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PART I
IN THE FOREIGN SERVICE

Introduction

Diane and I stood on the Aceh beach staring at the empty slabs of tiled concrete. Weeks before, houses had stood there, full of families with children laughing and parents enjoying the pleasures of a quiet Sunday morning. Then the gigantic killer tsunami swept them and more than 170,000 other Indonesians to their deaths. To our left, on higher ground, there remained a seemingly endless pile of debris, made up of pieces of those houses, children's toys, cooking utensils, palm trees, and even a cargo vessel that had ended up hundreds of yards inland. Standing there in the eerie quiet, my wife and I could only imagine what this village would have been like on the morning just before the wave hit. The stench of death was now gone, not like on my earlier trips, but those empty slabs and piles of everyday items stood as terrible reminders of the devastating human toll the tsunami took on Boxing Day of 2004.

As we rode back to Jakarta in the embassy's small two-engine plane, tossing violently in an electrical storm, my one consolation was knowing that the United States was doing all it could to help Indonesia and the people of Aceh get through this terrible tragedy. It was my responsibility, as ambassador, to make this happen. I had coordinated with the U.S. Pacific commander for an aircraft carrier, the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, and some sister ships to be deployed just offshore. Helicopter crews from the ships had flown thousands of missions, bringing fresh water to the isolated and desperate survivors and transporting the critically injured to the makeshift trauma center set up by our military and embassy doctors. The embassy had sent convoys of relief supplies by road, where possible, and provided medical help as soon as word of the

disaster reached Jakarta. The U.S. Navy and Marines had begun their life-saving mission six days after the tsunami occurred. Several top U.S. officials had visited to provide resources and encouragement. Money was by now flowing to the relief efforts in large amounts—especially from Americans, who gave over \$1.5 billion in public and private assistance; and we had helped the Indonesian government set up an agency that was using this money to rebuild Aceh effectively and without corruption. I was proud that U.S. government efforts had saved thousands of lives through this humanitarian effort. I also knew we were carrying out Secretary Colin Powell's simple instruction to me as he swore me in as ambassador: "Help Indonesia succeed."

Seventeen years earlier, my job had been to help another secretary of state, George Shultz, carry out the historic discussions with the Soviets that effectively brought an end to the Cold War. Shultz played the critical role in bringing President Ronald Reagan and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev to agree on vital issues involving nuclear weapons and global hotspots through his extensive negotiations with Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze. They would meet in Moscow and Washington, building the trust and developing the compromises that changed the world's most fraught relationship. I had been part of the effort to get us to this point, first as deputy director of the Soviet desk during the "Evil Empire" period and then as deputy of Shultz's State Department Secretariat. During Shultz's meetings, his advisors normally worked into the wee hours of the morning, analyzing the Soviet comments and hashing out suggested points for him to use in his meetings the next day. My job was to ensure that Shultz's instructions were carried out, that he had full understanding of the views of his (often contentious) delegation, and that he had the information he needed at breakfast to review for the day's upcoming negotiations. It usually meant on the Moscow trips that we would work until two or three in the morning, catch an hour or so of sleep, shower, and be at Shultz's room by 6:00 a.m. This was Shultz's show; he and his top advisors deserve full credit for the breakthrough. For all of us who had a part to play in these events, there was a feeling of enormous satisfaction at being there as history was being made.

Earlier, in the mid-seventies I stood reading a wall poster near

Peking's Forbidden City under the watchful eye of the Chinese police. As one of the U.S. Liaison Office's two political officers, I needed to understand the meaning of the hundreds of Chinese political posters pasted up on walls that often included obscure historical references as part of the ongoing fight among opposing factions to control China's future. Mao was dying, and more traditional elements of the leadership, headed by Chou En-lai and Teng Hsiao-ping, had only a tenuous grip on power. The radicals in the Communist Party, led by Mao's wife Chiang Ching, were responsible for the massive destruction wrought by China's Cultural Revolution, and they were fighting hard to regain control. My job was to make sense of what was going on in China to a skeptical audience in Washington that wanted to preserve its opening to China and hoped the political infighting in Peking would simply go away.

Diane remained in Hong Kong for a couple of months with our daughters so that Kim could finish the school year. But she soon left behind the comforts of Hong Kong to make a home in the desperately poor and inhospitable Chinese capital. She found herself not only making all our bread, baby food, and meals, but also working part-time at the understaffed Liaison Office. Our family made the best of the experience, enjoying simple pleasures and sightseeing where we could. At work, I was having the time of my life in every political officer's dream job, keeping Washington informed of events in one of the world's most important capitals.

Some thirty-three years later, riding through the streets of Mogadishu in a South African armored personnel carrier wearing a helmet and flak jacket, I looked out on destroyed buildings as far as the eye could see. The devastated capital of Somalia had little in common with its past as a pleasant city perched above the Indian Ocean, where colorful villas provided homes for the rich. After its civil war and the continuing conflicts of the early nineties, Somalia had become the world's premier failed state, best known in the West for the U.S.-led UN force's failure to keep the peace. The nadir of that effort, depicted in the film *Black Hawk Down*, was a disaster that Washington tried to block from its collective mind. I was here, on the only road controlled by the ragtag African Union force that kept the beleaguered Somalia government in power, in my role as the United Nations under-secretary-general for political affairs.

Frustrated by the unwillingness of the world's leaders to even talk to him about Somalia, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon gave me an instruction that sounded remarkably similar to Secretary Powell's before I went to Indonesia: "Figure out some way to fix Somalia."

Over time, we managed to get a reasonable government in place. The African forces gained control of most of Somalia's territory, the rampant sea piracy was virtually wiped out, and Somalia emerged with a commodity that had been in short supply for decades: hope. No one would call Somalia a garden spot today. Its government still does not function well, and the rebel groups continue to carry out terrorist actions. But we did prove that the United Nations can make a major difference even in the most unlikely places. Secretary-General Ban also instructed me to completely remake the UN's political department so it could help resolve impossible conflicts like the one in Somalia. We made considerable progress and found ourselves involved in conflicts in many parts of the world. While well outside my past experience, my five plus years at the UN proved to be an exciting and exhausting "retirement" job.

Usually when people hear the term "diplomacy," they think of earnest diplomats sitting around a large table in some ornate hall hashing out the terms of an agreement on some pressing international issue. The word may also evoke the image of elegantly dressed people dancing in a chandeliered ballroom or exchanging pleasantries at a reception. But the reality of life as an American diplomat is quite different. The world in which we work to advance the interests of the United States is constantly changing, and the need to understand the challenges we face to protect the interests of the American people are always pressing. There is also great satisfaction at being part of that passionately patriotic and devoted group of American diplomats, the men and women of the U.S. Foreign Service, who work each day around the world—often in some of its least appealing places—to protect and advance the interests of the people of the United States.

Diane and I faced the challenges of the Foreign Service together, but our family experiences would make an entirely separate book. In these pages, I've decided to stick for the most part to the job itself and the issues my colleagues and I faced. I make no claim for the results as a broad review of U.S. foreign policy or of the

Foreign Service experience as a whole. What follows is the story of one diplomat's experience, a kid from a small Missouri town on the Mississippi River who, blessed with a wonderful wife and family, was privileged to play his part in a collective effort to make the world a better and safer place.

1

Getting There

A Mark Twain Childhood

My childhood was fairly typical for a kid growing up in a small Midwestern town. La Grange, Missouri, a collection of some twelve hundred souls on the Mississippi River north of Mark Twain's hometown of Hannibal, had seen better days. The great humorist has been quoted as saying: "If you want to know about my childhood, read Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn." Socially and psychologically, the area had changed very little by the time I grew up there a hundred years later. It was a simple life. My father owned a small furniture store that just managed to keep food on the table. Running the business by himself meant that he worked at the store all day, six days a week. With Sunday church attendance mandatory, family recreational activities were infrequent, but we did enjoy our annual family camping trips to one of the state parks. Naturally, I had to earn my own spending money, which I did by cutting lawns, helping my father in the store, "bucking bales" on nearby farms, and working as rough labor on road construction projects. My mother and I also worked together as custodians of our church. Like Twain's characters, life seemed totally normal to those of us living it. Money was tight, but I made enough to cover the limited opportunities to spend it.

My two brothers and I were blessed with caring and loving, if strict, parents, and my mother put me through the usual paces of childhood, including daily piano practice. My dad was the disciplinarian, a lifelong Marine, quite religious, and intensely patriotic. He expected his sons to be self-reliant and to get the college education

he lacked. My doting maternal grandparents also occupied a key place in my childhood. My grandmother was always there with a hug and a smile. My grandfather loved to tinker, and his junk-filled garage was a young boy's delight. We made great contraptions, like a motorized kid's car and a pedal boat (it sank on first launch, so we rebuilt it) from scraps of metal retrieved from a junk yard.

My friends and I spent a lot of time in the summer swimming in nearby lakes and ponds or fishing in the Mississippi. As was typical of the time, I worked my way up through the Boy Scouts, looked forward to the usual Halloween pranks with a gang of boys (we never managed to push over the town's one remaining outhouse), and occasionally downed a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon after a scout meeting when we could talk one of the local winos into buying it for us. Overall, it was an ordinary small-town boy's existence.

The town's school was weak academically, but the teachers wanted to make sure we learned the basics. Good grades came easily, but I would invariably get marked down for being too talkative or unruly. At one point a teacher, fed up with my inability to keep quiet, made me stay after school and talk continuously for an hour and a half, probably useful training for a future diplomat. The town had a tiny library, but as a young boy I read all of its adventure stories and spent a fair amount of time thumbing the set of encyclopedias my father had purchased in the hope of furthering our education.

By junior high school, we had a few young teachers—mostly students or recent graduates who would work for the meager pay—who lit a fire about the possibilities of the outside world. One college student, Bob Gray, an academic star at the nearby Culver-Stockton College, taught math during my sophomore and junior years. Bob became a mentor (and a lifelong friend) who arranged for me to enroll in Culver as a part-time student. I did my freshman college work during my junior and senior years in high school. It was great fun and intellectually stimulating to study there and attend college events. But the most interesting and rewarding experience at the time was the pursuit of an intelligent and extraordinarily pretty girl named Diane Wolfmeyer from the town of Keokuk, Iowa, thirty-five miles upriver from La Grange. We had a great time attending events at three schools, and I confess I pursued her relentlessly.

On graduating from high school in 1961, I went off to join Bob at the University of Kansas (KU) to study mathematics. That fall I moved to a fraternity house (I had joined at Culver), an experience that made me a devoted fan of the movie *Animal House*. Fraternity life turned out not to be my cup of tea. I found it hard to keep up both the social schedule and the grades I had come to expect of myself. More to the point, I was desperately lovesick for Diane, then a freshman at the University of Iowa. As the year went on, I also became less enamored with mathematics and began wondering what I should do with my life. My mind was made up one Friday after a teacher spent the entire hour proving some advanced theorem and announced we would finish the proof on Monday. I just sat there, stunned. No way would I spend the rest of my life teaching math. By this time KU had done its job broadening my horizons, and I had developed a strong interest in politics and foreign affairs.

In September 1962 Diane and I married (the smartest decision I ever made, despite our youth) and headed back to Kansas. (Diane interrupted her education for a year to earn enough money for us to survive.)

Education of a China Hand

In this post-Sputnik era, the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) had authorized serious federal money to fund studies of foreign affairs and foreign languages, including a new Chinese studies program at Kansas. While finishing up my math courses, I soon found myself engrossed in studying Chinese and world affairs. I remember telling Diane during a college performance of *Paint Your Wagon* (probably while they were singing "I Was Born under a Wanderin' Star") that I had seen posters about the Foreign Service that sounded very interesting. Diane, as usual, thought I was in my dream mode (neither of us had any idea what the Foreign Service was about), but she was always willing to humor my whims. The whole concept sounded intriguing to a small-town kid from Missouri.

A leader of KU's China program, Bob Burton, suggested I consider attending graduate school at Columbia and sent a letter

of introduction to his old friend Doak Barnett, who headed the program there. Barnett set up an interview at Columbia, which turned out to be in the week of President Kennedy's assassination. Given our tight resources and Diane's preparations for some pre-Thanksgiving exams, we decided that I would take the bus by myself to New York. Somewhere along the highway late in the evening, I heard a fellow passenger say that KU classes were canceled for the week. As it did not occur to me that campuses across the country including Columbia would also close, I called Diane at the next stop to ask if she would like to go to New York with me. She agreed, drove our beat-up old Plymouth across half of Missouri in the middle of the night, and we headed off to New York as only two totally clueless college kids would do.

Of course, when we showed up at Columbia at the appointed time for the interview, the gates were locked tight. I did manage to call the professor I had been scheduled to meet. He clearly had considerable experience with crazy college students and graciously agreed to come in from New Jersey to do the interview. Fortunately, he recommended that I be admitted to the master's program. After I graduated from KU in June, we returned to Keokuk for the summer. Diane worked in a factory making rubber gaskets for automobile doors and I worked as a rough laborer in a steel mill where my father-in-law had been employed for years. Staying with Diane's parents, we earned enough money for Columbia's tuition and some of our living expenses in New York.

The two years at Columbia were wonderful ones for us. Diane again supported us, working in a medical laboratory the first year and studying cancer research at Sloan-Kettering on a stipend the second. By then, I also had a small stipend as Doak Barnett's research assistant. We led the lives of typical college students, studying hard but trying to absorb as much as we could of the big city we came to love. With China courses from Doak Barnett, Don Zagoria, Edmund Clubb, and Martin Wilbur and Soviet-related classes from Zbigniew Brzezinski and Marshall Shulman, plus other political science and language courses, Columbia provided a great learning experience that later proved invaluable in trying to understand the world's events.

The growing anti-Vietnam War fervor among students at the

time made joining the government something akin to aiding the enemy. Nevertheless, I took the Foreign Service Examination in 1965, passed the written and failed the oral part. My oral test got off to a bad start when my interviewer asked a question about art history and various genres of painting. As a Midwestern math major from a small town in Missouri, I probably could not have defined the word genre, much less compared various artists or sound intelligent about the nuances of art history. The panel suggested I come back and try again the next year. Naturally I read up a bit on art history, but mercifully, the second panel asked me a general question about the Johnson administration's foreign policy and the Vietnam War. They may have known about a letter several of my fellow graduate students and I had published in the *New York Times* warning that U.S. escalation might bring China into the war; or it may just have been their standard opening question, given that the issue was so topical. Whatever it was, the question allowed me to talk at considerable length on a subject that I knew, or could pretend to know, something about. This time they put me on the Foreign Service roster.

With the Vietnam War heating up and growing draft calls, I had other exam obligations in New York, including military physicals at the Battery and an unforgettable trip to a Harlem police station—complete with shattered glass, smashed walls, and unsavory-looking characters—to be fingerprinted for a background check. We made our first trip to Washington in this period for interviews with both NSA (which, of course, liked my combination of math and Chinese training) and the CIA. Both offered me considerably more money than the State Department Foreign Service Officer's starting salary of just under \$7,500 a year; but I was put off by the polygraph test, the generally secretive atmosphere, and the stigma of intelligence work. We chose to stick with the Foreign Service.

After two years at Columbia and with my master's coursework complete, Diane and I departed for Taiwan for more Chinese study at the Stanford Center in Taipei (paid for by the Ford Foundation and an NDEA Fellowship). We took a bus trip across the United States with a stop to see our parents in Iowa and Missouri and an interview with my draft board to see if they would allow me to leave the country. With a father deeply proud of his World War II

service as a Marine, a young Marine lieutenant uncle killed leading his men in battle on Okinawa, and an older brother in the Army, I certainly had no problem doing my duty if the draft board called. The board decided, however, that since I was the only one from northeastern Missouri studying Chinese, I should finish the training, and they could then review my fate a year later after we returned to the United States.

Language training in Taiwan was fantastic—the teachers were among the best in the world. As we learned the language, we began to become familiar with Chinese culture and absorb the surrounding atmosphere. Whenever we could, we would go out on our bicycle—Diane riding side saddle Chinese style on the back rack—to explore the city and savor Taiwan's superb cuisine. I also developed a sense of the incredible pressure Taiwan's school system put on its students. In our Japanese-style duplex, the neighbors' twelve-year-old daughter did her homework on the other side of the wall, reciting out loud in the traditional Chinese fashion. I considered myself a serious student, but she was always at her studies before I began in the evening and was still going strong when I went to bed around midnight.

We had an interesting entrée into Taiwan's society when Diane was recruited by the Taipei Medical College to improve the quality of their cancer research program. The school was getting bizarre results from its examinations of cancer specimens, and one of Diane's mentors at Sloan-Kettering recommended her as an expert on the subject. In fact, she knew more about how to identify various forms of cancer cells than anyone on the island at that time, and they arranged to pay her as an assistant professor. As the medical school was run and almost entirely staffed by Taiwanese, we gained the friendship and heard the candid views of the people, under heavy pressure by the Chiang Kai-shek regime that had dominated the island after retreating from mainland China in 1949.

A Junior Diplomat in Bangkok

Our Foreign Service adventure began in August 1967. Before departing Taipei, I got my first taste of the bureaucracy's wartime mindset. At my last interview at the Embassy in Taipei, the security officer pulled out the letter we had sent to the *New York Times* and asked me about my political views. I responded indignantly and felt sufficiently feisty to tell the guy I didn't think what I said when I was in graduate school had any bearing whatsoever on whether or not I would make a good Foreign Service Officer. He harumphed, but that ended the issue. In Washington, I was amused (and relieved) that one of our first introductions was to the credit union. We needed it because we had no money for rent or food, and my first Foreign Service check only appeared in our bank account some six weeks or so after arriving in Washington. The introductory A-100 class provided a nice way to meet colleagues in those days, but imparted little information about the career on which we were about to embark.

When assignments time came in October, most of the single men found themselves headed to Vietnam for the U.S. civilian advisory effort known as CORDS. We were assigned to nearby Bangkok. Before we left the country, I had to again appear before my draft board in Missouri. They decided I should go to Bangkok as a diplomat rather than to Vietnam as a soldier. Diane and I headed off to start our new career—but with one more little adventure before we arrived in Bangkok. When we were students in Taiwan, we had visited Hong Kong, and we decided to stop over again for a couple of days on our way to Bangkok. Short of cash, we stayed with our newly minted diplomatic passports in the same crummy

hotel we had been to the year before. A fire broke out in one of the nearby rooms, but Diane, pregnant and suffering a terrific case of morning sickness, had no intention of getting out of bed. I listened to her moans and watched the fire, trying to figure out how to get out of the firetrap if it spread in our direction. Fortunately, it didn't. Chungking Mansions still stands on Nathan Road in Kowloon a half century later, looking as derelict as ever.

While Bangkok offered very little opportunity to use our newly acquired Chinese (other than ordering Chinese food in restaurants) and the State Department chose not to train us in Thai, Thailand turned out to be a fascinating assignment and a good introduction to life in the Foreign Service. Assigned to what was supposed to be a rotational post, I did six months of consular work and then was "stuck" in the plum junior officer job in the Political-Military Section for the rest of the tour because Washington ended the rotational tours. When we arrived, as the lowest ranking officer in the embassy, I was put "in charge" of the embassy warehouse over the Christmas break. I had no clue what my duties entailed other than being there to watch over things. My mischievous local staff decided to break in this young green American by taking him to an open-air restaurant famous for its deep-fried sparrows. Thanking my stars for our student experience in Taiwan, I dug right in, apparently passing their initiation.

The Consular Section in Bangkok reflected the chaotic atmosphere in those Vietnam War days. Naïve young soldiers would bring in their new brides only to discover they were a decade older than themselves and had been working as prostitutes for years. It was always sad to see the faces of these guys when you had to tell them that someone in Washington had looked at their application and concluded that their precious little child had been conceived two months before the two lovers had met and was therefore not a U.S. citizen. Ladies of the night would flash their wares to the young male consular officers to try to improve their chances of getting a visa, and the American contracting companies seemed to have attracted every scam artist in America to the boundless funds produced by the American war effort.

Down through the years, I have been enormously impressed with the quality and dedication of most members of the Foreign

Service and find them truly among the elite of our nation. But a big embassy like Bangkok in wartime attracted some less-desirable types. After coming in one morning feeling proud and happy to be serving my country and my fellow Americans, I was advised by a middle-grade boss who obviously was going nowhere in his career that I should bring in an extra suit jacket to put on the back of my chair. I could then take as long a break as I wanted since my colleagues would assume I was in the bathroom or conferring with a colleague. I was crushed by the stupidity and crudeness of this “advice.” In general, though, I came away from the experience with great respect for our consular colleagues. There is nothing like a few weeks at the visa window to give deep insights into the creative capacity of many men and women to lie with a perfectly straight face. Once while providing consular services, I had to adjudicate between a ship’s captain and one of his crew. Both knew all the legal loopholes involved; I didn’t have a clue what I was talking about beyond what I had read in the regulations. I guess the manual and I made the right decision because they went their merry way, apparently satisfied.

I spent the next eighteen months in the embassy’s Political-Military (Pol-Mil) Section. With 47,000 U.S. military personnel inserted into a country proud of its ability to fend off colonial and neocolonial pressures by manipulating foreigners; with massive military supply lines and incessant bombing of neighboring countries (Vietnam, Laos, and, as it turned out, Cambodia); with no Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) to provide protection for our troops; and with a military-run government that (aside from the king) had only marginal legitimacy with its people—frictions between the Thai people and their American guests popped up everywhere. Our job was to somehow make this all better and allow the military to prosecute the war while keeping the Thai mollified and still friendly once the war was over, a challenging task to say the least. The Pol-Mil Section was mostly a six and a half day a week job, with Sunday afternoons and some U.S. holidays off. I once made the mistake of suggesting to our boss that we might have the next day’s staff meeting a bit later since it was a major Thai holiday. He looked at me and growled: “Those aren’t real holidays,” and the meeting began as usual at 8am.

I had two primary responsibilities in Pol-Mil. The first was to assist a very able Air Force colonel and lawyer (who later became the Air Force judge advocate general) assigned to the embassy staff to negotiate a Status of Forces Agreement between the United States and Thailand. As often happens, we had put our forces on the ground to get on with the war without delay and then began demanding that the Thai sign an agreement with us along the lines of the SOFAs we had with Japan, Korea, and Europe to keep our forces from being subject to capricious local law enforcement. The Thai cherished their refusal to sign unequal treaties with colonial powers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and were not about to agree at this late date to formally give up jurisdiction over foreigners in the country. But being Thai, they would never put it that way. Instead, we endured endless hours of polite and circular discussions that went nowhere. The discussions continued for years after I left.

I quickly learned from the experience that negotiations are not always about finding agreement. In this case, the U.S. military took consolation in knowing that they had one of their top men trying to get an agreement; the Pentagon and State Department made themselves feel better by periodically demanding that we get the Thai to agree to a deal immediately; the Thai Foreign Ministry polished their skills in leading us on and never flatly saying they would not sign while upholding their right to apply their laws to our people, although never actually exercising the power except in the most egregious cases; and the U.S. continued to prosecute the war as it saw fit with little interference from the Thai. It all worked, although not without considerable friction.

It was a proud moment the day I accompanied my boss for my first diplomatic negotiation. We went to the Foreign Ministry to talk with the foreign minister's chief assistant, a brilliant young Thai diplomat named Birabhongsi, who later became a popular Thai ambassador to the United States. The discussions began along the usual lines—earnest explanations of our talking points about the value of a SOFA, possible compromise language for the text, and great protestations from Bira about their goodwill and hopes to find common ground but without any give whatsoever in the Thai position. About halfway through the conversation I reached for a

sweet, knocking over my glass of sparkling water and dousing all the important papers on the table. My embarrassment was acute. It was definitely not a great way to start a diplomatic career. Needless to say, for the next forty-five years I carefully noted where the drinks were placed during such meetings.

My second responsibility in Pol-Mil was as nebulous as the overall aims of the section—to improve relations between our soldiers on the bases and the people surrounding them in the countryside. This included everything from encouraging the military to carry out more civic action programs in their environs, finding ways to minimize the disruption of 24/7 bombing raids on the airbase neighbors, trying (in vain) to get the military to control the massive prostitution industry around its bases, working with contractors whose mandate was to indoctrinate our troops to be sensitive to local customs and norms, and trying to get the PX and Commissary systems to adopt policies to minimize leakage to the black market (another total failure, since promotions in the system were based on increased sales volumes and anything damaged—like a scratch—was considered fair game to sell on the local economy).

I logged many miles on C-130 shuttles, going from base to base trying to make some impact. The only real thing that helped was the Thai capacity to take the inconveniences of the foreign “occupation” in stride, maintaining their famous hospitality and making billions of dollars in the process. (As I read the headlines from Iraq and Afghanistan, it reminded me how little the United States had learned in the past half century about managing its military campaigns abroad and the massive dislocations that go with the billions of dollars that flow through the Pentagon budget. The contracting system doesn’t appear to have improved. Grand plans are laid out that are never fulfilled, and our civilian interests and structures are overwhelmed by the immense funds allocated to the military.)

One of my “responsibilities” bordered on farce. My superior told me when I arrived in the political-military section that I was the embassy person responsible for something called “Tommy’s Tours.” It didn’t take me long to figure out that I would have nothing to do on that topic unless something went terribly wrong. Tommy’s Tours was the R&R program in Thailand for U.S. forces

fighting in Vietnam. After the horrors of combat (or maybe a less dangerous job) in Vietnam, large groups of U.S. military personnel would come to Thailand for five days of heavy drinking, whoring, doing drugs, and practically anything else they could think of before returning to the possibility of being injured or killed in the war zones of Vietnam. Tommy was the former chief of staff of the Burmese Air Force, and his partner was the (very active) Thai deputy chief of staff.

The program was totally corrupt but highly effective in delivering on its promise of troop recreation in Thailand. As far as we at the embassy knew, almost all American servicemen got back on the plane at the appointed times. No reports were filed about any of the numerous abuses, murders, and property destruction that undoubtedly occurred (families were paid off for silence), and brawls were handled quietly as routine parts of the enterprise. To this day, a part of me marvels at how well the whole thing worked from an American point of view; but one definitely had to leave all scruples at the door when dealing with this huge and incredibly lucrative enterprise. As for my “responsibilities,” I was never quite sure whether my boss had been kidding or signaling that I would be the embassy fall guy if something went wrong.

I have always seen the Vietnam War as the low point for the U.S. government’s internal integrity, although Iraq came in a close second. Even a Missouri skeptic like me continued to be surprised by the capacity of ranking American officials to lie to each other and themselves, keeping up pretenses even when the entire effort was going terribly wrong.

One example struck me as particularly shocking. When the United States and Thailand discussed the basing of U.S. bombers in Thailand to pursue the war against Vietnam, the American side formally agreed that the warplanes would not bomb targets in Cambodia. Responsibility fell on the American ambassador to ensure that the U.S. honored its commitment. The coordinates for each day’s bombing raids out of Thailand would be sent to the embassy’s Pol-Mil Section to be reviewed. Our section vetted the targets each day to be sure they did not include Cambodian territory. If any coordinates were found to be inside Cambodia, permission was refused. The embassy would then be sent new coordinates for

that day's bombing runs. This was a serious effort on our part, carried out at an extremely high level of classification and tightly controlled. At first the violations were essentially spillover raids along the Vietnamese-Cambodian border; but after Nixon ordered the secret bombing of Cambodia in March 1969 the "mistakes" became more frequent. A few years later when the bombing became public, it was clear the whole process was a sham. Despite the agreement with the Thai, the embassy was being fed bogus coordinates; and the U.S. ambassador as well as the secretaries of State and Defense were kept in the dark. Even at that highest level of secrecy, we were lying to ourselves.

Our ambassador, Leonard Unger, and his wife, Anne, set a high standard that impressed young people like Diane and me. In the late sixties, white gloves and turned up calling cards were still required for the "ladies." My section head's wife once suggested that the wives help clean the ambassador's residence before an event. The wives explained to her that this was not in their job descriptions, fully confident that Anne would have been horrified to see her junior colleagues doing chores that a very large house staff was perfectly capable of managing.

A scientist by training, Anne Unger was famous in the Foreign Service for an incident that showed her confidence and grit. Once, when she was seated beside the arrogant Thai foreign minister, Thanat Khoman, at an official function, Thanat began to berate her for something that President Johnson had done a day or two before. Mrs. Unger rose from her seat, smiled politely, told the foreign minister that her husband, not she, was paid to hear such complaints, and walked off.

Throughout our tour, I was impressed by the way the ambassador, his DCM, and other leaders of the embassy kept the large and chaotic operation together. They dealt with the Thai with style and managed quite well the never-ending onslaught of arrogance from Washington, particularly from DOD civilians, who assumed they were in charge of the entire world.

I was also impressed by the critical role a strong ambassador could play by another incident that occurred before we arrived in Bangkok. When Lyndon Johnson visited Bangkok in the summer of 1966, Ambassador Graham Martin and the Secret Service backed

by Secretary Dean Rusk engaged in a major argument over protection of the president. The Secret Service, as usual, flew an armored limousine in for the president to use. However, one symbolic event of the formal welcoming ceremony at the palace required the president to ride a few blocks with the god-like king of Thailand in his gold Rolls-Royce. Martin argued that not only would the president's use of his own limo be a great insult to the Thai, but that the seat next to the king was the safest place in Thailand, given the reverence shown him by the Thai public. The Secret Service, four years after Kennedy's assassination, saw this as a red line that could not be crossed, and they intended to put the upstart ambassador in his place.

The argument continued even as the president and Secretary Rusk were flying to Thailand. Rusk cabled Martin saying that, as secretary of state, he ordered Martin to tell the Thais that the president would ride in his own limousine; the king could accompany him or ride separately. Martin responded to Rusk that the ambassador, not the secretary of state, was the president's personal representative on the ground in Thailand; and since he was responsible to make the final call, the president would ride with the king. In the end, a smiling President Johnson rode with King Bhumibol in the Rolls-Royce, beginning a visit that all sides considered a great success. The story sent a strong message to a new twenty-five-year-old Foreign Service Officer that it was his responsibility to do what was in the best interests of the United States, no matter what the bureaucracy demanded. Only a direct order from the president could have swayed Martin.

Toward the end of our Thailand tour, Diane, our young daughter, and I were sent to Chiang Mai to help while the consul-general was away on home leave. An idyllic town in those days (although quite tough under the surface), I felt we should have been paying the U.S. government to be assigned there rather than drawing a salary. To be sure, the place had its drug traffickers, and events in Laos and to the north in China were of keen importance to the United States. Still, when we strolled past quiet shops and listened to the silversmiths hammering away on bowls and plates, Chiang Mai allowed us to be transported back to a simpler past and to forget the tensions of the world and the bustle we had left behind in Bangkok.

Our small wooden house looked out onto fields with water buffalo slowly chewing their cud in the hot fall sun. Chiang Mai belonged to the old Foreign Service and a world soon to be gone forever.

Even with all the pressures of the war, the Thai managed to keep their sense of humor. The *Bangkok Post* ran an entire series on a laborer's efforts to sell "bullet-repelling amulets" for a thousand baht (\$18) apiece. He claimed to have given one to a U.S. military officer to send to President Johnson. The paper challenged him to demonstrate its power by having a marksman shoot at a duck wearing one at a public event. On the appointed day, the unfortunate duck and three chickens became in the newspaper's words "the deadest ducks you ever saw," despite wearing the charms. The scammer then explained to anyone who would listen that the tests failed because the demonstration took place near a spirit house.

We also had our humorous moments. I enjoyed the formal warning sent out by the defense attaché for U.S. aircraft to avoid the airspace above the area of the annual elephant roundup to avoid a stampede. And a parting ditty I read at our departure dinner noted that only in Thailand could military statistics record 1006 cases of venereal disease for each 1000 men stationed at a U.S. Special Forces base.

Thailand was a great first assignment. Political-military work on the edges of the wars in Vietnam and Laos presented daily challenges. Sitting through military briefings on the massive but ultimately ineffective bombing efforts to close the Ho Chi Minh Trail provided strategic lessons equal to the best War College lectures. Diane and I found Thailand as fascinating as Taiwan and would have liked more time to explore the country and meet its people. Unfortunately, my long hours and a newborn made that impossible. We did leave satisfied that we had done our small part in promoting U.S. interests on the leading issue of our time. Best of all, we were taking with us back to the States our one-and-a-half-year-old daughter Kim.