM: Eventually it resulted in the expropriation of the American industry after I left. I always had the feeling when I was there that I was sitting on top of a boiling pot, and that some day it was going to explode.

Q: Were we concerned with the forays of Castro's people into, and terrorists attacks within Venezuela?

BERNBAUM: Very much, very much. The first time we got a resolution at a conference in San Jose threatening to retaliate if the Castro Government repeated its interference. This turned out to be only on paper. Castro did it again without any adverse consequences.

I know the Venezuelans were very much concerned the second time Castro attempted a landing of revolutionaries and arms. The president asked me to discuss this when I got home. He said, "I know you're not going to send Marines to Cuba, but for God's sakes, you can't just ignore it. You've got to do something." He added, "Our unions are passing a resolution to deny access to Venezuelan ports to any ships touched at a Cuban port." He said, "Now, that's not much, but it's something."

I passed that on back home. Nothing happened.

Q: Were we doing anything to help in the efforts to put down terrorism in Venezuela at that time?

BERNBAUM: With technical assistance, equipment that they needed. We were not involved in their activities against terrorism. They were able to take care of themselves. They didn't need any help.

Q: Speaking of your time in both Ecuador and Venezuela, was there any change in emphasis, would you say, between the Kennedy and Johnson administrations?

Library of Congress

BERNBAUM: No, the first thing that Johnson said when he became president was that he was going to continue the Alliance for Progress. I know that had a very good reaction in Ecuador when I was there. Whenever I had delegations of people coming in to find out what our policy was going to be, I'd always quote Johnson.

Then, of course, as time went on, we became more and more preoccupied with the Vietnam problem. The Venezuelans thought we were being silly. Well, they said, "Why don't you tend to your own backyard, and stop worrying about what's happening on the other side of the world." They said "every penny you spend in Vietnam means that much less you can do for Latin America, which is a lot more important to you. That was their belief.

Q: How did they feel about our one big intervention in their backyard, the Dominican Republic?

BERNBAUM: I hadn't been there very long when that took place. They felt that we jumped the gun. I remember that I returned to the Embassy late one night, about 11 o'clock. I had a telephone call letting me know that we had moved in to the Dominican Republic, and asking me to speak with the president. This was 11 o'clock at night. I called the presidential palace. He was at that time in a meeting with his cabinet. They were drafting a resolution condemning it. When I spoke with the President about it later. He said, "We think you people jumped the gun, that you exaggerated the threat." He said, "We didn't think that the opposition elements in the Dominican Republic were that dominated by Castro and the Communist party. At least we had no evidence to that effect."

But in any case, they were willing to supply a military contingent to the Dominican Republic on the condition that we would withdraw American troops *pari passu*. I think we were ready to give an oral commitment. We never put it in writing, so the Venezuelans never did it.

But they felt not so much opposition to the move, as they felt it was perhaps unnecessary.

Library of Congress

Q: How about within the Venezuelan public. Were there many student demonstrations, this sort of thing, against us?

BERNBAUM: No. The press was involved, the left wing press, of course, was condemnatory, and the rest of the press, as I remember, weren't very happy about it, but there was no great condemnation. No, you didn't find any demonstration of the kind we might have found in Ecuador.

I'd like to mention something that I perhaps might have discussed during our conversation about my stay in Ecuador. I remember the missile crisis.

Q: The Cuban missile crisis?

BERNBAUM: Yes. We had gotten the message the day before asking us to let the government know what we were planning to do and why. This was before the announcement was made. So I did get in touch with the government.

The president was ill. He was in no condition to do anything. And also there was a funeral down in Guayaquil that he had to go to, so I spoke with the vice president and a few of the other ministers about it. I found a really tremendous amount of support for what we were doing in the missile crisis.

Q: They saw that this was introducing an unnecessary element into Latin America.

BERNBAUM: That's right. And they expressed their support completely for what we were doing, and I understand that the same message came through from every other Latin American capital. They were on our side.

Q: Speaking of our relations not with Venezuela, but your relations with Washington. Did you have the feeling sort of from the beginning that Secretary of State Rusk really was not very interested in Latin American, and was more turned toward the situation in Asia?

Library of Congress

BERNBAUM: Yes, I had that feeling. Not necessarily apply only to Secretary Rusk, but there was a feeling that we had other fish to fry. We had Vietnam. We had the Soviet problem, and people were just relying on the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs to handle the situation there. And this is one of the reasons I think why when Castro tried his second landing of ammunition and troops in Venezuela, that there was a limited response from Washington on that.

Q: But, in a way this was a blessing, wasn't it, for ambassadors in Latin America, that you didn't have too much micro-managing from Washington?

BERNBAUM: That's right. Usually every time there was an attempt to do it, well, we'd ward it off. Yes. That was a blessing, and it also was not a blessing, because it meant that many of the positive things that one wanted to do couldn't be done. There just wasn't that much interest.

Q: You couldn't take initiatives, but you could at least ward off unpleasant interference.

BERNBAUM: And to the extent that anything we wanted to do did not involve difficulties with other parts of the world.

Q: How well did you feel you were staffed in Venezuela? I mean, were you well supported? Speaking of the Foreign Services as a staff.

BERNBAUM: Well, I had some very good people, and some who were not as good. I always had difficulty in getting good economic people. Economic counselors were a very rare commodity, and very frequently we had to do with second best.

Q: Why is it difficult, or why did you find difficulty do you think?

BERNBAUM: I don't know. I remember one man who had a very good reputation, and I asked for him, but he wanted to be a DCM. The moment he became very well known

Library of Congress

as a good economic man, then he wanted to go political. So a certain number of the outstanding economic people were siphoned off. But then also I don't think we did enough to develop a cadre of good economic people.

Q: Did you feel that we did enough on the commercial side?

BERNBAUM: Well, the Department of Commerce handled the Commercial Attach#s.

Q: How did that work?

BERNBAUM: Pretty well. They maintained contacts with whom the people in the Department of Agriculture were interested. And they would do their jobs. As far as I remember, there was never any problem with them. They would always collaborate, and work as part of a team.

Q: Well, in Venezuela I know there was a rather bad earthquake. Did this have much of an effect on you? This was in July of 1967.

BERNBAUM: Yes, I remember that. I was having dinner with friends when the earthquake hit. I remember those streets undulating, and the cars outside going backwards and forwards. And the chauffeurs rolling with them. It was a very scary experience.

A few of the buildings collapsed completely because of inadequate construction. We helped to the extent that we could, not so much in a monetary sense, but sending immediately our best technical people to help them.

Q: How would you describe relations with Venezuela during the time you were there?

BERNBAUM: I found that relations during my time were very good. I never had any problem with anybody. I always found all the ministers very cooperative. I always had access to the president whenever I wanted to see him. The only problem was "discrimination" which would arouse hackles here and there.

Library of Congress

Q: But in a way that was because of what we did, rather than what they did.

BERNBAUM: That's right. With the exception of that, I thought relations were very good.

Q: Well, you also were there during the time when there was a party out of power replaced the party in power without a coup, or revolt or anything else like that. It was a good solid stable situation.

BERNBAUM: It was even more impressive because of the character of the vote. The COPEI beat Accion Democratica by a narrow margin with only about 38% of the electorate. There were some fears in COPEI at the time that AD might not go along with the electoral result, but they did. There has since been an alternation of power, not by design, but more or less by the way things went.

Q: Did Perez Jimenez cause you any problems? He was sort of a loose cannon still at the time.

BERNBAUM: Do you mean when I was DCM and he was then in power?

Q: No, I'm thinking of when you were ambassador. He came back and ran for Congress.

BERNBAUM: He never came back to Venezuela. He had his supporters putting him up, and I think he was elected, but he never dared return to Venezuela.

I used to have some problems at the beginning because of the supporters of Perez Jimenez used to come in to complain about the failure of the Venezuelan government to bring him to trial. They felt it was the obligation of the United States to pressure the Venezuelans. I realized this was a subject that in which I didn't want to get involved. We always received them, but I always had the DCM see them. They therefore had a feeling that they had access to the embassy.

Library of Congress

Q: You left the post in 1969.

BERNBAUM: July of '69, as a matter of fact.

Q: Was this by plan? I mean were you ready to go at that time?

BERNBAUM: Well, I'd been there for four years. It had been over four years, so it was really time for me to go.

Q: Did you go into retirement at that time?

BERNBAUM: Well, I let it be known that I was going to retire. I didn't expect to have any appointment by Nixon. We had a problem during his Latin American trip in '58.

Q: Could you describe it?

BERNBAUM: Well, he felt that I was not supportive of what he had done in Peru. I think that was mentioned in his Six Crises. Well, I was rather critical of what he had done. So I never did expect an appointment by Nixon, I let it be known that I was going to retire after leaving Venezuela.

I stayed on until the following April or May to act as a consultant on the study being conducted on our petroleum policy. When that was finished, I retired.

Q: Looking back on your career, particularly the time we're focusing on in Ecuador and in Venezuela, what might you point to as sort of the things that you did that gave you the greatest sense of satisfaction?

BERNBAUM: Well, I helped prevent a coup against Guyana while I was in Venezuela.

Q: How was that?

Library of Congress

BERNBAUM: We had gotten word that there was a coup brewing in Guyana, in the Rupununi area; that some of the Venezuela military were sympathetic to the coup, and planned to move in after the coup started on the grounds of preventing violence.

I let the president's number one assistant know about it—that it was a discovery I had made in which the President would be interested. I think it was Christmas morning. There was a coup attempt made, but no Venezuelan participation. I felt that I had done that. I felt also in Ecuador that I had at least helped delay a crisis in the tuna fishers' problem by negotiating that agreement.

I also felt that in Venezuela I had established a feeling on the part of the Venezuelans that the American government was really interested in trying to solve the problem—that we were more or less on the hook both ways, and that if we could find a way out, we would be very happy to do that. And that created a considerable amount of confidence within the Venezuelan government and facilitated operations there.

Q: How about the reverse side. The sort of major disappointments, things that didn't work out that you can think of, major or minor?

BERNBAUM: Well, one major disappointment was that we were not able to resolve the petroleum problem.

Q: Yes.

BERNBAUM: I was interested in Western Hemisphere preference, which I hoped would....

Q: This was for petroleum products?

BERNBAUM: That would apply not only to Venezuela, but to Columbia and all the other countries of Latin America. It would stimulate exploration and production in those countries, and give us an assured supply of petroleum in case of emergency. Because you

Library of Congress

couldn't count on the Persian Gulf or North Africa as much as you could Latin America. I was disappointed that that never went through.

Q: Was this mainly because of lack of interest, or because of pressures within Washington?

BERNBAUM: Well, I think probably the petroleum industry in the US wasn't particularly happy about that. The Independent Oil Producers Association wanted to control production. One of the ways was to maintain a quota on imports into the United States.

Q: So you were up against a very powerful lobby?

BERNBAUM: Yes. And then, of course, you had a problem because Johnson came from Texas. So there wasn't much he could do about it.

Q: No, no.

BERNBAUM: That was one thing. And the industry, I think, was not happy about the idea of giving Venezuelans a preference. They had other sources of supply, and they were afraid, I think, that if the Venezuelan government got too much participation, they'd lose clout. Well, they lost clout anyway.

Q: One final question. Looking back on it at that time, how did you find the Foreign Service as a career, and through your knowledge of it today, how do you see it today?

BERNBAUM: Oh, I found it the most satisfying career I could possibly have entered into. I mean I felt very fortunate, being a person who when he left it said, "If I had it all over to do again, I'd do it."

I don't think it's as good today as it used to be. It was an all-career operation. Perhaps I'm influenced by experience in Latin America, where we had a lot more autonomy until the crisis. But I think now there's a lot more politics involved.

Library of Congress

Q: There's not the clear sort of career pattern as you had. You moved through a series of DCMships, and then you moved from one ambassadorship to another.

BERNBAUM: That's right.

Q: Where today it seems to be more the pattern you may get one ambassadorial assignment before you're more or less put out to retire, and it's a reward rather than working up, so you do it as a profession.

BERNBAUM: There was also, I think, a feeling amongst the Foreign Service Officers that this was it. This was the thing. It wasn't a job, it was a career. And I'm not so sure that applies as much today. I find a certain amount of discouragement within the Foreign Service people I see.

Q: I've noticed the same. Well, Mr. Ambassador, I want to thank you very much for this. I have enjoyed this talk, and I'll be getting back to you.

End of interview