



Transatlantic Diplomacy after 9/11: The U.S. and Norway Collective Memory Project

Interviewee: John Ong
U.S. Ambassador to Norway, 2002-2005

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[Begin Transcription]

LEONG: I'm Dr. LaiYee Leong with the SMU Center for Presidential History. I'm with Ambassador John D. Ong, former US Ambassador to Norway. We are in Cleveland, Ohio. Today is January 28, 2019. Ambassador, thank you for agreeing



to speak with us. We'd like to talk about your time in Norway. To start out, could you tell us how you came to be appointed ambassador to Norway?

ONG: Well, it's an interesting story. I spent 36 years with my company, the B.F. Goodrich Company, and during that time, the first 18 years, I was primarily in the international division of the company, which I [00:01:00] eventually headed as president. In the last 18 years, I was the chairman and chief executive officer of the whole company, so I did an enormous amount of traveling overseas. We had operations in every part of the world, Europe, Africa, the Far East, Latin America, South America. Naturally, with that kind of career experience, I knew a lot of people outside of the United States. I had the opportunity to visit many, many countries repeatedly and managed to pick up a good bit of knowledge about how these countries were organized, how they operated, what the people were like, what their values were. So I always, sort of, had in the back of my mind that it would be [00:02:00] an interesting experience to be an ambassador.

One of my good friends was President George H. W. Bush. I knew George for 40-some years, and we both were members of the Bohemian Club in San Francisco for a long time. The Bohemian Club has a clubhouse in the city of San Francisco, which is much like any gentleman's club like this except it's much larger. But the distinguishing thing is they have a 4,000-acre camp in the redwood forests in the Russian River Valley about a hundred miles north of San Francisco. There, in the last two weeks of July every year, about 4,000 members of the club -- it has members all over the world not only the United States but other countries as well -- gather. [00:03:00] And we live in separate camps sleeping in tents or log cabins or all kinds of strange, little places, and no business is discussed. The emphasis is on the arts. We have our own symphony orchestra, our own chorus, an art museum, a science museum, and it's a unique institution. There's nothing like it anywhere else in the world. As I say, we're divided into little camps there.



Some of the camps have as few as two members, sort of misanthropic people who don't like other people very much.

Well, the biggest camp is the Toonerville Camp, [oo:04:00] and that has all the members of the symphony orchestra, so there are about 70 members. That's the largest. I belong to the camp called Hillbillies, and my friend George Bush is also a Hillbilly and a number of other people that you may have heard of, William Buckley, the very famous [inaudible] was there, Walter Cronkite, a member of Hillbillies. So George and I knew one another largely through the Bohemian Club, and on a number of occasions, he would bring his oldest son, George W. Bush as a guest, and that's how I met him. He never became a member of the club, but he was at Hillbillies on a number of occasions, and I got to know him in that setting. [oo:05:00] When George H. W. Bush had become president in the period between the election and his actual taking office, he had one of his transition team members call me and say that the President was interested in nominating me to be an ambassador.

Well, this was in the early 1990s, and it was just at the time when my company was going through a very profound transition. We had many different businesses, but the largest one and the one for which we were best known was the tire business. I had just sold the tire business and so we were reemerging as a very different kind of company, and I felt, frankly, it would have been [oo:06:00] irresponsible for me to run off and be an ambassador at a critical time like that. So I thanked President Bush very much, but said, "It just really was not the right time for me," and I thought, "Well there goes my chance on being an ambassador [laughs].

But then, time passed and during the campaign in 2000, I saw George W. a number of times, and I supported him and helped to raise money for the campaign, that sort of thing. He had a major fundraising event in the Canton, Ohio, which is just about 30 miles south of Akron, at the home of my friend



Timmy Timken who later became [00:07:00] ambassador to Germany. The Timkens were the founders of the Timken Company, and it's the world's largest roller bearing manufacturer. I had known that family for many, many years, so I was at the fundraising luncheon at Tim Timken's house in Canton, and at one point, George took me aside. It's a beautiful spring day, and we walked down the lawn, and he said, "Would you be interested in an ambassadorship?" I had just retired a few years before that from Goodrich, so I was still active in a number of things, but I didn't have the problem that I had when his father had offered me something. So I said, "Yes," assuming it was in a country where I had some knowledge and [00:08:00] some experience in the issues that would exist between that country and the United States so that I would bring something to the party if you will. And that was the conversation. He said, "Fine," and that was it.

As you remember, he had a longer waiting period to become president than any other president because of the Florida fiasco. But once that was over -- he had used that time to get organized so that the period involved in the usual transition was much shorter once it got started. The head of his transition team called me on the telephone, who happened to be another friend of mine, and said that the President wanted [00:09:00] to nominate me as ambassador to a Middle Eastern country. I thought about that, and I thought my wife will never go to a country like that where women are chattels, have very few rights, and she would just be very uncomfortable there. I had been in that country a number of times during my business career, and I don't like it very much, and I thought, I don't really want to live there for four, five years.

LEONG: Was this a particular country?

ONG: So I turned it down.

LEONG: Was it a particular country?

ONG: I'd rather not say what -- where it was, but it was a large company or country. I learned later that, I think, it was my friend, Don Rumsfeld, [00:10:00]



who was also a Hillbilly, who persuaded the new President Bush, Bush 43. They hate that. George hated being called Bush 41. He thought that was crazy.

But in any event, had persuaded President Bush the second that we ought to have ambassadors in the major hydrocarbon-producing countries in the world who had a business background either in the oil business or the chemical business. And so would understand because the economies of those countries are overwhelmingly dominated by what's going on in the hydrocarbons business. He thought it was important that the ambassador should be people who came up in that business and who knew what it was about and could understand the issues.

So I think that's why I got the nod for [00:11:00] this, but I turned it down. My friend, the transition chief was [laughs] really sort of miffed at me. He told me this was a golden opportunity, and I was crazy to pass it by, but I didn't tell him why, but I said, "I just can't do it." So I thought again, no ambassadorship, but it wasn't more than two weeks after that that the same chap called me, and he said, "Well, you have another bite at the cherry." He said, "How would you like to be ambassador to Norway?" and I said, "Sold, I'll go."

Norway, not many Americans understand this, is by no means the third-largest producer of oil and gas in the world. Russia has that title, the United States now is a very close second, and Saudi Arabia [00:12:00] is third. But the Norwegians have a small population, only about seven million people, so they don't use a lot of gasoline. Norway geologically is just a big 1,200-mile long slab of granite and so in the old days when they were putting in gas lines for home heating and that kind of thing; it was ridiculously expensive to drill into all that rock in order to put the pipe. There's very little domestic use of gas, so they export almost all of their oil and virtually all of their gas, and they're the third-largest exporter of hydrocarbons, were at that time. I think they probably still are.

[00:13:00]



And so this was very much along the allegedly Rumsfeld policy of having people, in my case somebody had been in the chemical business. Next to tires, it was our largest business and was -- after we sold the tire business, it became one of our two major businesses. So I accepted, and I knew Norway. I had been there several times during my business career and knew a number of people there in the -- not government people but people in private industry. It's a beautiful country and interesting folks. I had a lot of good Norwegian friends, so I said yes. Then, I had a little problem because, of course, you're nominated by the [oo:14:00] President, but you have to be confirmed by the Senate. And normally, that is not terribly controversial, but I was nominated in, I think it was, March or April of 2001, and I wasn't confirmed until the 4th or 5th of January of 2002, so almost eight months went by. The problem was that a member of the Senate, at that time, had exercised what's known as senatorial privilege. It's not written in the constitution in any place, but it's a practice that's grown up over time. That a senator can hold the [oo:15:00] confirmation process in the interest of getting the administration to do something that he wants them to do -- help him pass some legislation or whatever it might be. And so that hold was put on, and the whole Senate goes along with it including the committee on foreign relations, which is the one that vets nominees for ambassadorships and other posts.

I waited and I waited and I waited, and finally, just after Christmas of that year, the senator in question lifted his hold and the Senate then went to work. They had a big backlog, of course, of people, and I had spent eight months [oo:16:00] preparing for my confirmation hearings, and I was prepared. I had nothing else to do, [laughs] so I knew more about Norway than most Norwegians. It was absurd, but I had my confirmation hearing, as I say, right at the beginning of January in 2002, and a number of people showed up, the families. I had my wife and a couple of my kids were there. And there were two other people being confirmed, or there for confirmation, so there were three of us at this hearing, and



it was at ten o'clock. I had arranged for the two Ohio senators, Senator DeWine who is now the governor or newly elected governor of Ohio today and Senator Voinovich who was [00:17:00] the senior of the two senators. They had arranged to be there to introduce me and say, "This is our fellow Ohioan, and we know him, and he's a good guy. You ought to confirm his nomination." Well, they showed up ten o'clock, but nobody else, no senators from the committee were there and so we all just sat and waited, and finally, Senator Boxer walked in. She was not the chairperson of the committee, but she was, I think, the ranking minority member. She's a Democrat from California. She came in and she asked us to stand up and introduce members of our family who were there, and we did that. They sat down and she then proceeded to thank us for our willingness to undertake [00:18:00] public service and our patriotism and was sure that we were well selected and would do a fine job in our respective posts. And then she said, "Now, I'm going to keep the record open until five o'clock this afternoon for anyone who wants to raise a question or issue of any kind, but pending that, this hearing is over," and she banged the gavel and got up and walked out. That was my hearing. [laughter] I didn't even get to answer one question. So anyhow, I was off and running and then I was in Oslo for just exactly, almost exactly four years. I left right at the end of December at an interesting time. [00:19:00]

LEONG: So what was the mission, if you will, that you were given? What were highlighted to you as priorities?

ONG: It was pretty clear there were essentially three things that were critical to the relationship between Norway and the United States: One was the oil and the gas business because Norway as the number three exporter had a big impact on pricing worldwide for oil and gas. And that, of course, affected the United States, which at that point, was still a net importer of oil and gas. Today, of course, we're an exporter and getting to be a bigger and bigger and bigger exporter. But then, it



was thought that we needed somebody in Norway who understood the global pricing part of [00:20:00] the hydrocarbons business.

Secondly, Norway along with us is one of the charter members of NATO, and this, of course, was in the post-9/11. 9/11 happened while I was waiting to become ambassador, [laughs] just a small event. And so Norway's adherence to NATO, they were the major European country, Western European country that was not a member of the European Union but was a member of NATO. So that was important, and frankly, the United States was quite happy with having them not a member of the European Union because it made them much more flexible in terms of what they could do vis-à-vis the United States.

And the third thing was that there had been since [00:21:00] the beginning of NATO, which was 1949, a very close relationship in the intelligence field between Norway and the United States. There were Norwegian facilities that geographically were important in terms of their ability to acquire electronic intelligence. Those installations were all, of course, owned by the Norwegian government but manned in part by American intelligence personnel, and that had been going on for 60 years. So those were the three major items. There are all kinds of other smaller things, but that was my mission, [00:22:00] to look after those three things.

And another one, which is related to the intelligence coordination, is the fact that, at that time, we were in the very early stages of the F-35 program, this fifth-generation combat aircraft, which cost a billion dollars a copy. The program is just going into operation now in 2018–19. They're getting the first deliveries into the US Air Force, the US Navy, the Royal Air Force in the UK, and the Royal Norwegian Air Force. Norway was high on the list of prospective buyers of the F-35, so the people in the Defense Department [00:23:00] who are interested in the sale of military equipment to allied countries had an interest in Norway. And part of my mission was to promote as best I could or help promote the Norwegian



government's willingness to become a customer of the US and to reequip their air force with these very expensive but very capable aircraft. So that was it.

LEONG: Now, I noticed in preparing for this interview that you actually have a background in counterintelligence.

ONG: I'm sorry?

LEONG: You have a background in counterintelligence, is that correct?

ONG: Yes, yes, I was --

LEONG: Did that play a factor?

ONG: I did four years of active duty in the regular army, and I started out in counterintelligence. I, later on, went into the Judge Advocate General's Corps, which is the legal arm of the army because I'm a lawyer. [00:24:00] I had worked for a couple of years in counterintelligence and so I had a fair sophistication in that area.

LEONG: Was Russia the primary concern with intelligence?

ONG: Yes. There was no question in my mind that the Norwegians were very nervous about their neighbor to the east. Way up above the Arctic Circle, they have a common border that's only about 40, 45 miles long, but there's a Russian and Norwegian there and -- the rest of the time, Sweden stands between Russia and Norway, but they're very, very, very familiar with Russia. [00:25:00] The relationship between the Russians and the Norwegians goes way back to the early middle ages, way back to 1000 AD. And after six years of very brutal Nazi occupation during World War II, the Norwegians are ultrasensitive about their sovereignty being assaulted, and Germany was no longer a threat, but in their view, Russia was potentially a threat. The Russians had a large embassy -- have a large embassy in Oslo. I don't think quite as big as ours but close. So it's an important post for them as it is for the United States even though the country's numerically relatively small. But it's geographical position and its importance as a [00:26:00] provider of hydrocarbons to other parts of the world make it a place



that people are interested in. And it was very, very clear to me and made even clearer once I was living in Oslo that the Norwegians were very, very fearful of some interruption in their independence by Russia. They valued their NATO membership and their close alliance with the United States and, I'd have to say, with the United Kingdom as well as a result of that.

There were several great things about the bilateral relationship between the US and Norway, which made life easier and more pleasant for American ambassadors in Oslo. One was the fact [00:27:00] that they felt, as one prominent Norwegian politician said to me, an older man, a man who had been a child during the Nazi occupation. He said, "We know that at the end of the day if our sovereignty is threatened, all the ships coming to help us will be flying the Union Jack or the Stars and Stripes." And that goes back to probably two events -- World War II, of course, the British were the troops that came in at the end of the war to take Norway back. They didn't have to because the Germans all surrendered. Even though there were half a million of them, they honored what they were told by the post-Hitler regime and just surrendered. And the British sent in a couple of thousand [00:28:00] soldiers, [laughs] and they took over from almost half a million German soldiers.

But earlier on, Norway had been a subject kingdom, secondary kingdom for 440-some years to the Kingdom of Denmark. It all happened in 1387 when Queen Margaret I of Denmark, just by dynastic coincidence, also became Queen of Norway and Queen of Sweden. And they had for a period of about 70 or 80 years what they called the *tre-kronor* kingdom, the three-crown kingdom with the same woman and then her son all ruling from Copenhagen. Then when her son died, a local [00:29:00] Swedish family dynasty asserted its independence, but Norway didn't do that because it didn't have an aristocracy as the Swedes had and the Danes had. So they just continued on as a sort of, as I say, a subordinate kingdom



with the King being in Copenhagen and a viceroy sitting in what was then called Kristiania, now called Oslo.

Finally, in 1905 after a lot of agitation, the Swedish king, King Oscar, Oscar II I think it was, just got tired of the Norwegians. At that time, they were the poorest country in Western Europe. Only 5 percent of the land was arable, and they had nothing but [00:30:00] forestry and fisheries, basically was the economy. It was a very poor country. Sweden was a very prosperous country, and I think King Oscar probably thought, "Who needs these people? They're more trouble than they're worth." So he granted them independence, and they offered, the Norwegians offered the crown to, I think it was, his younger brother, King Oscar's younger brother, and King Oscar said, "No, my family wants nothing to do with these Norwegians, let them do what they want." So they went back to their old masters, the Danes, and they offered the throne to the younger brother of the King of Denmark at that point Prince Carl or Charles we would say in English. But it sounds like, "What are these people up to? They want to get [00:31:00] independent of Sweden and yet they offer their crown to a Swedish prince?" And when he turns it down, then they go back to their old masters the Danes. But there was one thing about Prince Carl that some people didn't realize. His wife was Princess Maud, and her father and mother were King Edward and Queen Alexandra of Great Britain, the most powerful country in the world in those days. And I think the Norwegians thought they needed a protector, and what was a better way than having an English queen sitting on the throne? If anybody started to harass them, she could just call her daddy in London and say, "Help." In any event, Prince Carl was a very cautious guy. He insisted before he accepted that they have a plebiscite as to whether the Norwegian people wanted [00:32:00] a monarchy, constitutional monarchy or a republic. The constitutional monarchy, overwhelmingly, it was like 80 to 20, was what was voted on, and at that point, he accepted and became the King.



But it was very interesting when that new dynasty started, instead of him being King Carl I, he went way back to the last time that Norway was a truly independent country which would have been in the 1380s. And the last king was Haakon VI and so Prince Carl became Haakon VII. He was followed by his son who was Olav V who was then followed by the present king who is Harald V. So they went back to the old medieval kings [00:33:00] in, I think, an effort to be comfortable with the Norwegian people.

And so England has been sort of their protector since that time. And about the same time, the first country in the world to accept Norway as an independent country and to establish diplomatic relations with them was the United States. I think even in Great Britain, all the dynastic implications of Princess Maud becoming Queen Maud of Norway delayed the opening of British-Norwegian formal diplomatic relations. The United States, of course, had no dog in that fight, they were able to move faster, [00:34:00] and so the Norwegians still remember that we were the first people to accept them as a truly independent country.

LEONG: Now, you mentioned 9/11 happening in the interim while you were waiting to be --

ONG: I'm sorry?

LEONG: You mentioned 9/11 happening in the interim while you were waiting to be confirmed, did that, in any way, color some of the priorities or the mentality that you might have taken with you?

ONG: No. That's an important part of the story because there was one... While I had many good things in the bilateral relationship, the other one, I'll mention just quickly and that is that Norway being extremely poor country in the nineteenth century, 40 percent of the Norwegian population emigrated to the United States and so there's a huge population [00:35:00] in this country of people who call themselves proudly Norwegian Americans. There are actually more of them than there are people in Norway. I think the Norwegian American Society claims they



have nine million Americans who are of Norwegian ancestry. And so that was the other thing that -- our early recognition of their independence and our position as the major force in NATO all made my job and any American ambassador to Norway's job easier.

Two things made it harder for me: One was we were in the run-up to the Iraq War at that point, and that was intensely unpopular throughout Western Europe, [00:36:00] a little less so in the United Kingdom. In Norway, the media was almost universally skeptical if not hostile toward anything like war with the Saddam Hussein regime. And the other thing that made my ambassadorship a little tougher than earlier ambassadors was that there had been a long hiatus between my arrival and the departure of the penultimate ambassador of the US. It happened because the second ambassador sent over by President Clinton was a man from -- a very wealthy [00:37:00] businessman from Detroit. While there, after a couple of years, he developed cancer of the brain, and he had to go back to the United States for medical treatment I think at the Mayo clinic. I never met him, I didn't know him, but he was away. He spent a whole year away getting medical treatment, and he went back when he knew, I was told, that his brain tumor was not curable. He went back for a couple of months to say goodbye to the Norwegians that he had known and then he went back to Detroit and very promptly died. That all happened just toward the end of Clinton's [00:38:00] second term. So he persuaded a woman who was very prominent in the Washington society. She had been married to a man from one of the first families of the old East Coast elite who was, at one time or another, ambassador to Denmark, ambassador to France, ambassador to Morocco. I think he had three ambassadorships. So she had run ambassadorial residences, very experienced, very much a figure in social life both in New York and in Washington. He nominated her to go to Oslo to succeed the dead ambassador. But it was the fall of an [00:39:00] election year when she went over, so she perhaps wisely went to Vice



President Gore and got him to promise her that when he became president, he would re-nominate her so that she could have a normal term. Because usually, when an ambassador -- when the President who has nominated an ambassador leaves office, that ambassador is more or less supposed to resign. It's not written down in any place, but that's the custom. So she knew that that custom would require her to step down once Bill Clinton's presidency was finished, but she had a commitment from his successor she thought. Of course, she thought wrong, and some fellow named Bush got into the act [00:40:00] and so she spent just a few months as ambassador and then had to come back.

For one reason or another, everything that I mentioned earlier came to pass so that I didn't arrive until a year later. Now, what happens in those circumstances is the second-ranking person in the embassy is the deputy chief of mission. And when the ambassador resigns, the deputy chief of mission automatically becomes what's known as the chargé d'affaires, the one who's in charge of business, but he does not become the interim ambassador. He's just in charge of things day to day, and he does not have the power and authority of an ambassador. [00:41:00]

Normally, in an embassy like an important embassy in Europe, the ambassador very often is a nonforeign service professional like me known in certain circles as a political ambassador. But the number two guy is always a senior foreign service person, appropriately. Well, the man who was there when Mrs. Duke had to leave crossed the line. He used the ambassadorial residence on several occasions to host luncheons and dinners, and word of that filtered back to Washington, and he was immediately pulled off, pulled out of the embassy. His career [00:42:00] was over because you're not supposed to do that. You're not the ambassador, so you can't use the ambassador's house. You have your house, you can use that, but you don't have the authority to speak for the President. The ambassadors to countries, as opposed to a number of key federal jobs, have the title ambassador that go along with them -- the ambassador to NATO and the ambassador to various



international organizations. But the ambassadors to countries are ambassadors extraordinary and plenipotentiary, which means full of power, and they are literally the personal representatives of the President of the United States in that country. And associate affairs does not have any of that.

So when [00:43:00] that chap was summarily pulled out, they sent over another man, another foreign service guy who had previously had a tour in Norway as a junior officer some years before, and he and his wife spoke Norwegian, so he was sort of an easy guy to send in as a replacement. He was there when 9/11 occurred, and the Norwegians like many, most of Western Europe and I think all of the Western European countries, immediately were very, very supportive and sympathetic.

The Prime Minister, Mr. Bondevik came down. They had a candlelight ceremony in front of the Chancery, the office building, [00:44:00] which is right across from the Royal Palace in downtown Oslo. He and the chargé d'affaires both spoke, and the Norwegians offered their sympathy and their support, and so on, and so forth. So I went into an embassy that had been without an ambassador for a year and actually more than a year because the previous ambassador for the last year and a half wasn't even there. He was in Detroit being -- or the Mayo Clinic or something. And an organization that doesn't have an effective chief executive is an organization, which is subject to difficulties because nobody really knows who's on first and [00:45:00] their cliques formed. People who are jealous of the chargé d'affaires -- well, I'm sure that somebody in the embassy leaked the fact that he was entertaining in the ambassadorial residence to the people in the State Department in Washington. That had to be an inside job.

So I inherited an embassy that was not a happy bunch of campers, and unfortunately, the fellow they sent to be the new chargé d'affaires was very experienced. As I say, he'd been there before in a junior capacity. He spoke fluent Norwegian, as did his wife. They sent their children to Norwegian schools, so they

would learn Norwegian. But he was not a strong leader, not [00:46:00] a strong manager. The US State Department has some great things that could be said about them, but one of their strengths is not continuing education of their key staff. In my experience, the military and the intelligence community both have far superior programs for continuing education. And so it's hard to meet a field-grade military guy, a major, a lieutenant colonel, a colonel who doesn't have an MBA or some equivalent educational thing that he was taken while he was on active duty. Some of them even have PhDs. But aside from language training, the State Department has an excellent language training school in Arlington, Virginia, but they don't have any equivalent -- at least they didn't in those days and I don't think it's changed a lot [00:47:00] -- to the kinds of opportunities that younger officers in the military and the intelligence agencies have available.

And so the standard of competence, particularly in management matters, is not high. Exceptional people always rise to the top, and I had -- I was lucky enough to have some exceptional people, two of whom since I left have become ambassadors on their own. One was ambassador to Chile and was just nominated to be ambassador to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which is the old Belgian Congo. And the other that's a woman who the last four years is ambassador to Rwanda, and she's now back in Washington awaiting her next assignment. I would not be surprised if it was another [00:48:00] ambassadorship. So I had some good people, but I had some people who were not that effective. So that was an issue to be faced, and that was an issue that I don't think that had to be faced with previous ambassadors. I had a good friend, a wonderful friend named Bob Stuart. He died just a couple of years ago. He was the heir to the founders of the Quaker Oats Company, which was founded actually in Akron, Ohio -- most people don't know that -- and then in 1930 or something, they moved to Chicago. His father and his grandfather and his great-grandfather had all been the head of Quaker Oats, as had he. He was very active in [00:49:00] republican



politics, a very successful CEO of his company, and he was sent to Norway by President Reagan. He was President Reagan's second ambassador to Norway. And Bob's wife was there with him for four years and then she died of cancer, and he returned to the States, of course, but then he went back to Norway as a visitor a couple of years later. One of the couples, Norwegian couples with whom they had had a great friendship, the husband had died. He came from one of Norway's leading families. So Bob married his widow who was among other things, the Mistress of the Wardrobe to the Queen, so socially, [00:50:00] she was right up there.

They had a house in Oslo. It's only about four blocks from the ambassadorial residence, so he would walk over even though he was over a hundred years old when he died and then he was in his eighties in these days. I was in the midst of all these discussions about should we go to war with Iraq and so on. I remember Bob walked over one Saturday afternoon and we're sitting there having a drink, and he said, "John, how the heck were you able to foul up our relationship with Norway [laughter] in just a matter of months? I left it in perfectly good shape. Everybody loved us, and now people are criticizing us and criticizing you." He was joking, of course, and that still stung a little bit. [00:51:00] So I think enough said about that.

We made some changes, and by the end of my second year, I had a good team. My military family, as it's called, were outstanding officers. The attachés were all colonels or in the case of the navy, captains, four stripers. So I had an air force colonel, two air force colonels because one was in charge of military sales to the Norwegian and one was the air attaché, a naval attaché, an assistant naval attaché because the assistant was a lieutenant commander -- that attaché himself was a captain in the navy [00:52:00] -- a Marine Corps colonel and an army colonel and some junior officers as well -- outstanding people in all cases. I had excellent - - the top security officer in an embassy is usually a member of the Central



Intelligence Agency, and that was the case in Oslo. There was a man there named Paul Pope when I arrived on the scene, and midway through my four years, he was transferred actually back to Washington, and another CIA officer came over and replaced him. They were rather different guys and rather different [oo:53:00] management styles but both topnotch people.

I remember I was at a reception several years after I came back, it was five or six years after I came back, for the man who was then the acting director of the Central Intelligence Agency and who was a native of Akron, Ohio, and so they had a big reception for him. When I went through the reception line, I was introduced by the woman who was hosting the reception to the acting director as having been ambassador to Norway. I said, "Well, sir, I have to thank you for the fact that I had two outstanding heads of my intelligence family in Oslo," [oo:54:00] and he said, "Well, who were they?" and I said, "Well, Paul Pope and John Usan." He said, "Oh, those are my two right-hand men." He said, "One is in charge of recruitment for the dark side," as they call it, "and one for the analytical side." Their careers had obviously flourished. They're both now retired. One of them is a professor at some unknown small university in Austin, University of Texas. And the other one is working for a think-tank type organization in Washington, but I still maintain contact with them.

LEONG: Now, your friend might have been joking.

ONG: Hmm?

LEONG: Your friend might who made that joke about you stirring up [oo:55:00] things in Oslo might have been joking, but nonetheless, you did, you did jump into the thick of things. What was that like? Can you talk a little bit?

ONG: I was in a hot seat for a long time, and it got really hot in the immediate run-up to the invasion of Iraq in the summer of '83. As I say, the media almost without any exception were somewhere between highly skeptical and openly hostile to US policy. One of the things I learned to do in my business career was to



get as friendly with the media as I could so that maybe they'd give me the benefit of doubt now and again. There's a man named Hansen who was probably the leading journalist in Oslo in those days. [00:56:00] He had his own television and radio programs. He wrote for all -- a number of the major newspapers, and somehow or other, I managed to get a good friendship going with him. I still have a picture of the two of us shaking hands in the entry hall of the residence. He would invite me on his show on television and did it several times. It gave me an opportunity to air my views. He ran into this, and he was on the skeptical side of the picture, but he was friendly, and he didn't try to embarrass me or pull tricks on me as many others did in interviews, not like this one, but blood-and-guts kind of interviews.

I got many invitations to speak including at the [00:57:00] Nobel Institute where they figure out who was going to get the Nobel Peace Prize -- all the others, of course, are given in Stockholm -- and several other venues, which are considered the top venues in Oslo. I was able to give a speech and answer a lot of pretty hostile questions. My wife and I are Episcopalians, and thanks to Queen Maud, there is a Church of England church in Oslo. And so since the Episcopal Church in the US is a member of the Anglican Communion -- the Archbishop in Canterbury is still the head of our communion -- we went to that church and had an English vicar whose wife was Norwegian, and he had been there a long time. He was [00:58:00] a lovely, little man. During the midst of this, I was getting bombarded on every side, and I was -- as I was leaving church one day, he said, "Well, you seem to have your name in the newspapers frequently these days," and I said, "Yes, and not in a very pleasurable way." And he said, "Well, I think you are fighting your corner rather well." So I had one friend. [laughs]

LEONG: It's interesting you mentioned that period because I've had the opportunity to speak to some people in Norway. I spent a year in Norway prior to this.



ONG: I think I did a reasonable job. It's interesting, one of the -- just on the surface, Norway is like England. It's like you're at home [00:59:00] because everybody speaks English. I mean everybody speaks English, and anybody who's anybody speaks very fluent English just as good or better than most Americans, and I'm sure the English think that. But, yet, just as in the case of Great Britain, it ain't quite exactly the same. One of the things that are different in the United States, individual opinion is important. That's why we have all these surveys and things.

In Norway, they had a funny social practice, I guess, I'd call it not written down anywhere. But several Norwegians who were friends had explained it to me because [01:00:00] they could see that I wasn't quite understanding why certain people said certain things and why certain people would say one thing to me and then publicly say something quite opposite. And that is that in their society, it's not so much the importance in what an individual, in what you think or what I think; it's what society as a whole thinks. They are constantly seeking consensus. They even use that word in English. On important issues, they try to arrive at a social consensus, what is the Norwegian view about x? And once they've decided it, that's it, then that's what they all espouse. Privately, a number of them, over the years I was there, would say [01:01:00] to me, "Well, I can't say this out loud, but you're right. Yeah, that's what you ought to be doing." "Well, why don't you say it?" "Oh no, no, that's not the view, not the view then." I took Norwegian lessons while I was there, and my teacher was a professor at the University of Oslo. She'd come to my office three days a week, and we'd spend a couple of hours learning my not-so-fluent Norwegian. She told me one day I -- we were finished. I was headed to a meeting of some kind and so I gave her a lift back to the university, and we're sitting in the back of my car, and something had occurred in this furor about Iraq. And she said, "You know, I can't say this, but I think the United States [01:02:00] is completely right in what they're doing." And so I said, "Why don't you say that?"



She said, "Well, I can't." She said, "If I go home tonight and I go to a dinner party with eight or nine other Norwegians, and this subject comes up, I've got to say what the consensus is. And that's not what I really believe, but that's what I have to do." That was a little issue that you had to work around, and if you understood it, then you understood that these people weren't being duplicitous or dishonest. It was just that that's the way public opinion was formed -- a quite different way from how it's formed in the United States -- and so it was something to be dealt with as best one can.

LEONG: Why do you think the consensus [01:03:00] developed so strongly against the war in Iraq?

ONG: Well, the media obviously has a big impact, and as I say, it was 98, 99 percent negative. But then the Norwegians are great talkers. They love to give dinner parties, and their dinner parties are social, but they also during the drinks period and the later-drinks period after dinner, they are more prone to carry on important conversations than sort of the chitchat that's more typical of this country. They have a lot of opportunity to gauge how, and, of course, there are always opinion leaders in any society. So if [01:04:00] a fellow over here who everyone knows is very bright and very important and well thought of by the government, and so on, and he says, "Well, the United States, they're a bunch of warmongers and" -- that makes an impression. That helps to form a consensus. They're more likely to listen to somebody who has stature in their eyes and adopt his or her views on whatever subjects. That's sort of the way it works. But it's another challenge in communication.

The one thing that I had going for me, I had Hansen of course. He was a great admirer of Walter Cronkite, and he used to laughingly refer to himself as the Walter Cronkite of Norway. [01:05:00] He knew that Walter Cronkite was a good friend of mine and another Hillbilly and so I think that led him always to give me a little extra room to make my points. I also knew that the Norwegians, however

this consensus thing might prejudice them, were basically very dependable, thoughtful people. The best way to address issues when they were here and we were here was to be very forthright about them. Not to try to say, "Well, no, that's not really the way it is. You've got to understand that there's party politics involved in the American view on this and that." [01:06:00] That wouldn't work. They wouldn't respect that. But if you say, "We are..." Things that might be offensive as some people say, "We're the strongest country in the world, we have an obligation to lead, and that means we have to make very, very tough decisions, and this is an instance where we're doing that. You're against it, fine, we understand that that's your right." They would accept that. They would accept that. If you tried to prevaricate in any way and then they thought that's what you were doing, that was deadly. They didn't like that at all.

The greatest example happened just before [01:07:00] the invasion of Iraq started. I said this is one of my missions was to maintain Norway as an effective ally in every sense. During the war in Afghanistan, Norway along with other NATO countries had sent troops and military aid, supplies of various kinds to Afghanistan. In fact, we had a Norwegian security guard force of about 30 men. They were sort of the people that guarded the gates and opened the gates and shut the gates and everything, all Norwegian. And then, of course, we had a marine security detail as well who were the ones that were prepared if the embassy was attacked, they put their helmets on and got their rifles and fought back. But one of the security guards was a reservist [01:08:00] in an army engineering battalion that was deployed to Afghanistan early on in the war. They were assigned a mission of clearing minefields because Afghanistan had been fought over by the Russians and the Afghans and now by the Americans and the Afghans. As he was removing a mine, it blew up in his face and blinded him, so he was evacuated eventually back to Oslo and disabled, highly decorated by the Norwegian Royal Army. I went to see him a number of times because he was -- we retired him, gave him a very nice



pension. Of course, he had a pension from the Norwegian government as well. And I would go to see him at his house in Oslo, [01:09:00] I guess probably half a dozen times, and it really brought it home. He's a young man, he was 28 years old, and he was blind, would never see again. He was one of these people who dealt with that kind of terrible experience and disability in a very positive way. He was learning braille. He had managed to get a kind of job that he could do even though he had a pretty adequate retirement income between the US and Norway, but he wanted to work. He didn't want to sit around all day. But it brought home to me the fact that Norway, in its own way, here is an example of the price that they were paying to help us in Afghanistan.

So next comes [01:10:00] Iraq, and so I was sent in to talk to the government at the highest level, which is to say the Prime Minister and the foreign minister and the defense minister. The defense minister was my best friend in the government, and she and the military officers under her control all wanted to go to Iraq. The foreign office didn't want to go to Iraq, and the Prime Minister didn't want to go to Iraq. So I was turned down every which way, "We just can't do this." Bondevik, the Prime Minister [01:11:00] was an ordained Lutheran priest. After I had tried and failed to move him, the President called and said, "I'd like to talk personally to the Prime Minister," and so we arranged a secure conference call between the two of them.

I had formed a friendship with then Norwegian Ambassador to the United States Knut Vollebæk who became and remains a very close friend. He was sitting with the President in the Oval Office, and I was sitting with the Prime Minister in his office, but we were both under orders not to say [01:12:00] anything. We were just auditors. And so they said hello and had a little bit of chitchat but really got right down to it. The President made his case as to why he thought Norway needed, as an example, particularly to the other NATO countries, that you had at this time the President of France getting up every other night and giving a big



speech in front of television about what a bunch of rotten people the Americans were.

So after he'd made his statement, Bondevik said basically, "Look, I allowed troops to go to Afghanistan, and," he said, "we had casualties." He said, "I committed troops [01:13:00] for the NATO missions in the Balkans the last several years." He said, "I just feel as a man of faith --" that's the way he put it -- "that I cannot send Norwegian young men into combat in a cause in which my country has very divided feelings. I can't do that." Bush surprisingly said with little pause, and he said, "Kjell, I, too, am a man of faith," and he said, "I respect the fact that if you tell me as a man of faith you cannot do this, then I have to accept that, and I do. But I want to ask you two favors." The Prime Minister said, "What are they?" [01:14:00] He said, "Well, first, I'd like your assurance that once the war is over, once the fighting ends, Norway will be there with financial and human resources to help in the rebuilding of Iraq," and the Prime Minister said, "No question. You have my commitment." He said, "What's the second thing?" He said, "Well, the second thing is we would appreciate it if you didn't make a big issue to the public of the fact that you have refused to join the military coalition," and the Prime Minister said, "You can be assured of that," and that's exactly what happened.

I had an old boss once who used to talk about people speaking things into town in their baggy tweeds. [01:15:00] There was no big public announcement. If you didn't know what had happened, you couldn't find out. The media largely missed it completely, but the government never made any big statement, "We are against the Iraq war, yeah, we won't cooperate," it didn't happen. They just kept quiet, and they did. They were there a year or so later in a big way relative to their capabilities to help, not only sending a lot of money because they're a very wealthy country but also sending civilian personnel with expertise in various areas that could help with the reconstitution of the economy and the government, and so on, so...



LEONG: I actually had the opportunity to interview [01:16:00] Prime Minister Bondevik and the Foreign Minister Jan Petersen as well as the Defense Minister Kristin Krohn Devold. Were you privy to some of the internal debate that they were having because they were from different political parties?

ONG: Mm-hmm. I made it my practice to try to get to know everybody. I, basically, spent my first year in Oslo building a network, some people would call it, of contacts with folks who I've had, somehow or other, persuaded that I was trustworthy, that I would keep my word, and that I would honor confidence on their part. I don't think I was enormously effective my first year, and a lot of that was because I was busy cleaning house [01:17:00] at the embassy itself and getting things going again in an efficient manner. But the last three years, I could do things because I knew people and I understood sort of the pressures and the attitudes that I had to deal with. And Bondevik, as I say, he was an ordained priest but a thorough politician, but I got to know him very well and his wife. His wife was a delightful woman, and he was open any time I wanted to see him.

I never had a problem getting in the door, which was not the case with all ambassadors. There were 56 embassies in Oslo, far more than a country with that small a population would normally have. They would have had maybe 20 or 24 or 25. But the Norwegians [01:18:00] had their fingers in so many pies in terms of international diplomacy that everybody wanted to be there to have an opportunity to have their voice heard. The Norwegians used to say -- I heard this a dozen, a hundred times -- "We like to punch above our weight. We're a little country that has seven million people or seven and a half, but we like to get involved," and they did like to get involved and they did get involved, and one of the reasons was they were unique in this sense. They had never been a colonial power, never had a colony, except if you go back to Iceland and Greenland, which don't count really. They're very wealthy, the wealthiest real country in Western [01:19:00] Europe, I don't count Luxembourg and Lichtenstein, now those are artificial countries, but



real countries, they're the wealthiest country in Western Europe. They've gone from being the poorest almost overnight because of the founding of oil and gas in the North Sea to being the wealthiest, so they had the money to get involved. They could deliver help in a real substantive way. And they were just this little country that didn't have any big issues of its own overseas. Other than the shipping business, they're huge, one of the largest merchant marines in the world. But they don't have large territorial or business presence in most parts of the world, so they are seen by people in other countries as being really [01:20:00] pretty neutral. Okay, yeah, they're in NATO, and they're great buddies of the British and the Americans, but they're really -- at the end of the day, they're an independent, neutral party.

And so a lot of the time, a fair amount of my time -- I guess I'll put it that way -- was being asked by various people in Washington to talk to the Norwegians about doing something on their own, which we can do. But we were the big, enormous, superpower, everybody wondering what our real aims were and what our -- what it cost to cooperate with us. Norwegians could do the thing, they had the money to do it, and then no one was suspicious of them. They just thought they were helpers, which they were. So [01:21:00] we tried to utilize that where we could and generally successfully. The Norwegians understood; they weren't foolish. They knew that, in a sense, we were using them as this. But we were using them in an intelligent way to do things that they needed to see done as well as us except they had the capability to do it and we didn't because of just who we are. And so we did a lot of that.

There were more damn international conferences in Oslo in a year than probably any other capital in Europe maybe with the exception of London because they're in every international organization you can imagine. If a country is in bad shape economically, the custom is to form a donor's group [01:22:00] of countries and have a little sort of organization. Half of those organizations have their major



meetings in Oslo, and the Norwegians were the hosts. Because Sudan, all of the years and years and years of civil war and starvation and all kinds of problems, Norwegians have a whole mission in Sudan, and all of Sudan support group countries met at least once a year or sometimes more often in Oslo. As I say, they had a finger in every pie, and they did good work, and they punched above their weight all the time.

LEONG: Did it surprise you, especially as you were fairly new at that time, that given that the Bondevik cabinet was really right of center, that it came out against the Iraq War?

ONG: Hmm?

LEONG: Did that surprise you [01:23:00] ultimately?

ONG: Well, I know how to answer that with hindsight, but that's not -- your question is did it surprise me when I first encountered it?

LEONG: Mm-hmm.

ONG: Yeah, I guess it did a bit. I was surprised because I didn't understand the consensus thing at that time. It took me at least a year to figure that out, so, yeah, I guess I was surprised. As I started to create real friendships with key Norwegians both in and out of the government, I got a lot of one-on-one support, the sort of, "Don't mention it, but you're doing the right thing, [01:24:00] and we're behind you." That happened very often. The first Norwegian with whom I became very friendly was the man who, at that time and during all the time I was in Oslo, was the Lord Mayor of Oslo, which in Norway is like being the mayor of New York City. It's bigger than just an ordinary mayoralty. Like many upper-middle-class Norwegians of his generation, he was sort of a generation even older than I. He had gone to the United States for his university education. He graduated from Stanford. And he told me one time, he said, "You know, I was in the Stanford Glee Club," and I just -- his name is -- first name is Per, P-E-R. I said, [01:25:00] "Per, I didn't know you were a singer." "Well, he said, "Oh no, I can't carry a tune." He



said, “But they were having trouble getting women to the concerts of the glee club at Stanford.

So here I was a six foot two, good-looking blond-hair, blue-eyed Norwegian, and they said, You’re going in, and we’re going to put you right in the middle of the front row. And you just mouth the words, you know?” “Don’t try to sing, you’re terrible.” So he said, “Yeah, I did that for four years.” He would be very honest with me, and when I told him that I had just hired this lady professor from the university to give me Norwegian lessons because political ambassadors like me don’t have a chance to go to language school for a year, and he [01:26:00] listened to that. I was pretty proud of myself. I was bragging a little bit. He finally looked at me, he said, “John, don’t you have anything better to do with your time than that?” He said, “You don’t need Norwegian, we all speak English. It’s the second language,” and he said, “You ought to be doing other things that are more important.” So he was capable of being very blunt with me, and he was.

The Norwegian American Society is sort of the social group there. We gave a big July Fourth party every year in the park, which was just two blocks from our residence, and he came every year. And I would make a speech, and he would make a speech and then we’d go eat hotdogs and hamburgers, which the Norwegians loved. So I got unsurprised by [01:27:00] the people I got to know well and who got to the point where they could be very open with me, even tell me things I didn’t want to hear, and that’s good. That’s what ambassadors are supposed to do.

LEONG: Knowing now what you know, would you have approached trying to persuade the Norwegians in a different way? It’s been mentioned to me several times by different Norwegians that maybe you came out too strongly. Would you have toned down? Would you have approached it differently?

ONG: No, I don’t think I would have. If I knew then what I know now, I think I would do essentially the same thing. I might do it a little more effectively, but



what I ended up doing by accident if you will, was recognizing that these were really, at the end of the day, friendly people. [01:28:00] They were not happy with the Bush administration, they weren't happy about the Iraq War, they had a lot of questions and a lot of doubts, but they weren't unfriendly. I had a good friend who went to France as ambassador the same time I went to Norway. We went to charm school together. The State Department runs a charm school. You go for about six or eight weeks, and it is basically an education for ambassadors if you will and so it was very important. I would say very effectively done. Your spouses could be with you. Unless a classified subject was being discussed, then they had to go off and have tea someplace while the ambassador-designate listened to the classified material. [01:29:00]

But this fellow, his name was Leach. He was Californian, and he and I had become pals during the time we were waiting around in Washington and so we talked probably every two or three weeks on the telephone, and he'd call me or I'd call him. I would tell him that I was having problems and -- but the Norwegians were really great. And if there was an issue on which we disagreed, we'd have a meeting and sit across the table from one another, and they'd make their points, and I'd make mine. But when that conversation was over, even though we hadn't agreed on anything, they'd get up. Everybody would smile, they'd shake hands, "Nice to see you, hope to see you soon," so on.

His experience [01:30:00] was utterly different. He said the French government made his life as difficult and unpleasant as they could. They complained about everything and demanded -- they would summon him to go to not just to see the President or the Prime Minister but to see some lesser ministry. He said one day he had a call from the minister of culture and -- well, he didn't get the call. The ministry called to his secretary and said, "The minister demanded to see the ambassador in his office, the ministry's office. Subject, the minister will tell



the ambassador what the subject is when he gets here." So he said, "Well, here we go again." [01:31:00]

So he went to some of these ministerial offices are in the old, usually the Royal Palace right in the center of Paris. It had 24-foot clinging and all kinds of Rococo decorations, priceless furniture, and rugs. He walked in, and he sat down, and he said without any overture, the minister said, "Mr. Ambassador, do you know that there are 1200 McDonald's restaurants in France?" He said, "What the...?" He said, "Of all the -- what's this about?" And he said, "Well, Mr. Minister, no, I didn't know that, but I certainly accept your word. What's the problem?" "Well," he said, "that's an [01:32:00] affront to our culture. French cuisine is at the heart of France. Everything about the values of our population is at the center of it, is our cuisine, and this is a desecration."

So Leach said to me, he said, "I had no idea what -- this is crazy." He said, that suddenly, he had a brainstorm, and he said, "Mr. Minister, as a matter of information, I really don't know anything about this, but how many of these McDonald's restaurants are owned by the company and how many are owned by French franchisees?" The minister sat back, and he said, "Well, do you have [01:33:00] that information?" and he said, "Well, yes, I think most of them are franchisees." So he said, "I knew I was -- I had won that one," but he said, "The fact that they would -- knowing that they would bring this up in such a barely civil way," that's what he was experiencing. I never experienced anything like that. The biggest problem I had was minuscule compared with what people in Paris were experiencing and many other European capitals.

LEONG: I also had the opportunity to have met Ambassador Vollebæk, and he told me, of course, about his friendship with you, but also that he had some unusual experiences when he was in DC. So he said, for instance, on at least one occasion, maybe more, he was actually called in by the State Department to help them



[01:34:00] contextualize some of the wires you were sending back. Did you know about that? Were you aware of that?

ONG: Yeah, yeah. He and I, as I say, became good friends early on. I actually met him. He came over and took up his ambassadorship during that period when I was twiddling my thumbs waiting for confirmation, so I got to know him before I went to Oslo. He was the first official Norwegian that I had a relationship, and we just got along fine. We became great friends, and our wives became great buddies. But he was an enormously successful ambassador in Washington. He had great credibility pretty much every place he went. I know that the State Department consulted with him from time to time. I don't always know exactly what [01:35:00] that consultation involved, but he was actually helpful to me in many ways and the fact that we were friendly. He usually spent about a month in Oslo. He had a house in the country about 40, 50 miles north of Oslo, and he and his wife would come back and have a month's vacation. And so we would always go up there a couple of times and have lunch or dinner with them, very often with the Prime Minister and his wife because they were like that [gestures two fingers close together], very close friends.

LEONG: In the same party.

ONG: Yeah. Vollebæk's father had been a priest --

LEONG: That's right.

ONG: -- and so they came from -- they were preachers' kids. He was very helpful to me, and he had great credibility [01:36:00] in the State Department, and they kept him there a long time. He was ambassador I think about six years, which was

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LEONG: Right through 2007.

ONG: Yeah. Since then, he's had a series of international organization jobs.

Although I think at the moment, he probably has finished with that. He's not nearly as old as I am, but he's up in his seventies now, so he's probably less active



than he used to be. I actually haven't seen him for -- the last time I saw him was in New York -- about two years ago. I used to go to Norway. I made half a dozen or more trips, after I left, with my wife but then my [01:37:00] wife's health in recent years has been declining rapidly to the point that she can't really travel much anywhere. And I've, as a result, haven't been back to Norway for quite a while.

LEONG: Why do you think the State Department asked him to contextualize your wires?

ONG: To?

LEONG: Why do you think the State Department had called him in to give some context to your wires? Did you find that strange?

ONG: No. No. No. That's what ambassadors are for. I had the same relationship with the royal ministry of foreign affairs in Oslo. They called me in to explain things that they didn't understand. They called me in for a variety of reasons, but [01:38:00] they would call me in and, having received a report of some kind from Knut, would say, "What do you think about this?" But I'd assume our guys at state did the same thing with him, and that's not unusual. No. And in my case, because we happen to be very close, I think it was almost always helpful both to me and contrariwise to him. He clearly was one of their real stars in their ambassadorial ranks, just a great guy.

LEONG: Ambassador Vollebæk also mentioned how he would -- after Norway declined to participate in the war or maybe even in the lead up to it as well, that he will be called in to the State Department, [01:39:00] and he would be given -- well he -- this is the word he used. He said he will be given a *scolding* for not getting Norway on board.

ONG: Oh, that happens.

LEONG: Is that normal?

ONG: No, that's not surprising. So ambassadors, we're sort of dummies to get beaten up when the real culprits can't -- are invulnerable. They couldn't beat up



on George Bush, but they could beat up on me. Knut would go through the same thing obviously. And as I say, my efforts and other people in the State Department were involved in this to get the Norwegians to join the military coalition in Iraq went on for months.

That finally got to the point where it got to be Bush and Bondevik bond to one another by telephone. [01:40:00] So it went all the way up, and of course, Knut had been required to keep saying to his interlocutors, as they're called in the ambassadorial terms, in Washington that "No, we don't want to do that or we don't believe this is the right thing to do." And I was over in Oslo saying, "We think you need to be with us. This is important, and we need your help." Well, we were both butting our heads up against a stone wall, and it was only solved when it got right to the top, and you had two people who because they were both active, devout Christians decided they had to respect one another's viewpoint, which I thought was pretty nice.

LEONG: Your name came up too in my conversation with the Defense Minister Kristin [01:41:00] Krohn Devold. She credits you with helping her to establish a very strong rapport with Secretary Rumsfeld. Do you recall what happened?

ONG: Well, that's true. I met her, of course, in the first couple of months I was there. I had, of course, to present my credential to the King and then I visited the Prime Minister and then I visited all the other ministers. It probably takes three or four weeks to get it all done. But I met her early on. The defense minister is one of the most important people both in terms of NATO, the F-35 program, and so on. And so I go in, and here is this very vibrant, good-looking blonde lady and so she and I hit it off right away. She's the most outspoken Norwegian I ran up [01:42:00] against in all the time I was there. So we did our usual thing.

And then about six months later or seven months later, we had the second anniversary of 9/11. The first anniversary had been celebrated in every European capital as well as in the -- all over the United States, but there's a big question



about the second celebration, and they decided that they would have it in the Oslo Cathedral. Lutheranism is the state religion in Norway, so 90 percent of the Norwegians are Lutherans and 90 percent of Norwegians don't go to church on Sunday. If you're nothing else, if you declare you're a Methodist, okay, they count you [01:43:00] as a Methodist. If you don't declare anything, you're a Lutheran. And they have bishops. There are 19 *fylkes* or counties. They call it *fylkes*, the Norwegian name, and each has a bishop, and the bishop of Oslo was a guy -- but they don't have an archbishop as they have in England or in most Roman Catholic countries.

But the bishop of Oslo at that time was a little self-important guy who was actually a politician sort of like Bondevik, except he wasn't a priest, but he was the bishop of Oslo, and at the same time, he was the head of the Centre Party, which was a small, mostly rural Norwegian political party. So he was part priest and part [01:44:00] politician. He was put in charge of organizing this celebration. I was informed that he had invited the local representative of the Palestine organization. They didn't have diplomatic relationships with Norway but they had -- the Norwegians had accepted a mission without ambassadorial status. So there was a little Palestinian guy who have been -- functioned in Oslo. And the bishop had invited him to be one of the speakers. Well, of course, I was outraged at this because, at that point, the Palestinian organization was practically an open opponent of the United States. [01:45:00]

So I went to see Minister Petersen, the foreign minister who I had -- another guy I had a very good relationship with. I discovered early on that he was an opera lover -- I'm an opera lover. When he and his wife went to New York, I saw that they had box seats at the Met and could eat at the Parterre restaurant and everything, so a little cultivation there. So I went to him, and the word got to him before I got to him, so he was angry when I walked in, and he said, "Well, no, that... It's an outrage. He can't do that, and I'm going to go see him this



afternoon. I'm going to tell him he can't do that and he has to call it off." I said, "That's all we ask" and so he did that, and the bishop apparently did not take that lying down. He argued the point with the ministry. The ministry finally, more or less, [01:46:00] told him to shut up and call this Palestinian guy, tell him not to show up.

I think the service began at noon as I recall, and my car drove up, and I noticed there was a limousine sitting right in front of us. It was just parked. As soon as my car stopped, the chauffeur opened the back door, and Kristin got out and walked back to my car. I'm getting out of the back, and she said, "Hey, I've been waiting for you." She said, "Let's go in together." And the cathedral is pretty big as cathedrals tend to be, and all of the government people were sitting on the right side of the nave, the central aisle right in the front. And then the ambassadors were scattered around [01:47:00] in other seats while I walk in literally arm in arm with her, and she's dressed to the nines with heels this long. We sort of parade down the nave, and I go in and sit with all the members of the government. I didn't ask for that. It was a complete surprise to me, but she liked me, and she knew that we were very sensitive about this, and she just decided, she'd show these people where she stood, and that was her clever way of doing that. [laughs] So after that, we became real buddies.

One morning, I was sitting in my office, and my secretary came in and said, "Minister Krohn Devold is on the telephone and wants to speak to you right away," I said, "Fine." So I picked it up and said, "Kristin, how are you?" and said, "Oh, I'm fine." I said, "What can I do for you?" She said, [01:48:00] "I've been told that you know Don Rumsfeld rather well." I said, "Yeah, that's true, he's an old friend of mine, and we belonged-- I told her the Bohemian club story. She said, "Well, I've been asked to visit him in Washington early next month, and what can you tell me about him?" "Oh," I said, "well, he's a very knowledgeable man. He's very successful business executive, ran an important company. He's been involved in



presidential politics and has had major positions in the Reagan administration, the George H. W. Bush administration, and now he's the secretary of defense." She said, "But what's he really like?" I said, [01:49:00] "Well, I don't know. He came from a middle-class family, went to Princeton. He's the captain of the wrestling team at Prince--" I said, "What do you what to know?" and she said, "Well, how am I going to get along with him?" She said, "I'm a woman, and he's a man, and I'm nervous about that," and the light is beginning to come on. I said, "Kristin, there's one thing about Don Rumsfeld I haven't mentioned." I said, "He was an air force fighter pilot," and I said, "I've known a lot of air force fighter pilots, and I can tell you, you and Don Rumsfeld are just going to get along fine." She said, "Do you mean that?" I said, "I absolutely do. Don't worry about it."

Well, they became real pals. Every year, they have a meeting of the [01:50:00] defense ministers of the NATO countries. It moves from one capital to another, and every year I was there. Don flew in with his plane to Oslo and picked up Kristin and then they went to Riga or Paris or Brussels or wherever. And when the Bondevik government left office in the fall of 2005, Don called me and said he wanted to come over and wish Kristin well and thank her for all her cooperation with him and with the department over the years that she had been defense minister. And so we arranged that he would fly into Stavanger, which is where the NATO headquarters is in southeast -- southwest Norway. And the NATO commander there, among other perks, has a lovely, [01:51:00] little yacht and Stavanger is sort of close to the mouth of one of these beautiful fjords. I went over and joined the NATO commander who was a British major general, and Kristin and Rumsfeld flew into Stavanger airport. We all got on the boat, and we had a nice, four-hour cruise, had cocktails, dinner. So he was right with her to the end, and they had a great relationship.

LEONG: Do you remember giving him any -- giving her any specific advice about how to approach Secretary Rumsfeld?



ONG: Yeah. Well, you know, fighter pilots like beautiful ladies, [laughs] and I knew that there was not going to be any [01:52:00] essential difficulty in their getting along, and that's exactly what happened. But it was funny because she was so -- she didn't really want to tell me exactly why she was so concerned. After about five minutes of my answering her questions and then in her saying, "Yes, but" and seeking more elucidation, it became clear to me -- I'm slow on the uptake I guess -- what she really was worried about.

LEONG: Is that type of personal rapport important in international diplomacy, in NATO specifically?

ONG: Oh yeah, it's very important. It's very important. I mean, come on, it's important in any social setting, any business setting, any government setting how people get along, how they're trusted or not trusted. Those are critical things and can make a big difference one way or the other. [01:53:00] Norway is receiving its first F-35s in about a month, so I was over there pushing that program hard almost 20 years ago.

There were two things that Ambassador Whitney and Ambassador White and I used to laugh about and cry about that never seem to get done: One was the effort to find a new embassy in Oslo. The one we had, a nice building, architecturally very important, but a security nightmare. It was a triangular building with public streets on all three sides. Across the street, [01:54:00] is the Royal Palace that sits in a big park, and it was just a disaster waiting to happen. The first weekend I spent in Oslo, I was out looking at possible sites around the city where we could build a new building. They finally moved into that new building last year, 2018, and didn't invite either Ambassador Whitney or Ambassador White or Ambassador Ong to the opening, which they had said they would do, but they didn't. It took almost 20 years.

So we used to talk about the embassy project just that we had our ups and then our downs and our ups and our downs. And the F-35 deal -- I mean in our



three ambassadorships -- probably the F-35 got right to the edge of being abandoned [01:55:00] by the Norwegian government as too expensive -- mostly too expensive, and yet, it survived all those years.

I noticed you mentioned in one of your written questions, what do I consider my greatest successes. I'm not sure I had necessarily any great successes, but one thing I did do that, to me, was very rewarding, and it made me understand that I had arrived and was finally able to be a real ambassador and really do important things myself. It had to do with the F-35 program. This would've been in early 2005 [01:56:00] or late 2004. I can't recall exactly, but in any event, the government then was a coalition of the Conservative Party being the leading party, but it had three partners. Then, the Labour Party, which historically had been running the country for almost 100 years was the opposition. But there's another opposition party called the Progress Party, and it was a party that probably would have welcomed a Norwegian Donald Trump as their leader. It was led by a guy -- and I can't for the life of me remember his name, although I knew him very well. I made a big effort to get to know this man.

The Progress Party looked a lot like the Republican Party. It was a pro-capitalist [01:57:00] party. It was a populist party in many respects but sort of a very much -- very much right-of-center populist party, and it had a big youth wing. Its number two person was a young woman who, just before I left Norway, succeeded the founder of the party as the second head of the party. And they, of course, despised the Labour Party. They were guilty of everything that was wrong with Norway as far as the Progress Party is concerned, but they also didn't trust or particularly admire the coalition, the Bondevik government. They thought they were wishy-washy, not sufficiently aggressive against the Labour Party. And so they were always picking little fights [01:58:00] with the current -- with the Bondevik government usually about fairly insignificant things, but still they were just a pest. And Bondevik just -- he was very priestlike, but he didn't like them



very well, and a lot of his ministers hated them because they viewed them as just an unnecessary distraction.

Well, the Labour Party got very, very aggressive on F-35 about that time, and they mounted an effort. They actually introduced legislation to withdraw from the F-35 program, withdraw Norway as a country. In those days, we had -- the UK, of course, was the second-biggest buyer or the first biggest buyer outside the US, the Danes, the Dutch, the Australians, Spanish, and the Norwegians.

[01:59:00] And I was leaving on a trip; I was going someplace in the country in Norway. I traveled a lot all four years I was there. I was in every *fylke* and so I was on my way to the Gardermoen, which is the airport just about 40 miles north of Oslo. The telephone rang, and my security in the front seat, passenger seat answered it. He passed it back to me. He said it's -- "The minister wants to talk to you." Well, it was Kristin, and she said, "It's just been announced by Mister" -- why can't I think of that name? -- "that he's [02:00:00] -- the Progress Party, members of the Storting are going to vote with the Labour Party to kill the F-35 program. They're going to do it tomorrow morning or this afternoon." This was nine o'clock in the morning. And I said, "That's terrible." She said, "Look, you've got to -- what are you doing?" I said, "Well, I'm on my way to Gardermoen, and I'm going to, I don't know, Trondheim or somewhere," and she said, "No, you've got to come back." She said, "We know that you have a very good relationship with Mr. X, and we think that the only way to save this, to get them to change their mind is if you make a strong pitch to him about the fact that the United States is going to be enormously unhappy with Norway if this happens." And so I said, "I'll be there," and I told the driver to turn [02:01:00] around and go back to Oslo.

I called my office and got my deputy chief of mission to call the Progress Party headquarters and tell them that I urgently needed to talk to the head of the party. And so that led to a meeting between the two of us, and I'll never forget



that 1:30 that afternoon and they were -- it was to be on the floor of the Storting, so this is pretty dramatic stuff. I went and made my pitch about this would be a disastrous break in bilateral relationship, and that the program itself was enormously important for the whole next generation of international security, etc., etc., etc. And he [02:02:00] heard me out. He got up, and he started to walk around the room, and he said, finally -- he didn't say anything, and he finally stopped. He was kind of a bombastic guy but pretty smart, very smart. He said, "Look," he said, "I understand things. We're talking about something that's very important, and that importance is the relationship between Norway and the United States." He said, "I don't have any quarrel with the United States. I know it's probably worth a lot of money to you if you sell these airplanes to us, but that's -- in the scheme of things, the United States [02:03:00], that's not the end of the world." But he said, "The loss of trust between Norway and the United States would occur," and he said, "I'm not angry with the United States, and I'm not really that opposed to the F-35 program. But the Bondevik government just hasn't listened to me. They don't tell me anything, they treat me like dirt, and I decided it was time for me to do something that showed them that I could be a bad enemy to have." "But," he said, "that's not as important as what's really important." He said, "You tell your people, we'll vote with the Bondeviks," and they did.

To me, that was a high point because they were using me the same way we used [02:04:00] Norway a lot -- to do things they couldn't do. This was something they couldn't do, and I was their substitute because they knew I had -- first of all, they knew this guy was very pro-American at the end of the day, and secondly, they knew that he and I had met many times and had, I won't say a friendship but a relationship. And so they threw me into the wringer, and it all worked out. But that, to me, was the best thing that happened. We had another couple of interesting, little victories that are classified, which I can't talk about, which were also very rewarding, but I can't talk about that one.



LEONG: Kristin Krohn Devold, you'll remember, was working hard to restructure [02:05:00] the armed forces under her watch. Was that something that the US helped to do in terms of support, in terms of know-how?

ONG: Well, it would never have happened. If they'd gone ahead and voted with Labour on the F-35 thing because they would've have been pariahs at that point as far as Washington is concerned. I know that one of the lessons learned that are always important was that the major danger to our relationship with Norway posed by the Progress Party was the fact that they were constantly harassing the Bondevik government and lessening their ability to do a lot of things that needed to be done and that there needed to be a way. Since they really in a lot of ways were in agreement on major [02:06:00] policy matters, it would be better if they could form a bridge so that Progress would be more supportive of the government. Of course, what happened was Progress eventually, not immediately, but it eventually became part of a coalition down the road. That's the point at which I was told I was a good boy and to keep on liaising with the people in Progress so that we were constant -- we knew constantly pretty much where they were on issues, and we could intervene where that seemed appropriate. I did that, although that was toward the end of my ambassadorship, but I know that my successors carried that on, [02:07:00] and it eventually turned out the right way.

The government that came in following Bondevik, of course, was centered on the Labour Party and was not nearly as good an ally as the Bondevik government had been. Stoltenberg who headed the Labour Party, at that time, was what used to be called Limousine liberals. He came from a very wealthy family right at the top of Norwegian society, but he was very, very left to center politically and even economically in terms of economic policy. I was there I think a grand total of three weeks after the Bondevik [02:08:00] government left office. We had an important matter, which I won't go into, in the Storting. I was asked, even though I was on my way out, to go talk against Stoltenberg because I knew



him very well like I knew all the political party leaders, and get him to promise that Labour would not support this particular overture, and so I did.

I went to his office, we had a discussion about it, and he gave me his word that they would not support this. Two days later, they did. [laughs] Of course, it made me look like a fool [02:09:00] because I had reported that he -- I had his assurance. So I called him late one afternoon and said I needed to see him. He said, "Well, I'm very busy this week," and so I said, "Well, I need to see you right away," and he said, "Well, I'm busy at the office, I don't have any time." And I said, "What are you doing tonight?" and he said, "Well, I'm going to a party of some kind at someplace," but it was in the same neighborhood as the ambassadorial residence, and I said, "Why don't you stop by my residence on your way, and we can have a little chat?" I said, "I don't think it'll take very long." So he did, and I just pointed, I said, "Tell me what I'm missing. [02:10:00] We discussed this matter a couple of days ago, you said it's not going to happen, and then it happened." "Well, things change," and he gave sort of a long, not very satisfactory answer. I said, "Well, I have to put that down as an indicator of lack of trust." He said, "Well, you're not going to be here very much longer," and I said, "That's true, but people will remember this event," and he said, "Well, do what you have to do," sort of, and left.

So that was the beginning and end of [02:11:00] my involvement with the Stoltenberg government. Of course, he's now and has been for a number of years, the secretary-general of NATO, and I was not happy when I saw that happen. Although, I have met him on one occasion since then since he got that job, and he's changed his tune a lot. But you know when something like that happens, it's tough to rely on somebody in the future. I, fortunately, never had any occasion to have to count on him after that one unfortunate episode but...

LEONG: Were you ambassador too when he had taken the phone call from President Bush, which was a congratulatory phone call. He claimed he made a statement



about withdrawing Norway from Iraq [02:12:00] War, but there was no record of it on the US side. Were you ambassador at that time?

ONG: No. No. I'm trying to think when... I'm not sure that -- that wasn't all that long ago. I think it may have been while Barry White was the ambassador, but I can't remember.

LEONG: No, this was when he became -- when Stoltenberg became prime minister.

ONG: About what year?

LEONG: So it would've been around 2000, when Bondevik switched when the cabinet switched from Bondevik to Stoltenberg.

ONG: Okay.

LEONG: Yeah, but you don't recall that? Because that was --

ONG: No.

LEONG: -- that caused a bit of flak too.

ONG: Well, it may well have been when Ben Whitney was ambassador. Yeah. I had my other problems.

LEONG: Going back to Kristin Krohn Devold, I have one more question in relation to her. She was not always very popular because of this perceived closeness to Secretary Rumsfeld who was not very popular in Norway. [02:13:00] What did you make of that?

ONG: Well, political issues are very important in Norway as they are in most places. Everybody in politics has enemies or better said, people who don't support them may be a better way of saying. I don't think she was unduly unpopular, but she had her critics because she was on a coalition government, which spanned the left of center to the right of center. She was clearly at the extreme right end of that. She was a member of the Conservative Party, [02:14:00] the Høyre, which literally means "the right" in Norwegian. She was very, very pro-American, and very, very supportive and defensive of -- about American security measures, and that was well known.



So the media didn't like her for sure. She had some defenders in the media, but generally, she was seen as kind of a hawk, and in terms of her behavior and her beliefs, she was pretty hawkish. She was outspoken, very brave politically. She knew she was putting her -- not only putting her cards on the table but providing ammunition for her enemies [02:15:00] by being as open as she was about her views on critical matters having to do with national security.

But she was very influential with the people who really were the important principals in the Bondevik government. Bondevik was very supportive of her. Petersen, the foreign minister, was very supportive of her. Knut in Washington was one of her fans. The woman who was the -- who I also spent a lot of time who became the minister of oil and industry -- the name eludes me at the moment -- but I obviously spent a lot of time with [02:16:00] her and with her ministry. She was not only a supporter but actually a personal -- a very good friend. She and Kristin were the two really important women in the government at the ministerial level. I remember I brought the oil and industry lady to Washington at her invitation when she came over, and the secretary of energy, at that point, was a friend of mine named Sam Bodman who had run the Cabot Corporation in Boston for many years. He was CEO of that when I was CEO of Goodrich, so we went way back. And I got her in to see him, which she appreciated. I've got in my office someplace a photograph of her and her secretary-general and Sam and myself. [02:17:00] She had enemies in the coalition government, but they were some of the enemies who were from the political parties that were -- maybe close to center but left to center for sure. They weren't so much in the Høyre. She was seen as a good, loyal, Høyre party person and deserved to be as far as I could tell. So I don't think that was major problem.

It was just you have people in the Bush administration at that point who weren't popular in the United States like the vice president and my friend Rumsfeld were not universally beloved people [02:18:00] [laughs] in the American



community; although, they got things done. Dick Cheney, probably the most productive vice president we've ever had in terms of actually doing things as opposed to just ceremonial stuff. That's very interesting because the people that Kristin got close to in our government were the hawkish people in the government. I don't think she was ever very close to Dick Cheney. She's very close, of course, to Rummy, but she got along with him. Colin Powell who was [02:19:00] then secretary of state, of course, never visited Norway while I was there. But his deputy, who is quite a character, visited three times in my four years.

LEONG: Dick Armitage.

ONG: Pardon?

LEONG: This would be Richard Armitage?

ONG: Yeah, yeah, Armitage, quite a character. Did you ever see him?

LEONG: I've met him. I actually interviewed him as well.

ONG: He's a big guy. He can bench-press 250 pounds. I've seen him do it. When he would come, I would always invite him to stay, of course, at the residence. Any senior State Department or US official of any kind, sort of de rigueur to invite them to stay. It was a big, huge house and lots of room. But he always wanted to stay at a hotel that had a really good gym, and he went down every morning and went through an hour [02:20:00] of weightlifting and everything. He reminded me of some comic book superhero there. He almost got his boss in trouble, as you probably know, in the famous affair with the --

LEONG: Valerie Plame? Valerie Plame, was it?

ONG: No, the lady who was --

LEONG: Yeah, the CIA undercover agent?

ONG: Yeah, right.

LEONG: Yeah, Valerie Plame.

ONG: Yeah, Valerie Plame, that's it. But he's a nice guy, and he was a hawkish guy too, ex-marine -- no, he was never an ex-marine. He was a marine, but -- he



would've corrected me about it. He was more hawkish than his boss. Colin despite his military background was -- had [02:21:00] a little less hawkish views on a number of things than Dick did, and we always enjoyed having him there. He was a lot of fun, and the Norwegians just, they would laugh about him because he this just a great, big, huge monstrous guy, and he -- [laughs]

LEONG: So did Kristin Krohn Devold's close relationship with Rumsfeld make a difference in terms of Norway's influence in NATO?

ONG: Oh, I think so, yeah, yeah, clearly. He'd show up at all these ministerial meetings hand in hand with Krohn Devold, so they had to understand that they were a team, so to speak, and I think it made a lot of difference. The Norwegians, so they're -- they made the choice a long time ago [02:22:00] (a) to be a pioneer member of NATO and (b) not to join the European Union, and they would defend those decisions to the death. The fact that one of their politicians is the secretary-general kind of says it all as far as NATO is concerned. And they've actually gone to the ballot over time twice to vote on membership of the union and then lost resoundingly on both instances.

If you look at Norwegian history, as I have, a lot, and you see that they had a subjection to the Danes for over 400 years, and then on top of that were still -- subjection to the Swedes for another 75 years [02:23:00] or so and then they had five and a half years of brutal occupation by the Nazis. They are a lot more concerned about their sovereignty than any other European country. The know what it means not to be a truly sovereign nation. And their experience in centuries is it's imbued into their character, into their DNA, and they're just not going to surrender that. What's wrong with that?

The European community is a mess, and one of the, kind of, comical Norwegian ministers said to me one time, he said, "We've got the same welfare state as all those [02:24:00] countries in the European Union." He said, "There's just one difference -- we can afford ours," and he was right. He was absolutely



right. That was Minister Ludvigsen. He was the minister of fisheries, and he was also the governor of the Tromsø Fylke or county, which is a royal appointment and very prestigious. I mean, not in some ways politically important, but it's at the hand of the Prime Minister, but the popular view is that the King has a lot to do, as he does with the appointment of bishops, with who gets those jobs. Because every time he goes to one of the *fylkes*, the guy in either side of him is the bishop [02:25:00] and the *fylke* governor. And so he likes people he's comfortable with and knows and can trust.

Ludvigsen and I became such friends, he invited my wife and me to go up. He owned an island. You reached it by a causeway that was about a hundred yards long, but it was an island literally. The ocean was on the four sides of it. And it had more government buildings on that little island than you could imagine, and it was because he had been the governor for -- some of these guys served for 8, 10, 12 years. And so it not only had a post office, but they had a government assistance office and all kinds of places that had been built with public money. We went fishing with him. I'm a fly fisherman, [02:26:00] and I went to Norway. I took five fly rods, two shotguns, and three rifles because Norway is one of the great hunting and fishing countries in the world. They're one of the highest per capita ownership of firearms in any country in the world. Every year, they shoot about 40,000, what they call, *elg* or elk, but which we would call moose -- the guys with the big palmate antlers. And, of course, they're one of the great fly-fishing countries in the world, the biggest Atlantic salmon, a friend of mine just caught a 54-pound one this past summer. So I thought, "Boy, on my weekends off and everything, I'm going to do a lot of hunting and shooting and fishing." I fished for four days in three years, [02:27:00] and I went on two moose hunts and didn't see a moose. I saw a dead moose shot by other people but didn't see one to shoot at myself.



If there's one thing I misjudged about Norway, it's that I had a really full-time job, and there was not a lot of time to be standing in the river fly-casting or out looking for *elg*. Didn't have to look too far in the wintertime. The Norwegians, over the years, one thing they've done extremely well is they have confined their cities. You don't have the strip malls and suburbs and everything that are common almost every place else in the western world. The city is a unit, and it's surrounded by green land, which is mostly owned by either the national government or the county government, [02:28:00] it's protected from any kind of development. And so in the wintertime, the moose come down out of the forest because of the deep snow, and they'd come right into Oslo. There's a huge, public park two blocks from the ambassadorial residence, and you can go over there any day in the wintertime, and you'd see wild moose feeding and walking around. Two blocks the other way is one of the main -- is a main divided street called Bygdøy Allé or Bygdøy Alley, except *allé* in the European sense is sort of a grand boulevard and Bygdøy is an island. *Øy* is an island and *byg* means [02:29:00] big. It's called the big island where there's a small summer royal palace and some museums and so on.

So this was a street that leads from downtown Oslo to that island. One day while we were there, there are little -- most of the really good restaurants in Norway are on that street, and many of the fine, small retail outfits, jewelers and that kind of thing, designer clothes. And a moose walked through the door -- it had a swinging door -- of a jewelry store. The thing is that high, and it weighs about 1400 pounds, he got these big antlers and walked over to the counter. Of course, all the people are screaming and yelling and running into the back room, and finally, the moose turned around and [02:30:00] walked out. But that just shows how there are lots of moose in Norway, but I couldn't claim any of them, unfortunately.



LEONG: Now, President Bush engaged in some rhetoric that was -- that received a lot of criticism in Europe at that time, using the term global war on terror or saying, "You're either with us or against us." The Norwegians generally didn't like that very much. How did you deal with the criticisms, the response to that?

ONG: With the?

LEONG: Bush's rhetoric, President Bush's rhetoric. It was seen as very harsh, as being overly simplistic. How did you deal with some of the negative responses to that?

ONG: I'm trying to think if that was really a problem. [02:31:00] I don't think it was. Nobody could have been more supportive than the President while I was there. And generally, the second Bush administration, if you will, was -- the State Department was well run. I think Colin Powell did a great job as secretary. He had an enormous reputation and a very favorable one before he took the job, so he didn't have to prove himself again really. There were undersecretaries and there were undersecretaries, but most of them were pretty good. And the [02:32:01] undersecretary for political affairs who protocol-wise is not the third-ranking person in the State Department, but he really is the third. He is the third most important guy, and that was a very able man.

The undersecretary for management was also very competent. I had a lot to do with him because of our project to build a new embassy. And the assistant secretary for European affairs was a woman, and she was very skilled. She was viewed as one of the real comers. But it wasn't as eventually successful as [02:33:00] I thought because I think she didn't do well with the next administration.

I was about to say she was my boss. This is an important point with ambassadors. As I said earlier, an ambassador is technically and protocol-wise, the personal representative of the president, so his boss is the president. I remember when I was sworn in as an ambassador, they have a very nice ceremony in the



Benjamin Franklin Rooms of the State Department up on the top of floor, which are beautifully furnished with all kinds of antique American furniture. I invited, I don't know, 50, 60 people all the way from members of my family to friends whoever. And so [02:34:00] we marched in in order. First comes the chief of protocol and one of his assistants and then the assistant secretary responsible for that particular country and then the secretary of state who's a speaker and then the ambassador-designate. Well, we were set up in one of the big rooms on the Franklin floor, and of course, it had complete bar set up, so we'd have a drink after. Well, some of my rowdy friends decided -- they were invited in 15, 20, 25 minutes before the procession came in. There were bartenders there and everything, liquor and wine and so they ordered drinks. [02:35:00] And when the procession marched, they were standing there holding cocktails. Powell goes to the rostrum, and he turns to me. I was standing to his right, and he said, "Are these your friends?" and I said, "Yes, sir, they are." He said, "Well, they're certainly a hard-drinking bunch that they couldn't wait for the bar to open." So, of course, all these people are partly abused and partly feeling a little foolish because they shouldn't have been drinking. But he then made his little address, and as I noticed -- I attended over time several of those ceremonies. That was the only one of which I was the principal honoree -- he made this same comment toward the end of his remarks. He would say, "Now, I know that you're going to be the personal representative [02:36:00] of the President in," -- in my case Norway -- "but I want you to know that I'm your real boss." He was obviously sensitive about that; although, he did it in a very joking manner. I just didn't have a problem with what you're talking about. I didn't view that as an issue.

LEONG: I'm not sure that my question came across correctly. I was actually asking you about President Bush's rhetoric about the war on terror, the so-called Bush doctrine, either you're with us or you're against us.

ONG: Well --



LEONG: But let me get back to that in just a second. I'm interested in what you're saying here. So you're saying you didn't perceive any tension, is that right, between --?

ONG: Oh no, I misunderstood your question. I said [02:37:00] the Norwegian media was almost uniformly critical of the Bush administration for any number of things but in particular for the Iraq War. They didn't have a lot of good things to say about President Bush, and they viewed him as being a kind of warmonger or certainly a hawkish president who, anybody got in his way, we're going to run over them with an Abrams tank. So, yeah, they had a lot of problems of that kind. But in private conversations -- I've touched on this several times earlier -- you sometimes heard different things not only about the United States as an entity but about [02:38:00] its government and the Bush administration and Bush himself. And in some areas, he was very popular. It's just that the consensus, famous Norwegian consensus had him as a bad guy or a questionable character at best and so, yeah, there was a problem there. He was going to make a trip to -- this was an interesting thing. I haven't thought about this.

We had a presidential visit known as a POTUS visit, President of the United States, scheduled in 2004. And early 2004, they were having a [02:39:00] NATO heads-of-state meeting in one of the Baltic countries. I think it was Latvia, Riga. And the president was planning to stop in Oslo and then fly on to Riga if my memory serves me correctly. And, of course, you get an advanced team that comes in, an advanced team for POTUS visits like 60 people, and they arrive like a horde of locusts, and they want to check everything twice and then a third time just to be sure - routes, residences, meals, security concerns, everything you can imagine. That team aided by members of the embassy spent [02:40:00] like three or four weeks just kicking the tires, as people say. And then a couple of months later, suddenly announced that the president isn't going to stop in Oslo on his way to Riga if that was it, but he's instead going to -- oh, oh no, now, I remember.



The meeting was going to take place in Warsaw, and he was going to stop in Oslo, then fly to Warsaw. But then he announced that he was not going to stop in Oslo, but he's going to stop in Riga because the President of Latvia had just made a very hawkish pro-American speech. And reportedly, nobody told me this officially, but the rumor was that the Norwegians, we had gone through the [02:41:00] invasion of Iraq thing and the one episode in the F-35 drama. And the President decided he ought to reward the Latvians by showing up to shake hands with this guy who had made a speech that he might have liked to have made himself. And they didn't particularly owe the Norwegians that, and of course, the Norwegians were very unhappy about that.

If there was a low point in Bush's popularity during the four years I was there, that was probably it because they felt that they were being snubbed. I don't know whether I was not privy to why that change was made. It was a subject best not talked about at the State Department. I think it probably maybe had been not a very popular decision [02:42:00] in a State Department who are very protective of the Norwegian alliance, but it happened. Other than the Iraq War thing, which tainted the whole bilateral relationship to some extent for a period of time, which I think has been largely forgotten at this point, there was nothing highly personal about the dislike. It was more what President Bush represented than any personal animus.

When the Iron Curtain fell, you had all these Warsaw Pact countries that basically were satellites of the USSR, and they all overthrew their Marxist, communist parties, [02:43:00] kicked all those people out, took over all the government jobs. And one of the questions they all had was, "Who are we going to send around the world as ambassadors? Because all the guys who have been ambassadors for our country to western countries are communists, and we don't want them representing us." So they looked around, and of course, they were very backward by Western European standards at that point. And so they found that



the best people they can muster were academics, most of whom could speak English fluently, and journalists, folks like that. They were the educated few who were left behind when the communists were kicked out.

So among my ambassadorial colleagues, I had the Polish ambassador who was a former professor of English literature [02:44:00] at the University of Kraków. He and I were both great fans of Joseph Conrad who, of course, was Polish but wrote in English, and we used to have a lot of fun discussing him over drinks. And the Slovakian ambassador who had been the chairman of the chemistry department at the University of Bratislava before becoming an ambassador to Norway. And the latter guy, the Slovak ambassador had got his PhD at Michigan State University way earlier in his career like many people from that part of the world came to the States for graduate work. He was a very bright guy, another nice man, but he looked like a Waterfront boss in [02:45:00] New York or something. He's a big, hulking guy with a chin. He looked like a prizefighter, a really tough-looking guy. And at a certain point while all of this Iraq War thing was at its height, his dissertation advisor from Michigan State visited Oslo, and of course, the ambassador invited him to stay at his residence, which wasn't actually very far from ours. The man was there for a week or so and then went off someplace, and we were having the Slovakian ambassador and his wife and a couple of other people over for a quiet dinner party.

A lot of our social life really turned around entertaining one another as ambassadors because we all were in the same [02:46:00] boat, so to speak. It was a little easier to do that than it necessarily was to entertain Norwegians, although we did plenty of that as well. So our Slovakian friend was talking about his professor's visit, and he said, "One night, we got to talking about politics, and he got on George Bush, and he just..." He said, "He just raved about what a jerk he was, and he finally turned to me, and he said, 'If that son of a bitch is reelected, I'm going to



move to Canada." And I said, "Well, what did you say?" He said, "I said it's okay as long you don't move to Slovakia." [laughter] I love that.

LEONG: But going back to the question that you seem to have been answering, I was about to ask you about the tensions, perceived tensions between the State Department and the [02:47:00] Defense Department and maybe the White House. Was that something that you observed at all?

ONG: I would suggest there's always tension among the major departments of the federal government, particularly the State Department, the Defense Department, to a little, lesser degree, the energy department. Because they came at related problems that each of them has a dog in the fight, as the old saying, but they don't -- the dogs don't all agree on every issue, so there's always tension. I suggested Colin Powell despite his long distinguished army career, was not a terribly hawkish guy, and certainly, as the secretary of state, he displayed that. [02:48:00] Dick Cheney and Don Rumsfeld were close and both very hawkish. I'm not sure which one was more hawkish than the other.

I don't want to get into that, but I got to know them. I had a cousin -- now dead, just died a couple of years ago -- who lived on the eastern shore of Maryland at a little village called Saint Michaels right on Chesapeake Bay, and his next-door neighbors were the Cheneys, and four streets over from that are the Rumsfelds. So Lee and I were visiting my cousin for a week, and he gave a party. It was the Rumsfelds, the Cheneys, and two parties of Ongs. I had known both of them well, but it gave us a chance. We spent the whole evening together, [02:49:00] and clearly, they were good friends socially as well as in an official capacity. And generally, I think saw things policy-wise in a very like way. But in terms of policy execution, there really wasn't that much fighting. Generally, I mean fighting not just in the military sense but in the governance sense because they eventually...

President Bush had a kind of different management style, but he was a skilled manager, and he knew how to keep peace in the family, which [02:50:00] is



not easy. Having kept peace in the family for 18 years at my company, I certainly understand that. He was not a tyrannical leader certainly and not even a highly egotistical leader. But he was a strong leader, and he knew how to push the buttons, as some people say, to get people to change their behavior. And when he saw that there was dissonance in -- at the top level or any level of the government that he felt was a disservice to the country, he was the first one to try to do something about it and, generally, was pretty effective at doing something about it. [02:51:00] It was a combination of the ability to have a kind of steely personality at times and also an ability to be very charming.

He had a very charming wife, and she played a part in that because Laura Bush was somebody that nobody could dislike. She was just a very nice woman and the same way with her mother-in-law. A lot of people were very critical of my friend George H. W. Bush. I never heard anybody say anything bad about Bar as we called her. She could do no wrong. She could say the most unusual things and get away with it. People just liked her. They thought she was okay, and she was. Laura while being much, much less [02:52:00] straight from the shoulder than her mother-in-law was also very, very effective in calming the waters.

So I think as internal discord was concerned, actually the second Bush presidency was one of the better ones. If you look back my memory -- I have known every president since. I actually shook hands with Ike, but I can't really say I knew him. But starting with Jack Kennedy, I've known them all and have varying relationships with them, some pleasant, some unpleasant. But George W. Bush, the eight years [02:53:00] was one of relatively little discord internally. They had a lot of critics on the outside, but they pretty much stuck together. That was not always the case with other presidents.

LEONG: As ambassador, did you ever get cross -- do you ever get instructions that were perhaps contradictory from the different departments?



ONG: Oh sure, I got instructions all the time. Some I chose to ignore that I thought were just bureaucratic nonsense and probably came from the desk of somebody a lot lower down the protocol list of me. So I didn't feel that I was obliged to salute and do whatever it was [02:54:00] they were asking me to do. If I got an order from somebody who was in a position of real authority, I had to be more careful about that, but I would then sometimes argue the point. I wouldn't just ignore it, but I would say, "Why are we doing this? Why don't we do that?" I would say I lost about two-thirds of those discussions, but the other third, I'd get people to back down and then I could go ahead and do what I thought was the right thing regarding x as opposed to what they were telling me to do.

For example, a simple example, I spent 36 years helping to run, and eventually for half of that time running a major corporation. I had [02:55:00] 50-60,000 people working for me, and I made a lot of speeches. I was very active. I was a chairman of the Business Roundtable here in Washington for two years and a member of their policy committee for 17, 18 years. I was on the President's Business Council, which is an invitation-only group of CEOs. And I was asked to speak in a variety of fora, so I had written -- I like to write. I had written dozens and dozens of speeches. Well, when I became an ambassador or at least an ambassador-designate, one of the things I was told at charm school was that ambassadors don't write their own speeches. You have a public information officer as one of your staff, and you tell them where you [02:56:00] want to speak and tell them the points you'd like to make, he then writes a speech. He then sends it to his counterpart office back in Foggy Bottom, the State Department, and they say, "Okay," or "No, you ought to take this paragraph out. You ought..." And then he tells you what you can say. I said, "I'm not going to do that." I can write better speeches than -- I knew my -- the guy I had inherited.

One thing about an ambassador, I can hire one person on my own, my secretary. Everybody else was assigned to me and so good, bad, or indifferent, they



were my team. I had a perfectly nice guy who was a public information officer, but I didn't see him as a great speechwriter and so I said, "I'm going to write all my speeches, and I'm not going to send them to Washington for clearance." "Oh my god, you can't do that Mr. Ambassador, [02:57:00] no, no, no. It breaks every rule in the book." I said, "I've been writing speeches for years, decades, and no one can write a speech to tell other people what I think about some subject. No one can do it better than I can because they're my views, not my speechwriter's. And I know a lot of people like to have their speeches written for them, but in most cases, that's because in their background, they never had to write many speeches if any. But that's not the case with me, so no deal. I write my own speeches, I approve my own speeches, I give my own speeches."

Well I struggled with that all the time I was there, and I got called on it once by the folks back in Washington. Somebody complained to somebody else in Washington that I [02:58:00] was breaking their rules, and I got a sort of a soft approach by the assistant secretary for European affairs who certainly considered herself as my boss, but then, so did the undersecretary and so did the secretary. I had a lot of bosses. The president thought he was in there too.

And so I just finessed that, and she didn't make an issue of it, so I went ahead and did what I did. I don't think I did any harm, and I think I probably made better speeches. Particularly when I was in this Iraq War thing where I think there's something about a speech given by one person but written by another person [02:59:00] that the emotional impact of it is far less if the speaker giving the speech didn't write the speech. And people intelligent, observant people can pick that up quickly, And people—intelligent, observant people—could pick that up quickly, because they, "this guy is reading a script." Or as President Obama was infamous for, reading the teleprompter. And that certainly diminishes the impact of the speech and probably spoils it.



So when I was talking about the important issues, which I believe one thing and almost everybody out there listening to me believed something else, I had to have emotional appeal. I had to be able to say these people, "Look, you're wrong about this, and we're right, and here's why." I had to [03:00:00] display the emotion, which an effective speaker always needs to display if he or she wants to get the maximum benefit from their communication.

I didn't have a lot of problems with the State Department. I had some supporters there. You can't fire anybody. You can't hire anyone; you can't fire anyone. The first thing you learn when you're running a corporation in the private sector is the most important thing you can do is hire good people and fire bad people or fire ineffective people, not necessarily bad people. You can't do either of those things. What you do, in an extreme case, you can ask [03:01:00] that the assignment of Mr. X to the embassy in Oslo is curtailed. And that means he has to go back to Washington. But then he can start through an appeals process, which a month before I stepped down as ambassador, I was still answering interrogatories in the third stage of the appeal by the guy I had sent back two and a half years before, and it went on. But it was nonsense and just busywork.

LEONG: So in retrospect, would you say that you were successful as an ambassador?

What grade would you give yourself?

ONG: Well, I don't think [03:02:00] I was unsuccessful. I think I made a difference. I have mentioned a couple of things that we did or I did. And I had a lot of support among other people. I haven't mentioned this, but the King and I became good friends. I met him, of course, when I presented my credentials to him. He's a very interesting guy. And the King of Norway -- could be a queen one day, but since 1905, they just had three kings -- has more to do with day-to-day government than is true in the United Kingdom or the Netherlands or Belgium or almost any of the [03:03:00] other constitutional monarchies in Europe, maybe



with the partial exception of Spain. Although, the new king in Spain is having a lot of problems. He's got a rogue brother who's causing him a lot of problems.

But in Norway, the cabinet -- the unicameral legislature the Storting, which just means the big meeting, and they choose the ministers guided by the heads of the various political parties. There are about five or six that amount to anything and then there are three or four other ones that some of them don't even have a single member of Storting. But then, of course, they're all appointed by the King. The Prime Minister goes [03:04:00] to the King, and "Here's my ministerial list," and the King approves it. But then, they have one meeting a week on Friday at the Royal Palace, not at the Storting. The King sits in the chair and is the chairman of the meeting and the crown prince, once he's 25 years old, sits on his right hand.

So as the King observed to me in one of our private conversations, he said, "Once I was 25, I sat at my father King Olav's right for 20 years before he died, and I became the King, and now I'm sitting there, and my son is sitting on my right." He said, "So I have more experience in [03:05:00] government than any politician in Norway because I've been through 40-some years of sitting in the cabinet meetings. And, yeah, there are restrictions that are not necessarily written into the constitution." But he quoted the old saying in the most famous study of the British parliamentary system back in the nineteenth century in which the author said -- talking about the role of the monarch in government in Great Britain said the monarch, he said the queen because that was -- Queen Victoria was around for a long time. [He] said, "The queen has three privileges: she has the privilege to be [03:06:00] informed. The Prime Minister of the government is obligated to keep her informed of what's going on. She has the privilege of offering advice, and she has the privilege to warn," to warn, interesting.

I think that's even more so in the case of Norway. Because of these meetings in the palace, the King on a day-to-day basis or week-to-week basis is probably better apprised. The prime minister in England generally meets once a



week with the queen, but [03:07:00] that's a private meeting between the PM and her. This is a whole cabinet sitting there; you have 20 people or so and the heir to the throne sitting on that. He says, "I never let Magnus say anything." And he said, "I never said anything." He said, "Papa would've been very unhappy if I said anything." [laughs] He always called King Olav papa. But he said, "He can listen, and he can learn."

I had all the normal contacts with the King, and the King generally hosts two major receptions for the diplomatic community every year. In the winter, he has a big reception at the Royal Palace in Oslo, which as I say, just across the street from, well, what used to be the US embassy. [03:08:00] And then in the summer, he has a meeting on the Royal yacht the *Norge*, which is a lot of fun. And then from time to time, he invites one or two ambassadors to lunch, and I was invited to lunch at least once a year while I was there, I think six times as I recall. And there would just be the king; the lord chamberlain who is the head of his household; sometimes the queen, not always; and sometimes the crown prince, not always; and one or two ambassadors. And we'd have sherry and then sit down and have a nice lunch and then we would have coffee [03:09:00] afterward. And they had all the staff wearing eighteenth-century clothes with silk stockings, wigs, the whole thing just like Buckingham Palace. And at those times, you got into some pretty interesting...

At the receptions, it was just a social thing, but at those luncheons, you could get into what essentially were policy talks with the King, and I always found him to be very well informed. He knew where the bodies were buried, so to speak. He would have an agenda of questions or points, questions he wanted to ask or points he wanted to make to you having to do with your country's relationship with his country. [03:10:00] He's very good about it. Like all members of the royal family in Norway, he had gone to public school in England, which is to say a private boarding school, in his case, Eton, which is probably the *primus inter pares*



in the English public schools. And then he'd gone to Oxford and then he'd also done some graduate study in the United States.

So like all Norwegians, all well-educated Norwegians, he spoke absolutely fluent English, but he had an ability, which the only other people I've ever seen that had this ability really were actors. He could be in a reception, a cocktail party, and he would walk up to you -- to me and initiate a conversation. You never [03:11:00] initiate a conversation with the King; he initiates a conversation with you. It works in England too. He'd speak sort of East Coast American-accented English and then he'd turn around and see the British ambassador, and he'd go over and speak perfect Oxbridge English to her. I have never seen anybody who could go from one to the other, as I say, except trained actors who have to do it professionally. But he was quite a guy.

And when I left, the best way I can answer your question is he gave me this as my gong as they say in England [reaches for pin on his lapel]. I'm a [03:12:00] Knight Grand Cross of the Royal Norwegian Order of Merit, which is the highest honor that can be given to any non-Norwegian, and the King gave that to me in my last week in Oslo. So I think he thought I had done a good job. Now, whether Colin Powell thought I had done a good job, you'd have to ask him.

I certainly was engaged, and there had been some ambassadors in the past, I was told, who were not engaged. I think my friend Bob Stuart and I stood out as two American ambassadors who really did a lot of moving around. I remember there's a little tiny town about 6-8,000 people way up above the Arctic Circle. It's in almost the extreme. The extreme northern point of Norway is the Nordkapp or the North Cape, so it sticks up into the Barents [03:13:00] Sea, which is really an arm of the Arctic Ocean. And just a little southwest of that, there's a little town called Kirkenes, and as I say, it's about 6-8,000 people. I once took a walk before breakfast, and I was met by six reindeer walking down the street in the opposite



direction. I was a little concerned about that because they all had big antlers, but they went their way, and I went mine.

And near Kirkenes just a couple of miles, three miles outside town, there's probably the most important of several important intelligence outfits in Norway, owned and operated by the Norwegians but in all cases with a significant number of American intelligence officers on staff. Well, [03:14:00] I got up there in a hell of a hurry. I was there I think within four to six weeks of arriving in Oslo.

And one day, a couple of years later, I was in a meeting at the ministry of foreign affairs, and it was one of those meetings where they -- I was getting beaten up. They called me in, and we had done something, I've forgotten what, which they didn't like and so the... Petersen never attended any of those meetings. When there was any dirty work to be done, he had either one of his state secretaries who are sort of the political appointees right below the minister or even more often, the secretary-general who is the senior civil service guy and the guy that day-to-day [03:15:00] runs the operation. It was a very pompous character who had that job most of the time I was there, but we started off like that [gestures two fists colliding] but eventually became sort of friends.

I was there, and one of the state secretaries was working me over -- I don't remember, what it was about. And we got to the point where each of us had said what we needed or wanted to say. And so everybody's smiling, the meeting is breaking up, and the state secretary leaned across, he said, "You know I was in Kirkenes last year or last month," and I said, "Yeah, oh." He said, "They said you've been there six times in two and a half years." I said, "Yeah, I think that's approximately right." He said, [03:16:00] "That's the first time I had ever been there." And he said, "They were talking about Ambassador Ong was here, and Ambassador Ong did this, and Ambassador Ong did that." So that was just an example of what we tried to do. I tried to get all over the country. I spent probably a third of my time visiting other cities, every city of any size in Norway



and some small ones, and people remember that. That's goodwill. Public diplomacy, they call that in the State Department.

LEONG: We're running a little low on time.

ONG: Pardon?

LEONG: I've got a plane to catch. I've got a plane to catch soon, but I do have one more question. So we had mentioned Russia at the start of this conversation, did - - were there any issues concerning Russia that came up while you were ambassador? [03:17:00]

ONG: Oh yeah. The Russian ambassador was a guy who -- he was an ex-intelligence officer in whatever in his day. He was a guy about my age. We're the oldest two ambassadors, the United States and Russia. And he had been a KGB, was in his youth an operative, and he had been under light cover in the Russian embassy in Oslo when he was a junior officer, spoke, I'm told, perfect flawless Norwegian. And then he had gone up in the ranks and was very close to the top of the KGB around the time that the USSR fell apart. He was considered an old KGB [03:18:00] regular, and the new people, Yeltsin and his gang want to get rid of those folks because they thought they were a problem.

So he was about ready to retire anyhow; he's in his sixties at that point. So he loved Norway and loved living there, and he spoke, as I say, flawless Norwegian, so they kind of gave him his victory lap. They sent him to Oslo as the ambassador, and he arrived a year or so before I did, so we were roughly there at the same time. He was still there when I left but left shortly after that and went back and was actually elected to the Duma for a very, very right-of-center Russian political party.

But I called him the Smiling Crocodile because I didn't trust him any further than I could throw that chest, but he always had a big smile and always treated me with great bonhomie, [03:19:00] and he always wanted me to drink vodka with him. Fortunately, I have a good head for liquor, so I could do that without embarrassing myself. He knew every trick in the book. He was far more



experienced both as a diplomat and an intelligence official than I. And it was interesting that our residence was on the edge of a big valley, and on the next ridge over was his residence, so I could literally stand at the back of my residence with binoculars and see him sitting -- in the summertime sitting on the veranda reading a book or having a vodka or something. And presumably, he can see me from time to time. So we were close in that sense.

But I made it, and I was told to make it my job to have a [03:20:00] good relationship with him, so I could, kind of, try to pick up what was going on in terms of Russian policymaking and their aims diplomatically with regard to Norway. So I spent a lot of time with this gentleman if he was one, and I had a lot of fun with him actually. He was a lot of fun to be with. He was very jovial, told good jokes, and that kind of thing. But, as I say, I didn't trust him at all, and I was right in not trusting him because I think he was not a very trustworthy guy. Their big thing outwardly, their big concern was with the border region way up above the Arctic Circle, and, as I say, it's like 40, 45 [03:21:00] miles long. But they seem to spend a lot of time about population movement back and forth. There are a lot of Laplanders up there or -- that's a politically incorrect term in Norway now.

They're called --

LEONG: Sami --

ONG: -- another name. I can't come up with it.

LEONG: They're called Sami.

ONG: Samis. And Samis move, and they're still to some degree nomadic people.

And so the goddamn border doesn't make any sense to them. They drive their reindeer herds into Russia, out of Russia, into Norway and so there are problems there of a very minor kind. But the Russian seem to spend an undue amount of time. They had a very important consulate general in this little town of Kirkenes, 6,000, 7,000, 8,000 people. The second-ranking guy, and their embassy was the consulate general in Kirkenes. And [03:22:00] a lot of things that I was told by the



Russian ambassador when I would, I hope, cleverly try to find out what was on his agenda would be things like that. The border issues, which obviously was not that important except for what was on the Norwegian side of the border. That was important, the place I mentioned, there were a couple of other places.

So we did not have a consulate in Kirkenes, but that's why I went there about every three or four months because I got to know the local political people, the mayor of the town, and the governor of the *fylke*. But they, obviously, had [03:23:00] other agendas, which they didn't disclose to me and which most of my Norwegian contacts never really discussed with me, but I had a couple who did. I had a couple of people who talked to my chiefs of station as we're called, the head of our intelligence community in the embassy, so we had some idea. Part of it, there was a program to try to encourage the Norwegian public and particularly the media to be against the Iraq War. That was one thing that was an obvious Russian policy aim was to try to frustrate us in that regard. [03:24:00] They also had some trade issues. A lot of the Norwegian hydrocarbon exports, not all, but a lot go into Western Europe, the Netherlands, Belgium, even the UK to some degree, Germany, and of course, the Russians were trying to break into Western Europe, and they're building this big pipeline down through the Baltic Sea to Germany. That's still work in progress, and there's a big fight going on about it politically in Europe right now. So they -- probably had some program to outfox the [03:25:00] Norwegians in terms of being a competitor for Western European gas and oil requirements. That's another major thing, and of course, something of interest to us.

So those were the kinds of things that seem to be. And they may have had some more nefarious schemes at large. There was some indication, at one point, Norway had started to allow in a lot of so-called refugees, people whose lives were supposedly threatened at home. So they moved to Norway where all are welcome. They had this marvelous banquet of social benefits and tax-supported programs.



You can have it all, get a job, so they're getting a lot of people from the Middle East. [03:26:00] And eventually, slowly, there started to be a reaction against that by the Norwegian public. When I was there, it was still politically incorrect to say anything nasty about the problem of immigration. If you talked that way, the Norwegians would jump on you right away. My wife and I went back there in -- it's either 2010 or 2011 and spent a week in Sweden, a week in Denmark, and a week in Norway -- two weeks in Norway, and we were amazed. That had become a big political issue. The Danes had reopened the border even though they're a member of the European Union, and they had [03:27:00] their border posts to check people's credentials when they came in from Germany. The Swedes were talking openly about creating a quota system.

The Norwegians were very upset. They were trying to enact legislation that would require every Norwegian citizen to be able to speak fluent Norwegian and know all about Norwegian history. It was kind of funny in a way, but large parts of the population in Oslo, there was no Norwegian or English spoken by the immigrants. They all spoke Arabic or some Central Asian tongue. That's all changed a lot in more recent [03:28:00] years.

But there was some indication that the Russians were, somehow or other, encouraging immigration in the thought that it would weaken the fiber of Norwegian nationality. I don't know whether that was true. It may have been; it may not. We didn't have any good information about it. It was just sort of rumor, "What do you think about...? Don't you think they might be...?" kinds of comments. But I had a lot of fun with the Russians. They were okay, and I drank more vodka than I had ever had in my life. [laughter] I'm not a vodka drinker.

LEONG: All right. Unfortunately, we have to stop there. Thank you very much.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO]