

Interview with Richard E. Johnson

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

RICHARD E. JOHNSON

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

Initial interview date: January 30, 1991

Copyright 1998 ADST

Q: I might add here that Dick and I are old friends, having studied Serbian and then served in Yugoslavia together. I should say Serbo-Croatian.

JOHNSON: Or even now Croato-Serbian, however you want to put it. Both ways.

Q: Dick, I wonder if you could start off by giving me a little about your background. Where'd you come from?

JOHNSON: Well, I was born and raised in Winnetka, Illinois, outside Chicago.

Q: Did you go to New Trier High School?

JOHNSON: No, I didn't. We lived just outside the village limits of Winnetka, so I was not within the New Trier High School area. I went to a private day-school in Winnetka. And went to Harvard, then went into the Navy.

Q: When did you leave Harvard?

JOHNSON: Forty-two. Graduated with a B.A. Then was in the Navy. Spent some time on a destroyer in the Pacific. Thereafter, I worked for a little bit of time in a company in Chicago

Library of Congress

that made cast iron pipe. And then joined the Department of State as a civil servant. Worked as a civil servant for four years.

Q: What attracted you towards the State Department?

JOHNSON: I think my Navy experience gave me a taste for working for an organization that I felt had some fairly high objectives, a U.S. government organization that I wanted to be a part of. I was proud of my service in the Navy, and to go from that into the world of trade was, for me, a rather boring prospect. I don't think it would be now; I have probably different outlooks on these things. But, then, I wanted to be a part of the process of post-war recovery. And so I joined the State Department and eventually was one of the officers in the Office of Chinese Affairs.

Q: You came into the department in 1947, and you worked there, I guess as a civil servant, until 1951. Could you describe a little of the environment? It was a time when the State Department was sort of trying to read its way into the role of being a world power, wasn't it? And also being a major organization within a world power.

JOHNSON: Yes, I think things were a good deal simpler then, needless to say. There was a small number of major issues around the world, rather than a whole basketful of them, that we felt we needed to be involved in. The one that I was most directly involved in was the process of Nationalist China going down the drain. I was in the Office of Chinese Affairs, and of course these were McCarthy days, so that, in a way, conditioned the mood in the State Department, which was a very cautious one and one of considerable concern, even seeping down to the lower levels in the Civil Service. You never knew when you were going to show up on some list for some crime you really didn't commit.

Q: Really, this McCarthy period was of concern?

JOHNSON: It certainly was in the sector that I was working in, the Office of Far Eastern Affairs on the China desk. I worked for a time for several old China hands who were hit

Library of Congress

by McCarthy and their careers were seriously damaged. They later recovered and they're now highly respected as Sinologists, but, at that time, McCarthy had succeeded in creating a good deal of fear in the ranks.

Q: What were you doing in Chinese Affairs?

JOHNSON: I was a junior professional assistant, I think they called them in those days. I worked mainly with the economist for Chinese Affairs, who was concerned with the question of aid to China. At that time, Chiang had retreated to Formosa, and he was raising the Nationalist China flag from Formosa. And he had a lot of support in those days in Congress, as you remember. And there was a major debate going on as to whether the U.S. should continue to support Chiang Kai-shek with large-scale aid. As you may remember, there was a White Paper put out, sort of illustrating how our assistance to Chiang had been wasted. There was reluctance in the United States government at that time to endorse large-scale aid programs for Chiang. And this put the Executive Branch in sort of a running duel with the Congress on many counts.

Q: Again, we're talking about junior level, but, still, how did you find the reporting on the economic situation? I suppose, at that point, you were concerned about the economic situation on Taiwan, but you're getting from both. I mean, how'd you find...?

JOHNSON: I don't remember there being much, Stu. Of course, we had no posts in mainland China then. What reporting was done was mainly a sort of intelligence-type reporting, through posts like Hong Kong, and we weren't too much interested in the economy of Taiwan. It was mainly a political matter.

Q: Did the Korean War, which started in June of 1950, which was right in the middle of the time you were there, change much of what you were doing?

JOHNSON: Yes, I think it intensified the battle between those who were in support of Chiang Kai-shek and felt we should demonstrate that support by large aid programs,

Library of Congress

and the more conservative forces that didn't see much benefit for the U.S. in further supporting the Gimo. I say that because, when General MacArthur came back from Korea, a great deal of this sentiment coalesced around him. He was a very strong exponent for helping Chiang Kai-shek, because he felt that was a good hope for getting at the Chinese Communists.

Q: Well, then, you moved to Hong Kong in 1951 and you were there until '54. Was this still with the Civil Service?

JOHNSON: No, I joined the Foreign Service.

Q: Why did you do that?

JOHNSON: That's a good question, and I've often wondered. I was having a fascinating time in Chinese Affairs and enjoyed it. And I had the feeling, which persisted throughout much of my Foreign Service career, that it's in Washington where the decisions were made, and that was a fun place to be, it's where the action was. I took the Foreign Service exams while I was in the Office of Chinese Affairs, partly just to see how I'd do, without much intention then of going into the service. And I was deferred on the orals because my knowledge of U.S. history wasn't very good. Even before that, I was deferred because my German was not up to date. So I repaired my German, took the language exam again, then I spent a year studying U.S. history, because it was just a challenge to me to get through this thing. And I passed the oral exam easily the second time. Thereafter, I think I just felt I'd put so much effort into this thing that I ought to give the Service a try. And my people in Chinese Affairs wanted me to go to Hong Kong to help in the commercial section with the trade controls that we had then, if you remember, very intensive controls to prevent goods from Communist China getting into the United States, and, conversely, to prevent U.S. exports from getting into Communist China.

Library of Congress

Q: It's interesting from a historical point of view to think how much effort has been put into the United States commercial controls, not spreading trade.

JOHNSON: Absolutely.

Q: During World War II, an awful lot of our officers were doing nothing but trying to stick it to the, particularly the Germans, to keep them from getting stuff out of Latin America. And we sort of went right back into that mode again.

JOHNSON: You're so right, we did. And we expended a tremendous amount of money and effort. And I was in the middle of that when I was in Hong Kong.

It even got kind of amusing, the depth of our concerns. For example, in trying to prevent Chinese Communist products from arriving in the United States, we got into some very detailed definitions of what is a Chinese product. There are a lot of Chinese products based on egg and chicken, food products that were exported to the U.S. traditionally. And, of course, exports from Hong Kong we were happy to let in, because this was a friendly British colony, but nothing from Communist China. Well, the border between Hong Kong and Communist China runs through a swamp, and there were a lot of Chinese vegetable goods produced in that swamp, on both sides of the border, and there was no way of detecting, for example, a litchi nut produced in Hong Kong from one produced in China. And it got even more technical when you got into egg products. It was clear that if the egg had been hatched in Communist China, even though the egg was brought into Hong Kong for processing, it was a Communist product. But how about if the chicken comes from Communist China and is brought across the border into Hong Kong live and lays the egg on the Hong Kong side, is that then a Communist product?

Q: These were matters of debate?

Library of Congress

JOHNSON: These were matters that had to be answered, defined, because we were policing this sort of thing.

And, looking the other way, there was a tremendous effort to keep U.S. goods from getting into Communist China. And in the commercial section I did a lot of export checking. You know the old export checks, where you try to decide what will happen to this particular product—if it's brought in, will it be re-exported?

That is really a battle of wits in Hong Kong, because a Chinese company that is importing and perhaps does intend to send it to Communist China, would find all sorts of ways of evading these eager-beaver American vice consuls. As you came up the steps, with the sign of the U Fong Company on somebody's desk, and they saw you coming, the sign would be quickly removed and another sign would be put up there. You'd ask, "Is Mr. Chin around?" And they'd say, "He is not here right now, maybe he'll be back later."

But I remember particularly one export check that I was asked to make on, of all things, prophylactic rubbers. And the question was: What are Hong Kong's requirements for prophylactic rubbers? And I had to go all around Hong Kong, talking to importers of prophylactic rubbers and asking: How many do you think Hong Kong uses? And how many are re-exported to China? And I wrote about a ten-or twelve-page airgram, which received commendations from Washington. Then I got a further communication saying, "Please update this carefully. We have heard that the Chinese Communists are using prophylactic rubbers to protect the muzzles of their guns from moisture."

Q: We did in Korea.

JOHNSON: That's what Washington said. They said this is being done in Korea.

Q: I remember it distinctly.

Library of Congress

JOHNSON: And so I was double checking, and then I got another telegram from the Pentagon that said, "Forget all about it. Our experts have said that if you do try to protect your gun muzzles that way, it will simply rust and pit-out the muzzles themselves because moisture will collect, there is no air in the muzzle. So any prophylactic rubbers that want to go to Communist China, okay."

Q: So you didn't look at the strategic value of trying to keep the Chinese population down.

JOHNSON: No, that wasn't part of that check. So that was challenging, but a tremendous expense of time and effort, as you said. We had a commercial section of, I would guess, four or five officers. And they didn't do any trade development work, it was all this kind of control.

I think at that time we had some concern that maybe the British patrols, patrols that were designed to prevent smuggling from Hong Kong to China, were not sufficiently efficient. To reassure us, they said I could ride on British patrols at night and watch them intercepting junks smuggling—steel plate was a big item and tires—to Canton. And I spent several very exciting nights patrolling Hong Kong waters. They'd pull junks over and go aboard and search for contraband. And a few of these junks tried to evade the patrols. It was exciting and interesting.

Q: I was wondering really how the Consulate General observed things in China. Did you have the feeling they were getting much information from talking to others there, or was it a group of Cold Warriors really hunkered down at that time?

JOHNSON: No, Stu, they had some really good China hands. These were people who had served in China before and knew the country, State Department Foreign Service people. Of course, there were CIA people there, too, who were very good. And there was a great deal of interviewing of people coming across the line—university professors from China and business people. And there was a great deal of reading of anything that was published

Library of Congress

that came out of China. It was the principal listening post for China. It was one of the very largest American posts in the world at that time, larger than most embassies. We had forty-two vice consuls, just vice consuls alone. It was known as a marrying post—I met my wife there—and we counted a total of six weddings that developed from contacts in the Consulate there.

Q: My God. Was Pat, your wife, was she...?

JOHNSON: She was there as a consular assistant, having joined the Foreign Service before I did.

I spent about two years in the commercial section, and then a couple of years in the consular section, which was also very colorful and also involved a great deal of detailed effort that produced little in terms of the interests of the U.S. citizenry.

Here the effort was to keep Chinese from entering the U.S. illegally. And the base of the problem is that, in China, at least then, they didn't have civil documents. There was no such thing as an official birth certificate or an official marriage certificate. So you had to rely on informal evidence if you were a Chinese and you wanted, for example, to prove that you were the son of a Chinese and therefore entitled to non-quota entry. And very often the Chinese father would be in the States and he would be asking that this young man come in as his son. Well, there was a great deal of illegal importation of Chinese young men into the U.S. for various labor purposes, so in the visa section we had to be extremely careful. And the "son" would come in with what was called informal evidence. This would be, oh, say, badly worn letters from "Dad," sent to this kid supposedly when he was such and such an age—but sometimes the ink wouldn't be too dry on them. Or they would unroll a beautiful certificate, and you'd say, "What is that thing?"

And he'd say, "That is the announcement of the marriage of Mom and Dad, and it's signed down here by the Chinese gentleman who presided at the wedding."

Library of Congress

And you'd feel it and say, "This paper feels pretty new. This doesn't look like the certificate that was used when your father was married."

And then he'd pull out a photograph of him with old "Dad" alongside, to prove the relationship.

And you'd say, "Why is it that the left-hand side of this photograph is light, whereas the right-hand side is so dark? Looks almost as though something had been pasted together here. Why don't you try again and come back in a few weeks."

I felt for the poor Chinese.

Then they developed blood testing as a means of tripping things up. Because, of course, a blood test can prove that by anything known to medical science you cannot be the result of the union of these two people. "Mother," of course, was often a part of this. She would come in with this alleged son, to testify that yes, I remember well when Jimmy here was born, and his father is, sure enough, this guy in San Francisco. And you'd take a blood test on all three, and it would come out that Jimmy just couldn't be the son of this union. And you'd not only have to turn him down, but you'd...this was the hardest, really the hardest thing I had to do in all my consular work, you'd have to turn down this poor, aging woman because she had lied under oath. And you'd have to tell her that under no circumstances could she rejoin her husband. And that is just a real, real hard thing. A lot of human interest stories in that work.

I remember...I'll get off this subject soon, but it is colorful. The citizenship section worked on somewhat the same problems, although here the young man was trying to prove that he was entitled to U.S. citizenship. There the effort was based principally on his trying to prove that he was born in a certain village at a certain time. He would come into the Consulate with a "witness," a friend from the same village. And both of them had been very carefully coached at a school set up in Hong Kong to brief guys who were appearing

Library of Congress

before the U.S. Consul so they would know what to say. The examination consisted of getting a piece of paper and drawing a sort of an informal map of the village. And the examiner would say, "Now in your village where was the, let's say, the place where the gentlemen bathed themselves?" And you'd ask them separately. The witness would come in and say it was over here; and the applicant would put it over here. And you'd say, "Well, you two don't seem to be from the same town really." And then you'd check out with them the place where the small market was in the village—tremendous detail. If you passed this oral quizzing, there was a place in Hong Kong where you could buy healthy, warm stools before you came in for your physical exam. Colorful assignment.

Q: Yes. You then left there for a much more mundane world, didn't you?

JOHNSON: Yes, I went to Toronto after that.

Q: Yes, you were there for about a year or so.

JOHNSON: That was, I would say, a rather dull assignment, being in the Consulate in Toronto. I did only consular work, and it was very open and shut. We didn't find Toronto very exciting, although we had Maple Leaf (hockey) season tickets.

Some of our vice consuls at that time found Canada a surprisingly hostile milieu. They were people, I guess who, like me, had been brought up to think that this was a brother country. Their parents had talked to them about the thousands of miles of undefended frontier. So they expected to be welcomed as brothers. And they were surprised to find the Canadians a little bit prickly about being called brothers, because they thought there was something condescending about that.

One of our vice consuls resigned while he was there. He had, before he resigned, written an article for Maclean magazine, which was titled "I'm Leaving Canada and I'm Glad of It." Fortunately, he had left about two days before Macleans hit the newsstand, because our Consul general really blew his stack—here was a U.S. vice consul stirring that pot.

Library of Congress

I don't think I was there for more than maybe a year in Toronto. And I applied for Polish language training.

Q: Why Polish?

JOHNSON: Well, it was one of the very first hard languages available, and it seemed to me a good way to get in on the ground floor of a fairly small corps of officers that would have some real expertise in a certain area.

Q: Well, maybe not to overhit this, but one had the feeling—I certainly did—that for at least a decade or so the East European hands were a real corps. In a way, that was, during the '50s and maybe early '60s, the way to replicate the old days of the Russian hands, the Soviet hands, who came in, in the '30s and a little bit of the '40s—the Kennans and the Bohlens and all. And East Europe was attracting somewhat the same type of interest.

JOHNSON: I think so. I agree with you entirely, Stu. And there was a certain esprit de corps among us, to the extent that one of us, Walt Jenkins, whom you probably know, became very articulate in complaining when Soviet language and area officers were assigned to EE posts, thereby preventing members of this EE group from ascending to levels of counselor of embassy and DCM.

Q: You took Polish, what, for a year?

JOHNSON: I think that lasted about six or seven months.

Q: What was the situation at the embassy when you got to Warsaw? Who was the ambassador, how did he or she operate, and what went on?

JOHNSON: The ambassador was a man named Joseph E. Jacobs, who had more time in the Foreign Service than anyone else at that time. He had something like forty years of

Library of Congress

service. He was aging, and beloved by his entire staff. He was a well- organized man, a kindly person, of course tremendously experienced in diplomacy.

It was a frozen situation. There was very little we could do when I first arrived. It was a typical Soviet-bloc set up: few contacts.

Then, midway in my tour, of course, the Poznan riots occurred. And then there was the exciting time when mobs surged down the avenue in front of our embassy, to besiege the Russian embassy and shake fists at them. Later on, tank tracks had been found around the camps where the Russians had based their armored forces. So apparently the Russians at one point had decided to move on Warsaw with their tanks because of this surge of anti-Soviet feeling in Warsaw.

This all resulted, of course, in an agreement whereby the Russians pulled most of their troops out. Gomulka came in. For a time, there was a great deal of relaxation in Poland, and the atmosphere was hugely improved. There was a great deal of interest in contacting Americans, but even more, Western Europeans, because Poland, of course, has this tremendous orientation toward France and Britain, as well as the U.S.

But, as history shows, eventually things froze back over again.

Q: What were you doing at the embassy when you went there?

JOHNSON: I was the economic officer, Stu. I did some economic reporting. Just about any shreds that you could get were of interest. The only reporting you could get on the industrial progress was out of the newspapers, and of course it was heavily censored and very optimistic. You could travel around and observe a bit, but not much.

Q: Could you go to industries and things like that?

JOHNSON: Oh, no. No, no. No.

Library of Congress

Q: Nothing the way that we used to be able to do it in Yugoslavia.

JOHNSON: No. Oh, once in a while, if a big delegation was in town that somehow the Poles wanted to smooth over the right way, they'd invite them to visit a showplace, like Nova Huta, the big ironworks. But we Embassy people couldn't get access to even a food processing plant by asking the protocol of the Foreign Ministry to get in.

I was the economic officer; in small posts they didn't call them counselors then. The political officer also was in the same office that I was, and we shared an office. His name was also Johnson, Valdemar Johnson, still a very good friend of mine. And people longed for the day when Valdemar would be transferred, to end the confusion of having two Johnsons. But Valdemar was replaced by Richard G. Johnson.

Q: Oh, God. How about contact, both on the official and on the sort of personal level, with the Poles?

JOHNSON: For a time, at the end of our tour of duty, it became easy and very pleasant. We made some good friends—business people and doctors. As I say, that's after Poland's revolution that brought back Gomulka and led to a great relaxation in the tension. This and the Poznan riots were, I guess, the first open defiance of Soviet authority.

Q: Well, there were the little Berlin riots in '53. And then there was the Poznan.

JOHNSON: That's right, there were. You're quite right.

Q: The Poznan riots were when?

JOHNSON: The Poznan riots were in '56. I was in Poznan at the time, I'd gone down for the Poznan Fair. The riots took place then because there were a lot of foreigners in town for the Poznan Fair whom the rioters wanted to impress.

Library of Congress

We encountered an interesting Polish businessman at a nightclub. Eating space was very scarce in the restaurants in Poznan during the fair, so we joined him at his table, with his dolly, a very attractive young lady. We got to talking about his livelihood; we were sort of curious as to how he could afford to keep buying champagne, which he insisted that we drink as well as his dollbaby. He kept asking us to dance with this beautiful young lady.

One thing led to another, and finally he said, "All right, I'll tell you how I can afford this. I have a good way of making money. Like many others, I make money on the margins. It's not really illegal, but the authorities would like to know about it. And I know you guys won't squeal on me."

He had very good contacts in places like the downtown department store in Warsaw and other places that handled textiles and suits, ready-made clothing. There's a lot of very shoddy stuff available. The good stuff came from just a very few plants and factories in Poland, and it was delivered infrequently. But he had enough good contacts so that he would get a phone call when a delivery was going to be made from the factory. And as the truck was backed up to the unloading platform of the department store, he would be there with his truck. And he would simply buy it all—at the retail price; it was all legal and covered by papers, but it was transferred directly into his truck. And he took it to his place. He had a huge basement there, filled with good stuff. This was the prime quality stuff, and Warsaw citizens knew if they really wanted to get a good, good suit, of good material, they could always get it from him, at a damn high price.

Further on in the evening, as things warmed up and we had a bit more champagne, he whispered to us, "You know, this place is going to blow sky high tomorrow."

We said, "What do you mean?"

"Yep, they're going out on the streets and they're gonna raise hell."

Library of Congress

We thought about it, and the subject changed. Fortunately we had the sense, when we got back to our hotel a bit later, maybe a half an hour later, to call someone in the embassy and say that there is this rumor in Poznan. Because it was the next day that things busted open.

Q: Did you sort of watch it from the sidelines there? How does one act when there is a major riot in a city where one happens to be?

JOHNSON: We were very much on the sidelines. We stayed on the fringes of the mob, and I don't think we had particularly good insights as to what was going on. I don't remember our providing any specially valuable reporting on the thing.

Q: Did you have the feeling that you were under tight security surveillance at the time you were there? Were there problems with sort of attempts at sexual attraction, or drinking, or, you know, I mean, what have you?

JOHNSON: Yes. Again, this was during the first half of my tour. There was a dramatic change with the events of 1956 and Gomulka's arrival on the scene. But during the first half, yes, there was very heavy surveillance. If we left Warsaw, we were always followed by black Citroens, which were souped-up so that they could keep up with the cars we had, which were pretty powerful Mercuries and things like that. The pursuit got intense. And in some ways I think we behaved in a rather childish fashion in trying to dodge these followers. There was no reason to; there was nothing really that we wanted to do that they could have detained us for. But we would try to out speed them. And if that failed, there was one trick that we'd do. After having been on the road for two or three hours in the morning, we would finally pull up in a nice rural scene and get out some Thermos bottles as though we were going to picnic and take it easy for a while. And the secret police people, who'd been parked in front of our apartments for several hours even before we left, had to go to the bathroom like tremendous, and they'd come flying out of their Citroens and disappear into the woods, whereupon we'd quickly pile the Thermos bottles back into

Library of Congress

the car and dash off. You'd see these poor guys coming out of the woods, buttoning their pants up. As I say, it was terribly childish.

Q: Such are sort of things of the Cold War.

JOHNSON: Yes, it was childish, but it provided a bit of excitement in what was otherwise a rather dull existence, I guess.

Q: Then you came back to the department, where you served from '57 to '61. What were you doing there?

JOHNSON: I was Polish desk officer. I was also the Baltic States desk officer. And, in that latter role, I had the job of writing every year the White House statement about the independence of the Baltic States. And I can still remember some of those phrases about how we stood totally behind the Baltic States in their desire eventually to throw off the Soviet yoke. And how we refuse to recognize the incorporation of these states into the Soviet Union. And how we'd never abandon the flame of freedom in the Baltic States.

Q: Well, this, I assume, was really very pro forma, wasn't it? I mean, the Baltic States—Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia—always had their legations that were here, but did you really do much with them?

JOHNSON: No, the main things I remember were, we went of course to all of their functions, and I became good friends with the ambassadors. Lithuania and Latvia had embassies (or legations) in Washington. Estonia had a Consulate in New York. Of course, they still do. No, there wasn't a great deal of activity. Preparing this independence statement, this was something of course that the Baltic-Americans really looked forward to and they made a lot of it. Another thing, though, that the Baltic States desk officer did was to approve the budgets of these three posts. And that was because the posts existed, and for all I know still do today, on funds that the U.S. Treasury had seized at the outbreak of World War II, or at least when the Nazis invaded the Baltic States, because we didn't want

Library of Congress

the Germans to get their hands on them. So we were still husbanding those resources, and in order for the Baltic diplomats in Washington and New York to get their hands on this money, they had to come to me, kind of hat in hand, with the budget. And I would go over it with them, because I knew the Treasury Department would go over it very carefully afterwards. And I'd say things to this...it seems ridiculous in retrospect...to this dignified old Latvian ambassador, "Arnolds, why are you asking for six brooms? What do you do with all these brooms? Didn't you get brooms last year?"

And he'd say, "Forget about it, I'll buy the brooms myself."

So I'd strike brooms off. And finally this budget, as vetted by us, would go to the Treasury Department and after even closer examination of it they would release the funds.

Q: Well, what about this period of '57 to '61—relations with Poland had sort of opened up; this was really the end of the Eisenhower administration—were there any particular developments at that time that as Polish desk officer you were dealing with?

JOHNSON: Nothing particularly exciting, Stu. This was a time of a gradual refreezing of the relationship. You remember Gomulka came in with great promise, and it looked as though there was going to be continuing liberalization, but Gomulka himself proved a bit of a disappointment, and then he left and the future Polish leadership and the PZPR became quite conventional in the Soviet state mold. I remember we did fight certain battles for the Poles. I think in Washington we tried to treat the Poles a notch or two better than the other Soviet bloc countries.

I remember a lesson I learned in how bureaucracy works. The Poles were picking up cotton in the United States, and the handiest port for them was Wilmington, North Carolina. Wilmington was not on the list of ports approved for bloc vessels, and we tried hard (because there is nothing particularly strategic in Wilmington), just as an accommodation for the Poles, to get Wilmington added to the list.

Library of Congress

Well, far more conservative elements in the U.S. government opposed this roundly, and took it right up to the NSC. In those days, these problems were hashed out in the NSC by a vote.

The assistant secretary for European Affairs told me go on up to the NSC and argue this case. Why not let the Poles come into Wilmington, for Pete's sake? So I prepared for it, and I could see a real collision coming.

I was told by the representative of Treasury that Treasury feels very strongly about this. "Our deputy secretary is going to appear on behalf of Treasury. Are you sure you want to be carrying the flag for the Department of State, Dick?"

I told the assistant secretary, and he said, "Oh, my God, I should ask our deputy secretary to go up and argue this question?"

I think eventually he went, or maybe an under secretary, but it just showed to me how very minor problems can be elevated to an importance that they really do not deserve, if a certain U.S. agency happens to feel strongly about it, and if there happens to be, let's say, a deputy secretary who isn't terribly busy and he's looking for issues.

Q: And this was one in which to take the State Department on, head on.

JOHNSON: Absolutely.

Q: Dick, what about the Polish lobby? This must have been a very powerful group. How did they affect you in the United States?

JOHNSON: Well, generally, Stu, they supported our policies. And of course it's a very powerful group, the Polish-American Congress. They were very conservative. Again, I'm referring to the period after the refreeze began and not to the balmy days of Gomulka in '56. They approved of our treatment of Poland as a Soviet-bloc country. And I think

Library of Congress

they were happy enough to see us doing what little we could to accommodate them in certain sectors, and in actually distinguishing between Poland and the other bloc countries. They approved of that, the idea of not lumping all the bloc countries together, but giving Poland individual treatment. But most of them refused to have any contact with Poland. There were a very few that traveled to Poland in those days, but not many, and the Polish-American Congress did not encourage group travel to Poland. We had no problems with pressure groups, because by and large they supported the U.S. government's stand on Poland then.

Q: Then you left that, and this is where our paths crossed. You took Serbo-Croatian. Was this sort of a normal course for somebody who wants to be an Eastern European hand?

JOHNSON: Yes. By then I think I'd decided that Eastern Europe was my bag and that I couldn't stay in Poland indefinitely, so I volunteered for Serbo-Croatian.

Q: You spent a year there studying, or about a year, in the bowels of the...

JOHNSON: It wasn't quite a year.

Q: No, it was about eight months or so, in the garage of Arlington Towers.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: That's where the courses were located. Well, what did you do then? I mean, you came to Belgrade, and what was your job?

JOHNSON: Just a little reminiscence about our language training. You remember Jankovic and Popovic, the teachers, both from the little town of Sabac, about sixty miles outside of Belgrade.

Q: On the Sava River.

Library of Congress

JOHNSON: Popovic owned the hotel in the center of town, which is to this day the principal coffee shop. And I remember asking these two gentlemen how does it happen, when there are only two instructors in Serbian in the whole U.S. government, they're both from the same little tank town? And their answer was that it's in Sabac that the purest Serbo-Croatian is spoken. Well, I thought that was kind of cute and kind of funny, and I told this story many times. I told it last June in Belgrade, and the guy didn't think it was funny at all. He said, "You know, that's where Karadzic is from. And he's the guy that..."

Q: Who changed the whole language.

JOHNSON: Absolutely.

Q: He was my god, as far as I'm concerned, because he did something about the spelling of Serbian, which made it impossible to misspell.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: And simplified the language. Anybody who'll do that is a god as far as I'm concerned.

JOHNSON: It's spelled the way it's spoken. So that's why Sabac was on the map.

In Belgrade, on that tour, I was a second secretary in the political section, no great shakes. I did things like analyzing the new constitution—about forty-five endless pages in the dumbest airgram that ever was sent. But the thing that made that tour interesting and exciting was that George Kennan was our ambassador.

Q: Could you explain, in the first place, his reputation before you went there, what you felt about him, and then how you found him as a boss.

JOHNSON: Well, of course I was tremendously impressed with him before I went, with what reading I'd done. And as a boss I just can't imagine a more exciting person to work with. The other boss that I would say that I particularly enjoyed working with in my career

Library of Congress

was John Crimmins, in Brasilia. But Kennan was the sort of a person who liked to rap with his junior officers, as did Crimmins, it happened. And he, as you remember, developed this project of publishing a history of Yugoslavia, and each of us was assigned a chapter, then he would ask us to come up on Sundays and sit around the fire and discuss various aspect of developments that were going on. He is such a tremendously articulate and deeply intelligent person that these were really fascinating Sunday afternoons. Also, he would invite us in when he came back from a meeting with Tito, and he would tell us how the meeting went and analyze it in very perceptive terms.

I remember one story about his dealings with Tito. I'm not too sure that it's true, but it could be. That after one meeting, he was getting up to go. He and Tito were by then quite good friends. And Tito started to say something as Kennan left, he said, "Mr. Ambassador, if you don't mind, I'd..." And then he stopped.

And Kennan said, "Yes, what is it?"

And Tito said, "No, never mind, never mind. I don't want to say it. I don't want to appear ungenerous."

And Kennan said, "Well, now, come on, please, we know each other well enough so that I know how to take it if you want to give me something straight."

And so Tito said, "All right, sit down." And Tito told him that he'd just as soon not have any more U.S. aid. That it was embarrassing to Yugoslavia to be a bone of contention in the U.S. Congress each year, and to have the question raised as to whether Yugoslavia was Communist or not. And that he thought Yugoslavia had progressed enough so that if we could shift to trade not aid he would appreciate it.

So Kennan went back and sent that telegram in. And fortunately the Department of State and Congress took it on good terms, and the aid was gradually terminated. And really from then on our relations were smooth and cordial, at least up to the present day. It's hard to

Library of Congress

say what's going to happen in Yugoslavia now and where the U.S. stands. We have to see what results before we can decide.

Q: We're speaking right now, in January 1991, where there is terrific tension between Serbia and particularly Croatia and Slovenia. A very, very critical time.

JOHNSON: Yes. Absolutely. Serbia and Croatia and Slovenia, yes. But what I was going to say is that, all along, since the date that aid program terminated, our relations have been just extremely smooth and very cordial, hardly a ripple on the stream.

Q: Could you describe a bit about how you, and maybe the political section, saw the political situation in Yugoslavia in this period of '62, '63ish.

JOHNSON: Well, I'm trying to separate what happened on my second tour in Yugoslavia from what developed at this time, in these earlier days. There wasn't a great deal of liberalization in Yugoslavia then. They had made their break with Stalin and deserved full credit, high marks for that. And they had developed their own economic system and I felt deserved high marks for that. As far as contacts were concerned, it wasn't easy. There was still a certain amount of distrust of foreigners, I'd say, and of course the Yugoslav press was not very liberal or not very free then.

I look back on that tour as having been exciting, in the sense that Yugoslavia was a country going its own way. And the one nice thing about it, one could travel. And if you went through protocol in advance, you could meet officials in towns and talk to them about the situation where they were.

I say "if you talked to protocol in advance" — on one occasion we were visiting Pristina and the word had not gone in ahead. We checked in at the office of the...I guess it was the head of the autonomous government, or the vice president of it, and announced ourselves. And we were told to sit down. And we sat down and waited for about forty-five minutes or an hour. And then someone came down and said, "What do you want here?"

Library of Congress

And we told them it was just a friendly visit, to talk about conditions.

“Well, you can read about it in the newspaper. We are not interested in talking with you. You're obviously trying to get some information that is not going to be made generally available. And we would appreciate it if you would leave town immediately” (before sundown, as in our Westerns)

And we were escorted by the UB to the edge of town.

Q: UB being the Udba, the secret police.

JOHNSON: Those were the bad days. Things gradually got a good deal better, and I have a wonderful time now when I go to Yugoslavia. I visit wherever I want to go.

Q: Just as an aside, protocol one time arranged for a visit. We asked to go to some industry, and I found myself, with another Foreign Service officer, Harry Dunlap, in the middle of a factory, and we noticed that everything they said was very guarded. It didn't dawn on us until we were halfway through our meeting that it was a cellulose factory, which made gun powder. Protocol probably hadn't realized it, and we hadn't realized it, and here we were talking about what do you do, you know. And they were very, very unhappy about this.

JOHNSON: No wonder. Well, there were possibilities to get factory visits and visits to towns, and certainly life was a lot different in Yugoslavia even then than it was at that time in Soviet-bloc countries.

Q: Well, how did you figure what was going on in the political world there? You had two newspapers, Politika and Borba. I was sitting in the consular section, and I would read them, both in Serbian and then in English translation, and no matter which you read them in, to me they were almost incomprehensible. How did you cut your way through the verbiage to find out what were the political dynamics of the country?

Library of Congress

JOHNSON: Well, although contacts were not easy, informal contacts with just plain friends, contacts with government people, some of them very shrewd observers, and with journalists, you remember this, were entirely possible. So I shouldn't have indicated there was a freeze on contacts.

I remember in particular one very fine senior constitutional lawyer who was connected with the government in a sort of consulting capacity, and very often, when I'd read of some political development or when I wanted some interpretation of a provision of the constitution, I'd call this fine old gentleman up and he'd say, yeah, come by. He wasn't giving away any secrets, he was just sort of telling me how things worked and how they were going to work. And there were other contacts of that sort that the political section had, open contacts, obviously cleared by any authorities that needed to clear them. And we could talk to journalists, who were fairly well informed.

Q: Well, how did we view the Tito government? Did we see this as having continuity after he departed the scene? Were we talking about trouble on the horizon, or not?

JOHNSON: I don't think we were. I don't know how you feel about this, but I don't think we realized then how unstable things would become when Tito passed away.

And, of course, Tito's approach to that was a rather frightening one. Instead of taking someone whom he trusted and training him to be successor, preparing him for that, Tito took the opinion there can be no new Tito; the only thing that's going to hold this country together (and there's certainly some rationale for this viewpoint) is to give each republic an equal opportunity to speak its piece in decisions—government by consent (which has turned out to be terribly clumsy).

But I don't think we viewed that with alarm when he died, I think we felt this was a good way to allow the republics to let off steam. And we felt that, sure, you can't have that kind of a government indefinitely; we expected that some kind of a leader would gradually

Library of Congress

emerge from this, who would have the support of all the republics. I think we felt that the process of Yugoslavia becoming an integrated nation was inexorable, inevitable. We were influenced by people who said, "Don't ask me whether I'm a Serb or a Croat, I'm a Yugoslav."

Q: I felt very much that way, that we didn't see these almost cultural fissures that have come up. We thought that perhaps the experience of World War II and all had...well, we were really superimposing the United States's experience on Yugoslavia, I think, in many ways maybe.

JOHNSON: Yes, we were also, though, I think, giving weight to practical factors: the Slovenes needed a market, and there it was in Serbia; the Serbs needed some components from more developed regions, and the Slovenes and Croats could provide that. Alone these republics, we were wont to feel, would have had a heck of a tough time. We felt that gradually these old animosities and nationalist feelings would wear away. And then, you remember, there was this resurgence of Croatian nationalism, in Tito's day, that he squashed.

Q: And we didn't see any real problem from the Albanian minority at that time, did we?

JOHNSON: In Kosovo?

Q: Kosovo.

JOHNSON: No, it took Milosevic to awaken the interests of the Serbs...

Q: Milosevic is the present authoritarian leader of Serbia.

JOHNSON: Yes, it took him to awaken the interests of Serbs in recovering this great battleground, this great scene of so many Serbian glories. Of course, all of these feelings emerge as soon as the Communist Party is removed, this great crust that keeps feelings down. And, in effect, there was a system. It was a horribly inefficient system, but things

Library of Congress

ran. Well, as soon as that crust is removed and you get an active prime minister like Markovic, who wants to go about reforming instantly and bring some efficiency into the economy—a free market, close down the factories that aren't making money, that sort of thing—that then gives rise to all kinds of not only nationalist feelings but arguments among the republics on economic matters and disagreements with the federal government: we can't afford all of these unemployed workers, we don't want these fine plants to shut down. And so I think, as Yugoslav officials today are wont to say, it was almost inevitable that once you gave them an opportunity, the people would bring these feelings to the surface and there would be clashes.

Q: Well, then you moved to Sofia as deputy chief of mission, and you were there from '63 to '65. How did that come about? You weren't in Yugoslavia very long.

JOHNSON: No, that was the result of Eugenie Anderson's selection. She came through Belgrade, and she and I worked together on something. We had a legation in Sofia then, you know, it was one of our last legations, and Eugenie was the minister to Bulgaria. She was then looking for a new DCM because Charlie Stefan was finishing his tour. So she asked me if I'd like to take the job, and I jumped at the chance.

Eugenie had a great public relations orientation; she liked to shake hands and to get out and around. Of course, Bulgaria is a very difficult place to do that, but Eugenie nonetheless tried. She dressed very beautifully. Both in terms of her personality and intelligence but also her appearance, she spoke well for the USA as obviously a prosperous woman. She and her USIA guy, a guy named Alex Bloomfield, would pile into her Cadillac and just shoot off for a day visiting different people, not with prearranged appointments necessarily, but going into the marketplace, and the mobs would descend around this huge Cadillac and Eugenie would shake hands and, through Alex Bloomfield who spoke excellent Bulgarian, she would tell everybody how the U.S. only wanted friendship with Bulgaria and that we hoped there would be some exchanges eventually, but the Bulgarian government wasn't doing much on that. And she'd do that until the secret

Library of Congress

police would sort of muscle her along. She liked to do that, and she left the business of dealing with the government to me, so I was the one that went around and delivered demarches at government ministries.

And at that time, the U.S. desk officer in the Bulgarian government (I guess he handled other countries in addition to the U.S.) didn't speak English, so the whole thing had to be conducted in Bulgarian. My Bulgarian was not very good. They decided that I could convert from the Polish and the Serbo- Croatian that I knew to Bulgarian without going through FSI, so it was rather rocky. I remember coming back, and Eugenie would say, "Well, what did he say?"

And I'd say, well, he said thus and so and so and so.

And Eugenie would say, "My gosh, are you sure he did?"

And I'd say, "(um, er) Yes, I'm sure."

And she'd say, "Well then, put it in a telegram, the department has got to know about this!"

I thought at that time I was a pretty weak reed to lean on.

That tour was generally, I would say, relative to some of my other tours, dull, because contacts with the Bulgarian population were all but impossible. We came to know a few doctors because there were international medical conferences in town. But one doctor that we came to know and had to our house for dinner was subsequently tried as a spy and strung up. There was just damn little contact, even with government people or press people. They just weren't interested.

Q: And the United States per se had very little interest in Bulgaria.

JOHNSON: I wouldn't say that, Stu, I think we wanted to warm- up relations. In those days, we were trying to build bridges, you remember. I remember, as DCM, urging that we

Library of Congress

arrange what we called basket talks with the Bulgarians, on a variety of subjects, to try to improve relations—talk about a consular agreement, and talk about beefing up exchanges. We tried on a number of occasions to get the Bulgarian government interested in accepting some nice exchange offers. I remember one was with the Columbia Medical School, an internship. Absolutely no political connotation at all. But the Bulgarian reaction was, “Well, why are you offering us this?”

And we'd say, “Well, just to develop relations.”

And the official would look at you sort of as if to say that's a likely story! And they'd turn it down.

So I think we tried.

One of the maddening things the Bulgarians would do was when an American delegation came, let's say, for some kind of an international medical conference, they would invite our doctors to a briefing and they would say, “You know, it's really unfortunate that our relations are so poor. It's the result of your legation here, they just don't seem interested in doing anything. We've proposed a number of initiatives.” And the doctors often would believe that. They'd come around and say, “Why don't you guys try? Get off the dime.” And maybe I had just come back from my third effort to interest somebody in taking this Columbia internship. The Bulgarians really had tremendous fear of the USA. They were not interested in us at all.

On two or maybe three occasions, the embassy was under siege by mobs of Communists. We were involved in Vietnam at the time. The occasion was usually some alleged U.S. atrocity in Southeast Asia, like bombing Cambodia or something.

These were quite frightening occasions, particularly for me, because I was the chargé d'affaires at the time of at least two of them. Eugenie was out in Western Europe at those times. They were frightening because I was worried that these mobs would set fire to the

Library of Congress

post. They always broke windows and started climbing into the windows. And we had the whole embassy staff to protect. We would be up on the top floor. The locals would have been sent home, but most of the embassy staff was there, because many of us lived there, and they were sort of cowering in a corner while rocks rained through the windows into the offices of the embassy. And, as soon as I could, I would have to try to get out the front door of the embassy, pushing against this surging crowd, and make my way through the crowd, with all sorts of taunts and insults and being spat upon, to the Foreign Ministry, which was just across the way.

And I would see a man named Bashev, who was the foreign minister, a really sinister, silent man who had very little to say. And the pretext for these things was always the same. Of course, the government always claimed: We had nothing to do with it, it's just an outburst of sentiment on behalf of our youth. But they would then say, "But, Mr. Johnson, a tip for you would be to close down that window you have where you display photographs that are sent to you from Washington, photographs that are propaganda. We know they aren't true, and it infuriates our people. Will you please close it down?"

And my answer was always the same, "This is our building and that's our window and we aren't going to close it down. And if you're going to make it impossible for us to operate, then we'll have to close this post." Nobody ever really thought of doing that, but I had to reply in fairly tough terms with them.

This happened two or three times while I was there. On one occasion, all the cars in front of the embassy were turned over and bashed. I got them to pay for the repairs to mine eventually.

Q: Was this the Bulgarian Communists acting as a Bulgarian Communist regime rather than at the instigation of the Soviets? They might have been marching in step, but was this coming from them, or did you feel they were looking over their shoulder?

Library of Congress

JOHNSON: I had the feeling maybe they were doing what they thought the Soviets would want them to do, but I don't think Moscow actually asked them to besiege the U.S. embassy. In fact, I think eventually Moscow developed some concerns that this sort of thing could get out of hand. And, you remember, it was turned off, just suddenly, and there weren't any more. No, I think the Bulgarians felt that this was a kind of a show of their loyalty, of their support for Moscow's position.

And so, if I woke up in the morning and heard BBC describing some brand new extension of the war in Southeast Asia, I'd have to tell our security officer, and splice the main brace, and get ready.

Q: Well, you left Sofia in 1965 and came back, and I have you going to United Nations Affairs for about four years. That must have been a fascinating period.

JOHNSON: It was fun. I liked it. I went there, again, because of Eugenie Anderson. She was assigned as one of the ambassadors to the U.N. Her specific responsibility was with the colonies of the world, the countries of the areas that were supposedly striving for independence. And this included the Trust Territories that the U.S. administered in the Pacific, as well as places like French Somaliland and Equatorial Guinea and even, of course, the anti-apartheid freedom fighters in South Africa. This was Eugenie's job.

She felt, and I think accurately, that there was not a lot of U.S. interest involved in these issues, that they weren't worth a great deal of time. Except for the Trust Territories. Eugenie felt very strongly about the Trust Territories and felt that something had to be done, that we couldn't indefinitely go on administering these territories without giving them some measure of self-determination. She was a real crusader.

But as for the rest of this, the Committee on Decolonization, they called it, also known as the Committee of Twenty-Four, she rarely went to these meetings. And, since the U.S. was a member, I, most of the time, would take her place.

Library of Congress

And one fortunate thing about this role in the U.N. mission was that I was able to sit behind the sign and represent the U.S. in most of the gatherings on “decolonization” that took place at the United Nations.

On most issues when a meeting was scheduled, guys would come up from Washington, with bulging briefcases, and sort of bump the U.S. U.N. officer aside, and say don't worry about this, we'll ask you for advice when we need it, we're taking this over. But the Committee of Twenty-Four decolonization proceedings were so grimy and repetitive, and there was so little U.S. concern in them, that Washington was prepared, or happy enough, to have me take it over. And I got...I forget whether it was a Superior Service Award, one of those awards, for the way that I defended U.S. interests. Actually, the Department gave me the award out of gratitude because I relieved it of the need to bother with this drudgery.

This committee, of course, is bad news for the USA, because our positions were, by and large, fairly conservative on these decolonization issues.

The committee took to the road every year and visited Africa, because that's where most of these freedom-fighters were, and the committee felt it was its job to assure these freedom-fighters of the support of the United Nations. Really that did them a disfavor in a way, I think, because they went away thinking the UN was going to do something for them, and it never did. But it was also an occasion to hear first-hand from these freedom-fighters about their plans and problems.

The U.S. delegation, we were kind of like trained bears, led into these hotbeds of anti-imperialism by the Committee of Twenty-Four, which was always chaired by a radical, maybe a Tanzanian, and we would sit there and take all kinds of abuse.

But it was good training for me, and in a way it was interesting—sticks and stones and that sort of thing. And I had some friends in the Committee of Twenty-Four, including the Yugoslav.

Library of Congress

I was very often attacked by the Soviet delegation or the Czech delegate as well as the Tanzanian and some of the other radical Africans. And they would change the subject to lambaste the US. We'd be talking, let's say, about independence for French Somaliland, and I was allowing myself maybe to doze a bit, when all of a sudden, the Czech would go (clink, clink, clink, clink, on his glass) "Mr. Chairman."

And the chairman would interrupt the speaker and say, "Yes, I recognize the delegate from Czechoslovakia."

And he would say, "What the distinguished delegate from France has said about French Somaliland reminds me of aggression in the Virgin Islands by the United States. I have here an article that I have just been reading about how the United States has disbanded the parliament of the Virgin Islands, and this is just another example of U.S. imperialism."

And I would have to go (clink, clink, clink) "We're departing from the subject, and I reserve a right of reply!"

I would then go to the telephone and call down to Washington and find out what had happened in the Virgin Islands and draft a reply.

It kept one of the edge of one's chair. As did the fact that all these proceedings were on closed-circuit TV in UNP in the Department. Often, after I'd made a speech, I would feel a tap on my shoulder, a messenger telling me I had a phone call, (one time it was Joe Sisco, the assistant secretary for the UN) and the question would be: "Why did you say that? Don't you think that that could have some negative impact on our bilateral relations?" So that kept me on my toes.

Q: Were you ever given ammunition, for example, to raise the oppression of the Russians on Georgia or on all these other Baltic States?

Library of Congress

JOHNSON: The Baltic States especially. Yes, oh, yes, that was part of the standard invective...there was an awful lot of shadow boxing. When the Czechs got after us about the Virgin Islands, more particularly Puerto Rico, that was our really sensitive point, we would always retaliate by saying how about the Baltic States? And that would get them furious. And Shakov, the Soviet delegate, and I would meet thereafter in the delegates' lounge and have a whiskey together and talk about in a rather friendly way.

Q: Did you ever get any delegation of that to go down to Puerto Rico, to take a look and to talk to people? Or did we just want the U.N. to keep their hands off?

JOHNSON: I don't think we did that. We didn't want the U.N. in on it.

The Committee on Decolonization is against any colony, under any circumstances. They feel that everyone has the right to freedom and independence, self-determination. Even the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, which is a reef off the coast of Australia that's administered by Australia. I remember they came up regularly on the agenda of the Committee of Twenty-Four. They'd ask the Australians: What are you doing to bring independence to the (some six hundred and fifty) inhabitants of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands? And the Australians would say this is just patent nonsense.

But, anyway, I think we were afraid that if we invited the Committee of Twenty-Four to go to Puerto Rico, they would plump simply for independence. And, of course, we had regular votes taken, plebiscites of sorts, with independence one of the options, the existing commonwealth status another, statehood a third option, and the vote was usually fairly heavily in favor of continuing commonwealth status.

Q: You did this, what, for about two years?

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: And then you moved on to...

Library of Congress

JOHNSON: The Senior Seminar.

Q: Were you working rather strictly this whole time on this colonization subject?

JOHNSON: Solely, yes.

Q: In a way you must have become quite an expert on every...

JOHNSON: Yes. Yes, I can still tell you what the various national elements are in Equatorial Guinea, Spanish Guinea, which was quite a complicated set up.

I was there for about two years, Stu, and then I went to the Senior Seminar, which was a tremendous experience for me. It exposed me to my own country for really the first time in my life.

Q: That's equivalent to the military War College in a way. It's at a senior level and it's a selected group of people.

JOHNSON: Yes. It differs from the War College, I think, in that it spends more time on the U.S. domestic scene, because it's designed to take officers who've been overseas for a long time and teach them what's been going on in the USA while they've been gone. Whereas the War College and the various other senior training things focus more on international politics and strategy.

Q: Yes, I found it a tremendous year. I had it about five or six years later.

JOHNSON: It was one of the best years I've ever spent; I loved it.

Q: Well, then you went to Rio. What were you doing?

JOHNSON: I was the political counselor. That was something I arranged while I was in Washington. I remember they told us, and they perhaps told you when you were in the

Library of Congress

Senior Seminar, you are a hot property and you needn't worry about your assignments from now on...

Q: I'm laughing, I'm laughing, because...

JOHNSON: Did they tell you this?

Q: Oh, yes, and they had no idea what to do with us.

JOHNSON: No, absolutely not the slightest.

Q: We were told we would be assured of a fine place because we were a selected few, and they had plenty of time to do this.

JOHNSON: Yes, yes, and they claimed they had plans for us. And then I remember there was a poor guy from the Office of Personnel that had to meet with each of us, and he always took us to lunch at Martin's. And that was a very painful luncheon, because, after I had been promised that there were all kinds of goodies ready for me, he would have to tell me, "As of now, Johnson, let me see...there seems to be a vacancy for the assistant political adviser to the US military in D#sseldorf."

And I said, "Well, what's at D#sseldorf?"

"Well, it's the headquarters of the 45th Mess Kit Repair Battalion."

And I'd say, "Well, maybe you can find something else."

And I despaired eventually, because it was clear to me that they didn't have anything particular in mind. Fortunately, I had a good friend, still a very close friend of mine, Doug Hartley, who was in ARA Personnel, and he said, "You're going on your Senior Seminar tour down in South America, why don't you stop off in Rio, they're looking for a political counselor." And I did, and I got the job.

Library of Congress

And I arrived at a very interesting time. Elbrick had just then been kidnapped.

Q: This was Burke Elbrick, who... And this was a brand new thing really for the Foreign Service.

JOHNSON: Yes, it was, I think, the second kidnapping. The first one was in the DR, I believe.

Q: Could you explain how you saw it, and how the embassy and everybody reacted on this.

JOHNSON: At that time, of course, our policy toward this sort of thing was just in its infancy. And the sole reaction was to order the Brazilians to do everything within their power to get our ambassador back. The terrorists had demanded the release of...I think it was sixteen, really tough terrorists, people with bomb-throwing records who had been caught and were in prison. And the Brazilians swallowed this. They said, "This is going to be tough for us, and it's just going to mean more terrorism in this country if we let these so-and-so's go. They're just going to go up to Cuba, where we have to fly them, and then they'll be brought back in again in a few months." And it turned out they were right—these guys showed up again. But, sure, they gradually released them all. It took a while. But we really rode them on it. I remember my boss would say, "Well, Texeira is still in prison up in Recife, and nothing has been done to turn him over for release." And so I'd call up the Brazilian Foreign Office and say, "What in the hell are you doing? After all, we've got to get these sixteen mothers out of the country, and Texeira hasn't even been moved." And they were terribly patient. But they wanted to get Elbrick back alive, too.

We didn't negotiate with the kidnappers, and anyway they didn't really identify themselves, but they sent us messages through this very fine Rio newspaper, the Jornal do Brasil, which was very helpful in getting Elbrick out.

Library of Congress

Finally, these sixteen were sent off to Cuba, and the kidnappers turned Elbrick loose.

It was soon after that, that he went back to Washington to be checked over, and he developed a circulation problem, which, as far as I know, had no relationship at all to his incarceration. And shortly thereafter, he lost both legs. Very fine man.

Q: Very fine man. A great professional.

JOHNSON: Excellent...

Q: What were your major concerns other than, obviously, dealing with the kidnapping? In the first place, Rio was still the capital in those days?

JOHNSON: Yes, it was.

Q: What was the political situation like in Brazil?

JOHNSON: The military was still in control, had been for several years, and any sort of expression of liberal sentiment in politics were suppressed. There was an opposition party, but it really wasn't very liberal. And student organizations were very thoroughly prohibited. Many of the terrorists were themselves kids rather than pros. They were college kids who had liberal aspirations and were not necessarily Marxists or anarchists or anything, but they just resented the pressure that the military regime was keeping on, and partly it was this refusal to allow them to form liberal organizations or any kind of student groups that led them to violence. So the political atmosphere was quite tense.

The U.S. government's position was to distance itself from this military government. There were reports, and I think fairly well substantiated, that the military was even torturing these young people in order to get word of their plans. And sometimes they would say, "Sure, but that's to protect you diplomats, to find out what the terrorists have in mind." But, in

Library of Congress

any case, our relations with the Brazilian government were not very close then, for human rights reasons.

We had an interesting reporting situation when I arrived. We had in the Embassy an army attach# who had wonderful contacts with the president of Brazil, M#dici. They respected one another for their military know-how and experience. The attach# had regular meetings with the very top levels in the Brazilian government, and even civilians, like the minister for foreign affairs, knew him, because he got along well with Brazil's president. He was welcome anytime and they would talk quite candidly with him. Well, you can imagine being a political counselor responsible for political reporting in a country ruled by the military, with this guy sending back military attach# reports with hot information from his top level sources. The attach# was happy enough to put "State Department Distribution" down on them. But it made it hard for the political section to find a niche. And, when I arrived, the political section just wasn't doing any reporting, because Washington really didn't want anything out of the Embassy that was not vetted by the attach#—and for fairly good reasons. I mean, if you were trying to say what the Brazilian leadership was thinking, not to clear it with the attach# was looked upon, at least by Washington, as a great oversight.

Q: He was following really, maybe several times removed, in the footsteps of Vernon Walters, wasn't he?

JOHNSON: Yes, several steps removed.

Q: Walters had exactly the same type of relationship.

JOHNSON: Exactly.

The attach# would not clear anything that my political section had written that had accusatory tones. He felt that he understood why the Brazilian government did what it did.

Library of Congress

My idea was that, at all costs, we had to do some reporting—what is a political section for? So we would send in things for a time with the attaché's dissent attached, and Ambassador Elbrick would sign them...while he was there; he wasn't there for an awfully long time. And the attaché and I got along quite well—we agreed to disagree on various things— but we'd turn in a fairly good volume of reporting.

I found I had quite a few junior officers, very good and very bright guys, but they wanted to spread all over town making contacts, particularly with the liberal groups, which was fine, the Embassy encouraged that. They wanted to spend all their time out and around meeting people, and I couldn't get them to come in, sit down, and put some of this stuff on paper.

I'd ask them, "What happened? What did so and so tell you?"

And they'd give me a bit of a rundown.

And I'd say, "That sounds terribly interesting. Would you please make a memorandum of conversation, and we'll shoot this right back to the Department, we'll send a telegram."

"Well, Dick, I've got an appointment with thus and so this afternoon, and I don't know whether I'm going to get around to it."

The only bad efficiency report I've ever written, really bad, on someone on my staff was this guy who absolutely refused to play a role as a reporting officer.

Q: I think this is somewhat a reflection of this era, of not quite seeing the connection between "doing their thing" and representing the United States in getting that knowledge back into the system.

JOHNSON: Yes, I think so. In a way, this was perhaps the early evidencing of the Vietnam generation.

Library of Congress

Q: Yes, I had somewhat the same thing, not seeing that this was a job.

JOHNSON: Yes, yes. And I found also, as a political counselor and as DCM, a reluctance to report, on the part of senior officers. And, there, it was because they didn't want to be caught off base. I can think of a couple of guys that were this way. They'd say, "Dick, let's wait till the dust settles before we report this cabinet shift. Who knows what it's going to mean. We've got to wait till more returns are in, and then we can give Washington some pretty good analysis." I was working for Mac Toon on one of these occasions, and Mac was very insistent on quick...

Q: He was the ambassador?

JOHNSON: Yes, he was ambassador in Belgrade at the time. He was very insistent on quick reporting.

Q: Well, we're not talking about Belgrade, we're still talking about Rio.

JOHNSON: Well, I'm talking here mostly about other posts that I've been at where there was a reluctance to report. But in the latter case it was for a different reason: it was caution and, because you can't send things back without some Embassy comments, fear of making an interpretation and being caught wrong. Well, I had the feeling that when something happened, like a cabinet reshuffle, Washington was interested right away, immediately. They got the word even before our Embassy telegram could get back, from press services, and the first question that morning when business opened was: "Well, what does the Embassy think about it?" And we needn't have thought that a decision was going to rest solely on our interpretation— Washington had the CIA and many other sources— but they wanted to know the Embassy's thoughts immediately. And if we weren't there until two or three days later, it was a real, I think, omission by the Embassy.

Library of Congress

Q: When you were in Rio, were you getting any push from, say, the Brazilian desk about, you know, tell us what's going on? I mean, were they uncomfortable about this sort of military cast to our reporting?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. Yes, indeed, they had been uncomfortable. But I don't think the attach#'s reporting was particularly slanted, although he was more understanding of what the military regime was trying to do than the rest of the embassy. But you're quite right, the State Department was anxious to get Embassy reporting. And that was why I devised this business of sending things in with the attach#'s separate comments, and we reported on what our contacts thought about the military government, and reported occasionally in very critical vein.

Q: Was there the problem of being concerned that you have a government with which we can "do business," but if you start reporting on it in a critical way, talking about, say, torturing or that sort of thing, and you know that when it gets back to Washington this could fall into the hands of people who are just opposed to our doing anything, and really not lead anywhere but just basically harm our relations without particularly changing the course of events, say, regarding torturing? In other words, did you find that you had to be careful about your reporting because this could be used not only as a picture of what was happening in a country, but could be used against our relations with that country by other people in Washington?

JOHNSON: No, I don't think we were that concerned really about the impact on our relations with Brazil. We felt the department had the right to get the full story.

Q: Well, how did you find dealing with the Foreign Ministry? Was it easy to deal with? How did they feel about Americans, the professionals in the Foreign Service?

JOHNSON: Oh, we had many good friends in the Brazilian Foreign Ministry. We liked them. And personally they were quite warm. And they were prepared to see us when we

Library of Congress

came over to their offices, but, I would say, not receptive to U.S. suggestions as to what we hoped the Brazilians would do, for instance, at the U.N. I'd go over and speak my piece, and quite often the under secretary would say, "Thank you very much for coming by. I appreciate your telling us what your position is."

And I'd say, "Yeah, well, what do you think about it? What's your position?"

And he'd say, "Our position has not as yet been determined, Dick. We'll be in touch with you later."

Kind of a don't-call-us-we'll-call-you. And very often, having gotten our position, they would draft as a position the exact opposite, because they wanted to be on the side of the developing countries, the anti-imperialists, the nonaligned. So, at one point, I told Ambassador Crimmins that I thought we were having a negative result trying to get the Brazilians to go along with us.

The foreign minister at the time, I really had trouble with. He was, I think, in many ways very bitter about the U.S. I would go to see him, usually with a visitor from Washington. And the foreign minister would proceed to tell the visitor from Washington what a great democracy Brazil was in comparison with the U.S., and how there is no racial discrimination in Brazil, how it has always been a great place for the mingling of the races, for centuries the Portuguese have always married blacks, or at least had black children. (That's true, there's a great deal of inter...I wouldn't say marriage but at least intercourse between the Portuguese and all the others that were there.) And he would draw a very, of course, negative picture of racial discrimination in the States and other aspects of U.S. life that I just didn't feel I could allow to sit.

Perhaps I shouldn't have done this, because the interview was really for the Washington visitor, but I felt obliged to tell him that I thought all countries had some problems in this regard. And certainly if you go to the Rio Country Club, you aren't going to see anybody who is even remotely tan. It's an absolutely, totally white club. And that at least in the US

Library of Congress

we recognized the problem, and clubs that have a no-black admission policy are gradually being beaten down. I don't see in Brazil any admission that there's a problem.

Well, that took up a good part of the discussion. He would launch in on these things because he really didn't want to hear what the American visitor had to say. He didn't want to have to answer any questions. He wanted to monopolize the meeting. And he'd start off by assuming that we had nothing particular to say and that he could fill the half hour allotted. And after a half hour, while I was right in the middle of my response about racial discrimination—he would go on so that I'd have to start talking right on top of him—in the middle of this, somebody would take a look at their watch and say, “Your time's up. The minister has another appointment.”

Q: Not one of your favorite people.

JOHNSON: No.

Q: Dick, does that pretty well cover the Rio side, would you say?

JOHNSON: Sure.

Q: Then you went back to Belgrade as deputy chief of mission. You were there from '71 until about when?

JOHNSON: Seventy-one until I went to Brasilia in '74.

Q: What happened? Why all of a sudden were you off to Belgrade again?

JOHNSON: Well, I was the political counselor in Rio, and they were looking for a DCM in Belgrade. That was, of course, a boost up for me. The ambassador then was Leonhart.

Q: And he had a blowup with his DCM.

Library of Congress

JOHNSON: Yes, he had a problem with his DCM and they needed a new DCM quickly, preferably one with some experience and one who could try to defuse disputes. And I guess the way I'd gotten around this Army-State Department dispute within the Embassy in Rio made me plausible for this job. I'm not sure whose recommendation it was, but I was happy to get the job because it meant a boost to minister counselor level.

Q: Well, you served under two rather active ambassadors: William Leonhart and then Mac Toon, but they were quite dissimilar, weren't they? How did you find their style of operation?

JOHNSON: Yes, I would say they were dissimilar in one important respect. Ambassador Leonhart was very concerned about detail; he thought most detail had some broader implications. I remember arriving and being told by the administrative officer that morale was low because the swimming pool hadn't been opened and it was already July. The swimming pool committee had not been appointed. I had hoped to handle that detail quickly for the Ambassador, but I discovered that he was concerned about late-hour noise disturbing the community. He saw this as part of our profile in Yugoslavia generally.

Q: I'm amused, because I was the head of the swimming pool committee when it first opened up, and I know that became a bone of contention because the swimming pool made some noise for the ambassador's wife when she took her afternoon nap.

JOHNSON: Which ambassador was that?

Q: This was Elbrick.

JOHNSON: Elbrick, yes. Of course, in Yugoslavia the pool was quite removed from the house.

Q: It was removed. It wasn't that bad, but it was a problem. It was an essential (there was very little to do there), and it was a very important element to them. JOHNSON: There

Library of Congress

was a tendency for things to pile up on Ambassador Leonhart's desk. I think his forte was in speech-making. Or answering toasts; that was the only time I really heard him. He was a thoughtful person, and you could be sure when he got up to make a toast it was deliberate and intelligent and thoughtful, he had really thought it through. He made an intervention just three nights ago at a thing I went to, and again it was very different from the interventions others had made and it exactly fit for the occasion.

Toon was much more brisk, much more military in his style. He saw me as his alter ego. He told me that that's what he wanted me to be, and he said he hoped that I could handle most of his dealings with the staff. Which in a way is good, because you know where you stand and you have some authority. But the problem was that members of our staff I think at times felt that they had a right to see the ambassador, to sit down with him.

A case in point is when the public affairs officer was putting together his program for the coming year and he had to submit it to Washington. He wanted to be sure that the ambassador had seen it and liked it, and he wanted to discuss it with him in person. And I couldn't blame him.

But often Mac's reaction would be: "Can't you take care of that? Do I have to see this person? Can't you see him and discuss it?"

And then if I said, "No, sir, I think he has a right to sit down and talk with you," Mac would say, "All right, if you say so." And he was quite gracious with the PAO when he did. But he preferred having everything go through me and if possible for me to shunt things off. And that was generally his style. It was an efficient style, it kept the embassy moving in good shape.

Q: What were the main things in our relations with Yugoslavia during this period? This was from '71 to '73ish?

Library of Congress

JOHNSON: Wasn't that when the Krsko nuclear power plant contract was signed? That became a major issue. We were, of course, delighted when Tito gave the green light for the contract to be awarded to Westinghouse. But throughout most of my tour this was under construction, and the Yugoslavs were concerned that Westinghouse was not using enough Yugoslav material, not training enough Yugoslavs, not using enough Yugoslav engineers. And I was called in, one of my last responsibilities, when I was charg# d'affaires just before I left, and they delivered a stiff demarche, telling us to get Westinghouse to live up to the terms of the agreement. I think they subsequently did, and it's a good, functioning, efficient plant.

But the fact that that is an issue that sticks out in my mind indicates how unruffled and uniformly good our relations were. Much, much fewer incidents than in our relations, say, with our NATO allies.

Oh, they picked up a U.S. official of Yugoslav origin visiting from Western Europe and put him in prison overnight. He had gone back to his hometown, as I recall, and was preaching sort of anti-government, anti-Tito sentiments, and so they picked him up and put him in prison. Well, this resulted in tremendous screams. I mean, you don't put in prison an official of another government. But as soon as I went around to the Foreign Ministry, they let him go.

Q: This was somebody who was originally born in Yugoslavia?

JOHNSON: Yes, he was a U.S. official, U.S. citizen, but of Yugoslav origin.

Oh, there were other arrests of U.S. citizens, but I don't remember any major incidents then in our relations, do you?

Library of Congress

Q: No, I was out of there then, but there was nothing very major happening. How did we view, from Yugoslavia at that point, the Soviets? Did we consider that Yugoslavia was a country that was threatened by the Soviet Union?

JOHNSON: Sure, and how! And that was in part the reason for our tremendously close relations with Yugoslavia. When they told us they didn't want our assistance, we didn't force it on them, but in many other ways, ever since then, right up to this date we've done everything we could to help them economically: Ex-Im Bank loans, OPIC programs, very generous duty-free treatment under GSP, CCC credits, every way you can think of helping a country economically.

Q: I suppose overriding our concern was that if Yugoslavia collapsed, there would be a tremendous destabilizing situation, particularly as regards the Soviet Union, which was still under Brezhnev, and we felt it was a rapacious neighbor.

JOHNSON: Yes, we felt the Soviets would like to get access to the Adriatic, and we knew they had asked the Yugoslavs on several occasions if they could rent a piece of this or that naval base to service their vessels. The Yugoslavs absolutely refused. But that was a very real consideration in our policy toward Yugoslavia. I think, secondly, we wanted the Yugoslav experiment to succeed, because we wanted the world to see that there were possibilities for more liberal forms of socialism. I don't think the Yugoslavs today would say that workers' self-government was a success, but at that time we thought it might succeed and we wanted to do everything we could to help.

Q: Well, you left Belgrade and went back to Brasilia as DCM.

JOHNSON: In 1974 to '78 I was DCM in Brasilia.

Q: That was your last assignment?

JOHNSON: My last overseas assignment, yes.

Library of Congress

Q: Who was the ambassador at that time?

JOHNSON: John Crimmins, bless his heart.

Q: And how did you find him as a...?

JOHNSON: I really enjoyed that man. He was just a terrific guy. He saw his job in the broadest sense. He loved people; he liked to relate to them. He liked to get his junior officers in and chat with them about anything, from policy to the fortunes of the Patriots football team.

I remember one time when John had a telegram from the Department saying: By the end of the day we want your views on a certain subject. And I noticed that one of the junior officers had been in there for a long time, and they were just chatting. And I thought, "I've got to go in and interrupt them. They may be talking about some important aspect of our policies. but he's got this telegram to write, and I'm going to help him get to it." And so I went in, with some interruption, and as I came in, Crimmins was saying, "I just can't stand the chunky variety of peanut butter! I think the smooth thing is much, much better. Bill, you're all wrong!" He still found time to write a very perceptive telegram.

And on another occasion, as I saw someone heading out of his huge, long office, Crimmins leapt up from his desk and shouted, "Run out for a pass." He was a great New England Patriots fan, and he had this football with autographs all over it that was on his window sill, and he grabbed it and flung it the length of his office. This JO made a leaping catch, otherwise he would have broken a picture.

Q: What were our issues with Brazil at this time?

JOHNSON: When I went back, well, Stu, the military government was still there, and there were still reports of tortures. Furthermore, the terrorist threat had subsided tremendously, so that there really was less reason for tight security. The military government was not

Library of Congress

quite so conservative and doctrinaire, but we still were critical of their human rights record. We were not outspoken about it; we didn't really confront them with it. But when somebody, like Kissinger, would come to Brasilia, he would tell the Brazilians, "We want to talk to you about human rights." He wouldn't say human rights in Brazil, and the Brazilians would then be able to say, "Oh, yes, let's talk about 'em—human rights all over the world. We oppose apartheid, that's a terrible system." But human rights in Brazil remains a major issue in our relationship.

A very dramatic event occurred midway in my tour. A priest was imprisoned by the military in the Recife area because he was in touch with liberal organizations—he may have been in touch with terrorist groups, I don't know, he was a defrocked young American priest. And our Consul general in Recife got word that this guy was in the 4th Army's prison and asked for permission to see him. It was denied for a long time. Finally, he was admitted and he went in and saw this guy, and it was clear why they hadn't wanted him to see him. He showed signs of having been really clobbered. And Rich Brown, the Consul general, sent word on this down to Crimmins. Crimmins was this very forthright, active person, he didn't mince words, and he went rushing over to the Foreign Ministry and told them about this. And, of course, the foreign minister said, "Mr. Ambassador, you are accusing the Brazilian Army of torturing! Do you realize what this means?" And then we heard later that the Brazilians were on the verge of declaring him PNG. But this heightened our determination to report objectively whatever there was, because we were certain that this poor guy had been blasted.

Q: What happened? Were we able to get him out?

JOHNSON: Yes, he was released a bit later. But what made the Foreign Ministry so angry at Crimmins was that he told the press about it right after he came away from the foreign minister. And you could say, well, why would he do that, this was between us and the Brazilian authorities. And that was the position that the Brazilian authorities took. But the American press knew this guy had been imprisoned and that Rich Brown had been

Library of Congress

trying to see him, so the question about his condition was put to the ambassador, he didn't volunteer it. And had he said, "Well, I don't know, I don't want to say anything, you know, I don't want to imply torture," and kind of waffled on it, it would have put him and the Department in a bad light later, because this guy went back to the States and was on the Today show, telling about everything that had been done to him. And he praised the ambassador for his forthright activity.

That brought our relations with Brazil really to an all- time low point. As did the evidence that we thought they were trying to develop a full nuclear cycle capacity. We were very concerned about the dissemination of nuclear capacity around the world, and we didn't want the Brazilians to get it.

Q: It's still an issue, isn't it?

JOHNSON: It still is, to some extent, yes.

Another issue was this...what we suspected was an interest on the part of the Brazilians in developing a full nuclear capacity. Not necessarily a capacity to build a bomb; we didn't have any evidence that they were determined to do that.

Q: They had no real enemies, did they?

JOHNSON: Maybe you're right. Maybe there was no reason for them to want to build a bomb. They claimed they wanted the full cycle because they didn't want to have to buy uranium for their power plant use. But we didn't want them to get the reprocessing facilities, because we felt that that just expands the potential around the world for bomb-building, the same way we talk about the Pakistanis and the Israelis and others. And that was, I would say, a number two issue.

Q: How did Brasilia work? I mean, this was fairly new as a capital, wasn't it?

Library of Congress

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: And for the Embassy to operate there, did you find that everybody was running back and forth to Rio? Was it sort of a difficult life to be in Brasilia at that time?

JOHNSON: Well, the question of relations between the US posts in Rio and Brasilia at the start was a big question. Crimmins was an activist, he liked to feel that he had all the levers of control in his hands. He was a guy that wanted to run the show. He didn't want to have a large staff in Rio, but we left behind a fair-sized staff because there were some Brazilian government agencies left behind there, at least temporarily. So we had a good-sized political and economic staff there, and Crimmins insisted that those staff members be formally made part of the Embassy in Brasilia. And, of course, our CONGEN in Rio didn't think very highly of that. He didn't like having people in his building who were not subject to his supervision, and this caused a fair amount of friction. And everything that Rio generated in political or economic reporting had to be sent to Brasilia to be checked out. That was one of the problems, but it didn't last forever.

And there wasn't a tremendous amount of running back and forth between Brasilia and Rio, because it's a two-days' drive, it's a long distance, and by air it was quite expensive. So we had a tendency to be isolated in Brasilia. And you are isolated, in what was then a rather small town of maybe a quarter of a million, on this high plain with nothing but sagebrush around for hundreds of miles.

There is, of course, beautiful architecture in the town. It's been described as having all of the color and excitement of a great international exposition...the day after closing. And that's what it reminded me of—these beautiful buildings, with tremendous open spaces, but no life visible. It was designed by a Marxist town planner. He laid out the town, and the architect was Niemeyer, who himself was a Socialist. And the idea was to build a town that had absolutely no gradations of wealth, where everybody lived the same way and there were no rich and no poor. So they had this series of apartment complexes,

Library of Congress

huge complexes, and each one was allowed to have a certain ration of stores. In each complex there'd be a merceria, where you got thread and cloth, and there'd be a hardware store and a grocery store and a church and one club. Life was supposed to center in this complex. And the assistant ministers for foreign affairs were supposed to live there right alongside of the elevator operators in the Foreign Ministry. It was laid out to be a town with no center, thus there were these units. So there was no heart. Most Mediterranean Portuguese-type cities have wonderful streets where there's a "corso" with opportunities for socializing all the time, and there are coffee shops where life gathers. Well, I haven't been back to Brasilia for a long time, but there certainly then was no center of the town. There was no life in the town. There weren't even sidewalks. The streets were made in a supposedly very modern style, so that people could drive through the town without even slowing down. There were no stop lights, there were only grade separations, and you could speed from one end of Brasilia to the other at 55 miles an hour; but you couldn't walk from the Embassy to your house, because you'd take your life in your hands trying to get across one of those highways. It was, in short, a rather dull town.

But, for Americans, it was wonderful family life. There were lots of swimming pools and tennis courts, and there was even a golf course. You could go out there on a Saturday morning, and look down an empty fairway, there wasn't anybody else playing golf, and play to your heart's content. So, from the standpoint of living conditions, it was great.

One of the jobs that I liked the best as DCM was my liaison with the Consulates. We then had six of them all over Brazil. And I enjoyed exploring Brazil by bus. I took the bus all the time, much to the displeasure of the Brazilian police. They felt they had to know my whereabouts exactly when I was the *chargé d'affaires*. So they would either ride on the bus with me, or they'd tell the police at the other end, in Salvador or Belém or wherever I was going, to meet me when the bus came in. And this wasn't harassment at all, this was just security.

Library of Congress

Q: Did you find that the Consulates performed a solid function, because of the size of Brazil you needed these?

JOHNSON: Some of them. Take a guy like Rich Brown, our Recife Consul General then, he's a real all-around Foreign Service officer, and he liked to do reporting. And he would send in interpretive reports that were good. And he was quite active with business people, trying to develop U.S. business in the area. Others were more traditional consuls. They felt it was their job to make sure the flag was flown up on the flagpole every morning, that the consulate was opened on time, that the consular section was there ready to receive visitors, and that if someone wanted to see the Consul, there he was behind his desk with the flag.

And I would ask them, "Do you know the military commander for this area? The military's running this country now."

"Yes, I met him at a reception a couple of years ago."

"Do you ever go to see him, ask him about what's happening in this region?"

"Well, no. He wouldn't want to see me. Why should he want to see me? He's a busy man."

I was continually riding these guys to get out and around, as I put it, instead of feeling that they were doing enough by showing the flag.

Q: Let's see, the Carter administration came in halfway through this time. Did that have any impact particularly?

JOHNSON: Yes. One of the highlights of my stay was when President Carter came down on an official visit. I was the charg#. Crimmins had gone, and the new ambassador hadn't reported. He was in Washington, but he was then...I believe it was in connection with the Panama Canal, he was testifying.

Library of Congress

Q: Who was that?

JOHNSON: Robert Sayre. He was waiting in Washington, and so I had to make all the arrangements and receive the President and go around with him.

As I recall making the arrangements, I had some conflicts with the White House. They were concerned particularly about President Carter's image in the US. They wanted footage that would look good on the Today show. One of the things that all visiting chiefs of state did was to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Well, the advance team for the president visited the Tomb and said, "This is no good, Dick. You can't get a crowd around here for the President. This place is too confined. No."

And I said, "Well, I really do think he has to do this. Please just take this as the Embassy's strong recommendation." He eventually went through the motions.

A little later I got something from the White House that said, "You know, the President is a very good friend of the President of Warner Communications, which in turn owns the Cosmos soccer team in the States, and Pele is under contract to Cosmos. We think it'd be a great idea if Pele would give a reception for Jimmy Carter and invite all the street people that he knows, all the sports fans, everybody. He should give it at Canecao." This is a wonderful dance hall in Rio, a great, big place, covered a couple of city blocks. "Invite everybody in there. Have beer and wine, and Jimmy can make a speech."

I said, "We recommend against that kind of a thing. Everybody knows that Pele and Carter don't know each other, and this would be seen as a very faked-up sort of a thing. We can get President Carter together with the man on the street on some other occasions."

So we had the feeling that there was a lot of concern, for public image in the US, more concern than we had. Of course, we wanted to be sure he did the correct thing locally, and we were more concerned about that than the White House.

Library of Congress

When he came, we had been informed in advance that the one person (and this is a sign of the Carter administration also) he wanted to meet was Cardinal Arns. Did you ever hear of Arns?

Q: *No.*

JOHNSON: Well, he was a very liberal, maybe almost Socialist, cardinal in S@o Paulo State. I think he and President Carter had exchanged communications before, and the President had a lot of respect for the cardinal. A very intelligent man, and outspoken, and a real enemy of the military regime. The President wanted to meet with him. We told them in Washington that this wouldn't be well received in Brasilia at all by the Brazilian President, and it could result in Jimmy's not meeting the President. And the White House came back and said, "Well, work it out some way. It's up to you guys."

So the political counselor and I worked it up, I thought, quite satisfactorily. Carter was going to Rio, after he left Brasilia, for an informal stay, just a vacation for a couple of days to rest up. And we figured, and correctly, that as long as he saw Arns during that part of his visit, it would be okay. So we arranged a breakfast for him with Arns. And we had arch-conservatives in as well, other people from all walks of political life. But we gave the President a long chance to sit down with Arns and chat with him. We thought that we had resolved the problem that way, and we were quite proud of ourselves.

But, as Jimmy left the place where this breakfast was being given, his limousine was pulled up there, and, with some movie cameras and the TV cameras grinding away, he reached for Cardinal Arns, gave him a big squeeze, shoved him into his limousine, and said, "Let's go out to the airplane together." So there were these pictures, front page, in all the Brazilian newspapers. But it didn't have the tremendous reaction on the part of the Brazilian government that this sort of thing would have had if it had been on his official schedule. They took it in stride.

Library of Congress

But it was fun, of course, going around with the President and meeting with everybody.

Q: Well, you left Brasilia and then came back to Washington, is that right?

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: What were you doing then?

JOHNSON: In Washington?

Q: Yes.

JOHNSON: I wanted very much to get an Embassy, and I had been told by various assistant secretaries for Latin American affairs that, having been DCM, minister counselor, and long-time charg# in Brasilia, it was virtually inevitable.

So they found a job for me, in effect marking time, as director of the office of regional political programs, which was a kind of a basket for all manner of regional things, things that they wanted run on a regional basis that were not economic.

I remember one of the problems was fisheries, another was labor problems. We had the labor man for ARA; he was in my office. We had military assistance. As far as ARA was concerned, we did it. We were the merchants of death. Or, more often than not, the reverse—we were trying to put the brakes on the Pentagon. Often we had the human rights spokesman for the Department of State arguing with us. If the Hondurans decided they needed a new steering wheel for their weapons carrier, and ordered it, it had to go not only through us, but through the Human Rights Division. And I'd get into all kinds of squabbles over these things. It wasn't a very exciting job.

Library of Congress

I was put up for a couple of Embassies. One of them was Sofia, and the other was Guyana. I was on a State Department short list for these posts, but I never got out of this State Department committee that picks names to send to the White House.

And I asked Under Secretary Newsom, who was commendably receptive to disappointed Foreign Service officers afterwards why I hadn't, and he said it was because of my age. I was by then fifty-eight. He said, "It would have been impossible for you to have finished a tour of duty as an ambassador anywhere before age sixty (which was the compulsory retirement age then)."

And I said, "Yeah, but I could at least have gone out, as age fifty-eight or fifty-nine."

And Newsom said, "These are exactly the arguments that I made on your behalf. But, the White House-oriented folks in the State Department know that Jimmy Carter is all for youth." (And of course he was.) "And we're supposed to try to appoint young ambassadors. If we appoint old ones, they're kicked aside by the White House and we lose that post." So...

Q: Those were the dynamics.

JOHNSON: Those were the dynamics, yeah. In some ways, in retrospect, I'm just as glad that I retired when I did.

Q: You retired when?

JOHNSON: When I was exactly sixty, in 1980.

Q: Well, you had a very good spread as far as where you served, and interesting places in interesting times. I've talked to a good number of people who were ambassadors to some very small places for a couple of years in which they did nothing really. I mean, it was very uninspiring.

Library of Congress

JOHNSON: Well, that's true. On the other hand, one feels that to have spent twenty-nine years in the Service and not to have arrived at the point where you got even a teeny little puny Embassy... I feel some regrets, in part, on behalf of Pat, because she was, throughout, a "very good Foreign Service wife." Of course, she got no credit for it in efficiency reports.

In Brasilia we had, I believe, four counselors of embassy. Of them, the two most active didn't have their wives at the post. And of course they never told the ambassador they weren't going to bring their wives. They said, "My wife is closing up the house," or "Our son's graduating from high school," and excuses like that, but they never came. And the reason, I think, was in part economic: the wives had good jobs, they had their own careers, and they weren't going to come to Brasilia and sit. Well, this meant that Patricia, who had herself given up a Washington career that she was getting more and more engaged in, had a lot more to do in Brasilia than she would have had if there'd been other senior wives at the post. And I feel a certain amount of bitterness on her behalf, that we weren't given this final recognition.

Q: Yes, of course. The system doesn't reward very much. I mean, this comes through very much. You get what you get out of it, but to rely on the system to have a progression that makes sense is to rely on something that...

JOHNSON: It's too mechanical...no, in a sense it's not mechanical.

Q: It's not even mechanical.

JOHNSON: Yes, that's right. If it were mechanical, it would probably be more just and efficient.

Q: Yes, and particularly when you have the political side absorbing, you might say, so much of the upper assignments, particularly the ambassadorial assignments, that it puts

Library of Congress

increased pressure, where logically a person would move to be an ambassador, up from a career, it wipes a lot of this out. It's very sad.

JOHNSON: Yes. There are swings, it seems to me. The department at one point in very recent years was favoring management people for Embassies and promoting them fast. Right now...I was talking with a very promising Foreign Service officer whom I know, who, after having been office director, is now going to a rather unimportant DCM spot. And I said, "You should have gotten a small Embassy after this. You did a great job in a tough spot."

And he said, "Well, the big jobs now are going to women." For good reasons...

Q: They've been ignored before. But there are these swings, you can't really depend on the system.

JOHNSON: No, you can't. You can hope to get promoted fairly honestly on the basis of your performance, but you cannot hope to get an Embassy on the basis of performance. You've got to get it on the basis, within the Department, of who is prepared to really go to bat for you. And if you don't know anybody that is, then you're not going to be nominated.

Q: Well, Dick, I want to thank you very much. This has been fascinating.

JOHNSON: Thanks, Stu, I've enjoyed this chat.

End of interview