CARNEGIE CORPORATION OF NEW YORK ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Thomas R. Pickering

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Thomas R. Pickering conducted by Myron A. Farber on July 27, 2012. This interview is part of the Carnegie Corporation of New York Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

3PM | Session #1

Interviewee: Thomas R. Pickering | Location: Washington, D.C.

Interviewer: Myron A. Farber | Date: July 27, 2012

Q: This is Myron Farber on July 27, 2012, interviewing Thomas R. Pickering for the Carnegie Corporation of New York oral history conducted by Columbia University. Thank you for joining us, Mr. Pickering.

Pickering: Not at all. My pleasure.

Q: You were a board member of the Carnegie Corporation from 2003 to last year?

Pickering: That's right.

Q: Is that one term of eight years?

Pickering: No, two terms of four. [Laughs]

Q: Okay.

Pickering: And there are term limits on the board.

Q: Okay. Now, before you joined the board in 2003, you had a long and universally agreed—except perhaps for [James] Jim [A.] Baker [III]—distinguished career—

Pickering: Oh, I have great relations with Jim, so [laughs] that's not a problem.

Q: —distinguished career as a [U.S.] Foreign Service officer.

[Laughter]

Q: We can come back to that to clarify that.

Pickering: No, no, that's perfectly okay. I know exactly what you're referring to.

Q: [Laughs] Okay.

Pickering: That is no problem. [Laughs]

Q: But how long were you in the Foreign Service?

Pickering: I entered the Foreign Service in June of 1959 and I retired on the last day of December of 2000. I had retired once before. I retired at the end of November 1996 and worked briefly for the Eurasia Foundation, which does grants and loans, small ones, to individuals in the

states of the former Soviet Union, and then rejoined the Foreign Service in April-May of 1997 to become under secretary [of state], which was the last job I had.

Q: Right. And the title career ambassador, is that an actual title in the firm?

Pickering: Yes, it is a title and it's awarded to a few people. There are between three and five serving at any one time and often it gets down to one. It has no emoluments and it has a few perquisites but not many. But it was decided years ago that a few people in the Foreign Service should be considered for that title as a kind of accolade for performance. So you have to have been an ambassador and either an assistant secretary or ambassador more than twice to be eligible for the title, and you're supposed to have had distinguished performance.

Q: Right. And among the ambassadorships you had, there was the United Nations in 1989, 1992, India, Israel, Jordan—doing this out of order—and the Russian Federation, of course.

Pickering: Russia, El Salvador and Nigeria.

Q: Right. Is there a balance that anyone tries to strike, or that should be struck, between career Foreign Service people as ambassadors and political appointees?

Pickering: Sure. It's an ancient and unending question that constantly arises. The current tradition, which has now been in effect probably since the end of the Second World War in one way or another, is that between thirty and thirty-three percent go to the White House for political

appointees on the basis of a list agreed between the White House and the secretary of state and the other seventy percent come from the career service. And the career service people are nominated by the secretary of state to the president. There are, during any one term, tradeoffs sometimes. If the White House wants a position that has been traditionally in the hands of the State Department, they may trade one of theirs off to the State Department. Sometimes two, depending on how badly they want it. So the relationship in numerical terms is never absolutely precise, but it's in the right ballpark there.

My own personal view is that ten percent non-career ambassadors would be a better way of dealing with the problem because then you would have what I consider to be the really outstanding people who have come in over the years, who know the country or know the processes very well and they're there for reasons of their outstanding capacity, either as journalists or academicians or as businessmen and so on. People like Felix [G.] Rohatyn; Edwin [O.] Reischauer, who worked for President [John F.] Kennedy; and many others. [Michael] Mike [J.] Mansfield, Walter [F.] Mondale. But people who are really distinguished, rather than used car salesmen who have managed to pony up the three hundred thousand dollars, more or less, for campaign contributions—that seems to be a threshold—and who therefore are considered by the White House as part of the reward system.

Q: Edwin Reischauer certainly was equipped to serve. [Laughs]

Pickering: Oh, absolutely. Superbly so. And there have been many others. George H.W. Bush was in China and so on. And I think no one in the Foreign Service would say we should adopt a

system that permanently excludes the president's right to appoint very distinguished and capable Americans. As ambassadors, they also bring with them, in addition to their own names, a relationship with the president. But I think in terms of policy making, that has relatively little relevance. The system tends to look at the quality of the policy recommendations rather than, necessarily, the relationship with the individual to the president to determine where the United States interests are and how things will be done.

Q: This recording might be listened to by someone another hundred years from now or something. Give me an idea of who you think of as really, in our time, distinguished Foreign Service people.

Pickering: Well, there are many of my—

Q: Apart from yourself.

Pickering: Obviously there are many of my colleagues. John [D.] Negroponte's had a very distinguished career. [J.] Stapleton Roy has had a very distinguished career. My old friend Frank [G.] Wisner [II], certainly. William [J.] Burns, who's present deputy secretary [of state], is an outstanding Foreign Service officer. Bill and I are very close and he's worked for me at various times. So those are the kind of people that I would put on the list. They happen to be people in the main who become career ambassadors [laughs] sometimes. [R. Nicholas] Nick Burns certainly did a fantastic job. Marc Grossman, who's back again dealing with Afghanistan, and so on. But there are many of them and I think they obviously have continued the tradition that we

had going back to George [F.] Kennan and the individuals we look at from the Second World War period. And in between, there have been people who have been there. Loy [W.] Henderson.

Q: Right.

Pickering: Sure.

Q: Is Kennan's so-called Long Telegram hyped? Or, did that really have a consequence of any kind?

Pickering: No, it had a formidable consequence. It changed remarkably and Gaddis's book is a very interesting review of that.

Q: John Lewis Gaddis.

Pickering: John Lewis Gaddis's book, a very interesting review of that in the sense that it was, in a way, an answer to something that James [V.] Forrestal had raised, I think, in a cabinet meeting. He said, "Do we really know where the Soviets are going and what they're doing," and George Kennan, I think, was then in charge of the embassy and kind of wrote it, if not over a weekend, wrote it fairly quickly. It was the sum total of his very prescient assessment of the Soviet Union on which he had been working since the mid-'30s. And so it brought out what I think was a whole series of thoughts and ideas, which were crystallized in a policy called containment, although I think that was never George Kennan's view of what it ought to be called. [Laughs]

But it was a policy, basically, of dealing with the Soviet Union in a way of both, as the word says, keeping them in their box but also continuing to provide openings for change that might make a serious difference. And it was that policy, in the end, that ended, I think, in the collapse of the Communist system and the Soviet Union in December of 1991.

Q: He wrote that in, what, ‘46 or so?

Pickering: ‘47, ‘48, yes.

Q: Was it? Well—

Pickering: Maybe it was earlier.

Q: Couldn’t have been ‘47, ‘48, because the *Foreign Affairs* article that he penned under the name—

Pickering: Mr. X, yes.

Q: —of Mr. X was in ‘47, I think.

Pickering: Yes, then it was written before. Maybe it was from ‘47.

Q: Right. But do you know of another example of—and by the way, when you say he was then in charge of the embassy, he actually wasn't the ambassador.

Pickering: No, no. The ambassador may have been away.

Q: Right. Was away.

Pickering: I think he was chargé d'affaires because the ambassador was away.

Q: Right. Can you think—

Pickering: Maybe not. But the ambassadors he had highly respected his judgment, and he would have been someone they would have relied upon to answer that kind of question, since most of those were political appointees.

Q: Right, right. Can you think, in your time as an ambassador in the Foreign Service, of another document, another message, that rivals that from an embassy to Washington in terms of consequence or importance?

Pickering: No, I can't offhand. I suspect that there were, over a period of years, messages that had a seminal influence. They were neither as long nor perhaps, in some ways, as influential at the time, but they tended to shape people's thoughts and ideas about a foreign country. And the place to look, obviously, would begin to look in the history of U.S.-China relations, for example.

A very large country with, obviously, a tremendous amount at stake for us. And I would probably think you could, going back over history, find things that came from various officials, whether in Washington or outside, that help to shape a lot of it. But as an action as opposed to a message, certainly [Richard M.] Nixon's and [Henry A.] Kissinger's idea of finding a way to break through the gap between the U.S. and China was of a similar character.

Q: Right, but I'm thinking, was there something emanating out of—

Pickering: There may well have been pieces of paper done either by Henry or for Henry for the president. I'm reading his book on China and nothing stands out at the moment. But conversations he had, certainly, with Nixon were of the same character.

Q: Right. But as you mentioned a moment ago, Kennan's Long Telegram, which was within the department, within the government, and then his Mr. X *Foreign Affairs* article in '47 or '48, was over some period of time widely misinterpreted in terms of what he meant, isn't that right?

Pickering: Exactly, and he was fraught about that. And on several occasions and several books, he attempted to try to clear it up and, I think, never did successfully. And so some of the misinterpretations stayed but in the end, but his general prediction about what would happen to the Soviet Union forty-seven years later turned out to be really quite true.

Q: Right. But he didn't mean it in terms of solely military containment, did he?

Pickering: No, not at all. He had a very broad political perspective on things. And I mean, if he were alive today, he would have said, "I thought that the political piece was probably equally, if not more important, than the military piece." I mean, one of the tendencies in American policy is we have a tendency to over-militarize.

Q: At one point in your life when you were young—not that you're not young now—[laughs]

Pickering: When I was younger. [Laughs]

Q: When you were younger.

[Laughter]

Pickering: Which is eternally true. [Laughs]

Q: Did you entertain an idea of going into the ministry?

Pickering: I did at one point, yes.

Q: Seriously?

Pickering: No. I mean, I looked at it. I looked at it seriously, yes.

Q: Any regrets about that?

Pickering: No, no.

Q: I mean, you enjoyed this time in the Foreign Service?

Pickering: Immensely, yes. It was a most interesting and challenging in every way kind of a job that anyone could have and of course, it suited my interests. I liked to travel. I liked living abroad. I liked learning new things all the time and I think government offers you immense opportunities. I was not interested in material rewards. I was interested in being able to live reasonably well. I never had that problem and I think most of my colleagues don't. But I never felt that I had, for one reason or another, to duck away from tough assignments. I welcome them. I thought they were interesting and I went places that were not on anybody's list of kind of A-rated [laughs] vacation spots.

[Laughter]

Pickering: But in many ways, they were fantastic. I learned a huge amount about the Middle East, about Africa, and places where I spent eight years in my career in each place.

Q: Wonderful. Let me come back to them. You retired as under secretary of state for political affairs.

Pickering: That was my second retirement. I retired as ambassador to Moscow.

Q: Right, okay. But only about a year earlier, right?

Pickering: No, only three months in between.

Q: Okay, only three months. And that was the end of 1999, beginning of 2000.

Pickering: The end of 2000.

Q: The end of 2000, okay. And between the time that you joined the Carnegie board in 2003, what were you doing? Were you associated with [The] Boeing [Company] in some—?

Pickering: Yes. As time came to leave at the end of the [President William J.] Clinton administration, Boeing approached me with an idea that I could help them deal with their overseas representation and their overseas activities. It was startling that a company the size of Boeing, the U.S.'s largest exporter, had no corporate-level activities overseas. They were all in the hands of salesmen, marketing people, and essentially the technical people who assisted the airlines. And that seemed to have worked for a while, so they kept it but it became very clear to them after they bought McDonnell Douglas [Corporation], Rockwell [International Corporation], and a big piece of Hughes [Aircraft Company] that they were going to need something more. And their vision, which was certainly something that immediately attracted me and became my vision, was that we should have a series of country presidents overseas at the corporate level that

would have a capacity to find ways to assist in the sales opportunity by having much higher-level contacts than the sales team normally was able to develop, even buttressed by the heads of the three divisions that existed. We had a division that did commercial airplanes, we had a division that did military activities, and we had a division that did space activities. And so the idea was that we would go for very well-placed people in countries around the world and we immediately agreed on a list of twenty or so as the right sort of countries to go in to. And so my job was hiring people and then bringing them into the Boeing Company. And it was originally thought that it was easier to learn Boeing than Chinese, although over a period of time, people had their doubts about that.

[Laughter]

Q: You didn't move to Chicago, did you?

Pickering: No. We were headquartered, when I came on board, in Seattle. Within nine months, a week before September 11 [2001], they moved to Chicago. My deal was that I would stay in Washington [D.C.]. I had spent the rest of my life moving and it made sense because the people that I needed to be in touch with would more likely come to Washington or New York. And so, we set up in the Washington office here, which was heavily focused on government relations, a small unit that actually worked for me that did international relations.

Q: And how long were you associated with Boeing?

Pickering: I was in Boeing from the first day of 2001 to the last day of June 2006.

Q: Had you any previous contact with them while you were an ambassador?

Pickering: Yes, I did. I took Boris [N.] Yeltsin to see the factory in Everett [Washington] to see the first Triple Seven. But, ephemeral—I mean, at one point I had owned some Boeing stock. [Laughs]

Q: Right. But do you know why they approached you?

Pickering: Well, I think they looked around Washington. I was leaving, so I was a logical candidate. I was sure I was not the first candidate.

Q: A happy association, though, for five years?

Pickering: Very, yes. And a very interesting job. The most difficult part of the job was to get Boeing people to appreciate that I was not there to compete with them, but to help them, and to use the services of the people we put in place rather than to find ways to try to work around or exclude them. But this was a fact that the prima donnas of the commercial airplane business, and to some extent of the defense business, are the salesman. And the really smart salesman, I think, and particularly a lot of the young ones, saw this as a great way to improve their capacities and used us. Some of the older ones took a little while to come along and understand what it was we were doing and thought that they had everything perfectly splendidly situated, that Boeing didn't

need to spend money as it was on all these outside people, and they were, thank you very much, going to continue as they had.

Q: Was it productive what you did?

Pickering: Oh, I think so. I think there were a number of cases where sales in the neighborhood of ten billion dollars were smoothed, effected, and perhaps greased by the people I hired. I hired a man in Australia who had been eight times a member of the cabinet, knew the prime minister personally, was kind of the [Robert] Bob [J.S.] Dole of Australia, and knew the head of the board of the airline. And when it came to a very large sale in Australia, he was absolutely fundamental. And he did similar things when we had problems with projects that we were engaged in—partly our fault—and be able to find ways through the thicket that always grows up when you get those kinds of questions in mind and we weren't performing as we should have been.

But I found a remarkable number of people, some from inside Boeing, some from my own personal experience, and some through the operation of a headhunter. It was an interesting conglomeration. Perhaps our most successful guy was in Russia, who was a Russian engineer who I had met when I was in Russia, years before I got to Boeing, and who turned out to have worked in the States five to seven years and then come back to Russia. And I said to Boeing, "Look, I can find people who are better placed politically than this guy but I can't find anyone I would trust more." I had worked with him by then. And I said, "I can help make the political bridges," and he did brilliantly and he understood exactly how the politics should work and he got to know people. He briefed President [Vladimir V.] Putin five or six times in his career.

Q: And the objective here was to—

Pickering: To do two things, essentially. To assist and help Boeing in sales and marketing, but also to help globalize Boeing, which meant that we spent a lot of time and a lot of effort thinking about how Boeing's footprint in the country could be made more effective and made more useful—both to save money, second to harvest ideas, and thirdly to give us a stake in that country's vision of the company. So when the government, which had a lot of influence on things like purchases—particularly commercial airplane purchases—looked at it, they would say, "In effect we're really buying airplanes that are in large measure made by our people." So this was an interesting thing and one of the things that my Russian friend did is we started off in 1997, before I joined, with a hundred and fifty engineers designing airplanes for Boeing. Within five years, we had fifteen hundred.

Q: I'm sorry. Did you say engineers?

Pickering: Engineers.

Q: Engineers.

Pickering: Russian engineers. [Laughs] Men and women.

Q: There's something in the back of my mind—I can't call it up—about some scandal involving Boeing.

Pickering: Oh, there were a number. There was a huge scandal when I was there when Boeing hired a former [U.S.] Air Force procurement officer, a woman, gave her a job that the lawyers told them did not conflict. And that was true. But the history of her hiring later came out that she had failed to recuse herself when she approached Boeing, as she had done with Lockheed [Martin] and Northrop Grumman [Corporation], and continued to make decisions on Boeing contracts. And that the Boeing guy who did this, who was the chief financial officer, was really not engaged in personnel, and probably shouldn't have been there, colluded with her in a chronology when this became public that, in effect, was not true. And both went to jail and Boeing paid a very substantial fine.

Q: Why was your association with Boeing ended in 2005?

Pickering: I had worked for Boeing for five and a half years. I had felt by then I had given it everything that I could. I had felt then that Boeing ought to try to find someone new, possibly from inside the company, to go on and take it further and that someone from inside the company could be more helpful than I could in breaking down some of the internal barriers to this kind of operation, which still were prevalent as I left. I was able to gnaw away at plenty of them but it needed someone else. And subsequently, I've been succeeded by two people, both from inside, and the present guy—I still consult for Boeing, so I work closely with—has done a brilliant job.

Q: Okay. Now, apart from that association, after you left the government in 2000, you had some association you alluded to before with the Eurasia Foundation?

Pickering: Yes. I was president of the Eurasia Foundation from beginning of December 1996 until April of 1997, when I went back in the State Department.

Q: Okay. And how did that come about?

Pickering: I was asked when I was in Moscow, when it was clear that I was going to retire, by the search committee, which was looking for a president for the Eurasia Foundation, if I'd consider it. And I said yes, I would consider it.

Q: And that accounts for that short period of time you were out of the government—

Pickering: That's right—

Q: —before you were permanently out of the government?

Pickering: Yes.

Q: Right. And at some point—as we get into the international activities of the Carnegie Corporation, let me know if there was any cooperation or collusion or what have you, between

anything that Carnegie did and Eurasia did. You were out of the Eurasia Foundation by the ‘90s—

Pickering: Yes. I can’t remember, in the three months I was there, whether there was or not. [Laughs] I don’t believe there was.

Q: Okay. No grant from the Carnegie Corporation to the Eurasia Foundation—

Pickering: Not that I—

Q: —or anything of that sort?

Pickering: —would have recalled. This is the first time I ever contemplated that. Yes.

Q: Okay.

Pickering: The distance between the two was the distance between ‘97 and 2003, so it was a six-year gap.

Q: Now, how did you come to join the Carnegie board in 2003?

Pickering: Vartan Gregorian called me perhaps in 2002 and said, would I consider it? And I said, “Vartan, I’m up to my ears. I can’t take on anything more.” But he kept calling me. Vartan

doesn't give up easily. So finally, by whenever it was in 2003—and I don't remember when it was—I assented to come aboard.

Q: Had you known him? You obviously had known him.

Pickering: I had known of Vartan. We may have met in passing. But I can't recall any specific instance when we had really sat down and chatted or done anything together extensively.

Q: By the way, I think I neglected to put on the record at the beginning what your current position is.

Pickering: Yes. In terms of my working position, I'm vice chairman of Hills & Company, which is an international consulting firm here in Washington.

Q: Is that with Carla [A.] Hills?

Pickering: Yes. Carla runs the company. She's the chairman and I work with Carla here.

[Interruption]

Comment [RIS1]: Check whether this should be caps lock

Q: At that time in 2003 when you joined the Carnegie board, apart from your brief stint with the Eurasia Foundation for three months, had you been involved in the world of philanthropy at all?

Pickering: No, not in the sense that—I was engaged in the donor side. When I retired from the State Department and began in Boeing I associated myself or re-associated myself with a number of institutions, or I maintained my relationship with a number of institutions, that were essentially in the think tank world, which were in fact the beneficiaries or the victims, depending upon your view, of the philanthropic establishment in the United States. And got involved in their search for money and what could be done. I did this principally because I thought, one, Boeing ought to have the connection with them. Two, I ought to have the connection to maintain my currency in foreign affairs and things that we're doing.

So by the time I left Boeing, I had maybe fifty such connections of not-for-profit organizations, many of which I continue to this day and some of which have changed. Some have ended and some have continued. I was for a time—in fact, I finished my second term and ended that engaged with a for-profit board, which I was reluctant to do, very reluctant to do, for a Russian company. But I did in the end, in large measure because an old and close and valued friend of mine was their general manager in the U.S. They had bought eleven plants in the U.S. They were a pipe company. And I ended my association with them in June.

Q: Of?

Pickering: This year, 2012.

Q: Right, right. But—

Pickering: And so, when I went to them—

Q: To Carnegie?

Pickering: —to the Russian pipe company, I told them they should get more involved in eleemosynary activity and they did. And I, in fact—I had no secret about it—I used the income from this company over the six years that I was engaged with it, I put it all in a charity account. So I use it myself to support activities that I'm engaged in, that I like, and that I think deserve that kind of help.

Q: Like many companies, did Boeing have a foundation?

Pickering: Yes. Boeing had several outlets. Boeing had a foundation which was founded in the neighborhood of between forty and fifty million dollars a year. That foundation had—and still has, I think—two priorities, health and education, and a third priority of a broader range of activities in cities where Boeing is physically present in a large scale. So that they take on, in a sense, responsibilities for being good citizens in the cities where they work and as a result can give to a larger amount of activities. Then there were other outlets. The business units of Boeing, which were originally commercial aircraft, defense, and space—now defense and space have been combined—as part of their sales promotion activities, made funding available to worthy, charitable and other kinds of activities.

Boeing also had ways, particularly in the delivery of new aircraft, in bringing in to foreign countries charity goods often donated either by their employees or by others. They had a very large employee fund, which provided this kind of assistance. And then I had a part of my budget assigned to these kinds of activities. So Boeing had a wide variety of spigots, so-called, that were used to develop corporate social responsibility, community relations, and so on.

Q: Right. By the way, I noticed, I think it was in yesterday's *[New York] Times* or the day before, Boeing is doing very well.

Pickering: Boeing had a very good quarter, a quarter above expectations, which is always nice if you own Boeing stock.

[Laughter]

Q: I don't even know if I own Boeing stock.

Pickering: [Laughs]

Q: But of course, that's what George Romney—not George Romney—

Pickering: [laughs] [W.] Mitt Romney says!

[Laughter]

Q: That's what he says.

Pickering: [imitates Romney] I don't know what I own but I don't want to know.

[Laughter]

Q: That's right. When Vartan Gregorian approached you as he did and asked you to come on board, he wasn't doing it because of your reputation, embryonic as it was then, at Boeing. It was because of who you had been for decades.

Pickering: No, he had made it clear that he wanted someone who could be an opinion and perhaps a voice inside the board on issues of foreign affairs in which the Carnegie Corporation was deeply engaged in funding.

Q: Right. And you joined the board. Can you give me some idea of people who were on the board who were interested in the areas that you were particularly equipped to deal with?

Pickering: [Samuel] Sam [A.] Nunn [Jr.] was. The former governor of North Carolina—and I should remember his name. Names go when you're my age.

Q: [James] Jim [B.] Hunt?

Pickering: Jim Hunt, yes. Jim Hunt. They were very interested. [Thomas] Tom [H.] Kean from New Jersey, former governor. Vartan himself, immensely interested. And often Vartan would ask—and sometimes without asking I would volunteer—my opinions [laughs] on things that were going on that were either touched on by our activities or should have been touched on by our activities. And often Vartan and I would have a colloquy about things that he was particularly interested in as well. So there was a lot of opportunity on the board to talk about those things and to be helpful, I thought, in terms of giving a perspective on what was happening to the board itself, and others talked about other issues.

But I was not, in the board, solely interested in the international relations piece. The education piece was fascinating. My wife, who's since died, was a librarian and I had a long interest in her interest in libraries, their role and place in modern life and what they could do and how, in fact, the technological revolution was affecting it. We spent some time, from time to time, on technology change and what was happening in those areas and how and in what way it could be fit into the work of the Carnegie Corporation. So it was for someone—and I think all of us had inquiring minds and interests beyond our own field—a remarkably great educational opportunity. And one of my mottos in the Foreign Service and something I used to tell my colleagues when they asked for my opinion was that a day when you don't learn something new is really a day wasted. And the Carnegie boards were always a day when I could learn something new. It was very important.

Q: So it was certainly a two-way street.

Pickering: It may have been but I mean, I don't make judgments on that. [Laughs] My blather seemed to have been acceptable. [Laughs]

Q: What was your commitment as a board member? I mean, how often did you meet?

Pickering: Well, I think we met, what, six times a year, maybe, or more? Maybe four? And I made it a point to be in New York. I missed very few meetings. I may have missed some because of business because it was impossible, obviously, to be there a hundred percent of the time. Although when I worked with Boeing, board attendance using a Boeing airplane was always a possibility for me. So I could fit that in. And board attendance usually went from fairly early in the morning—I was on the audit committee, so I would go often early to read in, go up on a six o'clock plane, and just about shortly after lunch—and often I had meetings here in the afternoon—I might pull away a few minutes early. But generally speaking, that was the pattern.

Q: By the way, who was chair? Was Tom Kean or Helene [L.] Kaplan—

Pickering: Helene first and then Tom. And I can't remember whether it was anybody before Helene but I don't think so.

Q: Okay. As chair?

Pickering: Chair.

Q: Right, right. And who would you say—either who determined or what determined the agenda?

Pickering: My sense was that Vartan and his staff—I can't believe Vartan didn't have an absolutely salient role in this. [Laughs] Perhaps talking with the chairman but I was never involved in those discussions. But we always had a very strong agenda. There were always good presentations from staff members for us to digest and work over and often an outsider of significance would come in and make presentations at board meetings on things that they were particularly focused on. Sometimes they were grantees and sometimes just distinguished in their fields.

Q: Do you recall any staff members—when you were on the board, would you have much contact with staff?

Pickering: Yes, we would. And often, conversations aside the board meetings. Often they were people we knew. Often they were as a result of their presentations. But I was always particularly impressed with the staff and there were, at times, meetings where I would meet staff members who were attending meetings that I was attending in a different context.

Q: In terms of the programs that they were working on when you came, do you recall any discussion on the board as well? You know, "This is an area we have to stay in for the rest of our lives," or "This is an area we have to get out"—

Pickering: Yes, I think we had discussions from time to time—Vartan made sure we did—to take a look at the range and scope of activities and what was being done. There was a strong effort, and I think a reasonable one, to stay faithful to the original subject matter that came out of [Andrew] Carnegie's original desires, which are in education and associated kinds of activities. And that was important and I think it was significant for the corporation to have a very strong, particularly domestic footing.

But we did some overseas work on education, particularly in Africa, particularly in libraries, particularly with the few English-speaking universities. There was a very strong international component, particularly in things like nonproliferation of nuclear weapons and particularly in questions having to deal with Islam and change and understanding in the Islamic world. Those were not the only areas, but they happen to be areas that were, I think, particularly heavily focused on. The Islam piece came also quite intensively as a result of September 11.

Q: Well, I was going to ask you about that. Of course, you came on a couple of years after September 11.

Pickering: A year or maybe a year and a half.

Q: Have you any idea or did you have any sense of whether the events of September 11 and subsequent movement into Afghanistan and Iraq, which is later, had impact on the program of the Carnegie Corporation?

Pickering: I can't tell you about any major shift and change because if it had taken place, it had taken place before I got there. But it continued. That's all I could probably add to that.

Q: And in terms of what's called International Peace and Security, the program there, this has several different components. As a board member, were you mindful, would you say, of the different components of the program, or it didn't matter whether it was called this or that?

Pickering: I was mindful of the fact that they had attempted to work and focus in various compartments and that had made sense to me. We talked about some of that focus from time to time and things that might be worth looking at more intensively or less intensively. All of that, I think, was part of the board discussion. I think that in the smaller grant area, over which Vartan had significant authority on his own as result of board delegation years ago, there was a wider scope for worthy projects [laughs] that didn't necessarily easily fit in to the major grantmaking compartments. But I thought it was a value of the organization that it was not so rigidly organized, that if some worthy project or idea came along and was within the range that Vartan had scope to fund, he would do it. And I admired him for doing it.

The board did not spend a huge amount of time talking about "the grants" per se, as they came along. There was a lot of information available. I think we had a great deal of faith and trust of Vartan and in the staff of the organization. But Vartan made sure that the principal programs and the principal thrusts of the principal programs were part of what we would call the meat and potatoes of the board discussion. And the board discussion would spend so much time on

international and so much time on the domestic programs and that was pretty well allocated and, I thought, fairly balanced.

Q: And Vartan himself. Would you say there are certain qualities of him that he brings to a job like foundation head that are uncommon?

Pickering: I haven't dealt with a lot of foundation heads but I think Vartan [laughs] is himself, by definition, uncommon. [Laughs]

Q: Right. But how does that show itself?

Pickering: He's a person of enormous intellectual breadth and interest. I think he's wise about managing. He understands ethics and confusion and confrontation and all of those messy things and has found an extremely good way of operating his own organization to minimize that kind of thing. So rarely, if ever, did we have the kind of [laughs] unfortunate surprises that sometimes boards get faced with when the organization begins to come apart at the seams. There was never any of that. I think he had the admiration and love of the staff. He looked after the staff, I think, well. He tended to attract good people to come and he used them well. I think he had high confidence in what he was doing but was always willing and open to have conversations about it and to have the board discuss it or have private discussions, if you wanted to, with him about things, and he sought that out. I thought he had interesting things to say. He was enormously active. He let us know what he was doing and where he was doing it and how he was doing it and what he was engaged in, I think not through purposes of self-promotion so much as,

basically, he wanted the board to be sure that they know that he was working certainly thirty-six hours a day, ten days a week. [Laughs] The luster and distinction that Vartan brought to the board was not one of self-promotion, but of self-achievement.

Q: Sounds like he could've been an ambassador somewhere.

Pickering: Well, I thought he was a consummate diplomat.

Q: [Laughs]

Pickering: It made a great deal of sense.

[Laughter]

Q: In your time there—that was eight years—you don't recall any crisis on the board of any kind?

Pickering: No. No, I don't.

Q: No.

Pickering: Maybe we should have, but we didn't—

Q: No no no, I just—

Pickering: We didn't have crises. That was what I meant when I said I thought his management style and his capabilities and his alertness to the potential for that, I think, made it—I suppose there were crises. I can't imagine there were not. But they were not crises that he had to bring to the board or felt it necessary to bring to the board.

Q: Carnegie is what is known as a non-operating foundation, isn't that correct?

Pickering: It does some operational things in a sense that it will work closely with granters. For example, Vartan was down here not too long ago with a couple of other members of the staff to take a look at whether we could find a way to pull together the Washington community on the problem of Pakistan, something I've been interested in. And in fact, Carnegie has just funded something for the Century Foundation—which I had suggested to Century to take a look at and for my sins I've become the putative chairman of—to take a look at Pakistan, its role in the world and its relations now and in the future with the major players in the region. But Vartan was down, chaired the meeting. We brought together much of the Washington community and the idea was to set up a series of regular meetings, which we will have, among the people interested in Washington in Pakistan, government and non-government, to talk over Pakistan-related issues. He played a very important role in bringing Americans and North Koreans together at various times, getting talks started and then once we had talks started, making the Foundation available or the Corporation available as a locus for meetings and as a place where perhaps they could play some tempering role through their staff on where things were going.

Q: But when I speak of it as a non-operating foundation, you of course are familiar with the activities of everything from [Bill & Melinda] Gates [Foundation], to Google [.org], to [Paul D.] Bono [Hewson], to Angelina Jolie [Voight] or what have you. It's a whole mix. I mean, the one term "philanthropy" doesn't really do it all justice. As far as you're concerned, having served on the board for eight years, is Carnegie viable as a perpetual non-operating foundation?

Pickering: Yes, probably. I think there's a big niche for Carnegie and I think it would require substantial, very persuasive reasons, other than the proclivities of a particular head of Carnegie, to move out of that mold, to change the nature. There would have to be, in my view, very substantial reasons, in part because its role as a non-operating foundation puts it in a position to be certainly highly focused on its funding activities, highly focused on how to do those well, highly focused on how to look at projects and possibilities very well. Aside from the fact that the great bulk of its money goes into these fairly clearly defined compartments that it works in, it's still available for other things and it's nice to know that you've got a foundation that manages money well and that is out there and available and that if you have a reasonable idea and it's not too far afield from what they do, you'll get a hearing.

Q: Actually, you mentioned you were on the audit committee. What did that involve?

[Interruption]

Pickering: The audit committee met on a regular basis and did the usual things an audit committee does—heard from the auditors, took a look at the audit, asked a lot of questions how the auditors saw the Corporation and where they saw it going, how to handle its money, whether there were any conflicts, whether there were any errors of administrative responsibility and so on. It was a committee that met in confidence that things were being done well and the auditors tended to reassure us. When an issue came up about which we had a question, they were ready to give us answers, and the staff that handled, in fact, the movement and management of the money seemed to be quite on top of it.

Q: Never encounter any problems?

Pickering: No. Not that I recall.

Q: Was that the only committee that you served?

Pickering: That was the only committee I served on, yes. I went to other committee meetings which were open. Most of them were open, anyway, so I took advantage of the time when I was there. And sometimes committee meetings were a little bit indistinguishable from board meetings, [laughs] so that says—[laughs]

Q: During those eight years that you were on the board, were you approached to serve, or did you entertain serving, on any other foundation boards?

Pickering: I don't think so. I don't think I was ever approached and as far as I can tell, none of the other things that I served on were foundations of a similar character.

Q: Andrew Carnegie—had you ever given a moment's thought to Andrew Carnegie before you joined?

Pickering: Not before I joined. Well, I had. I mean, my wife's whole library experience was shaped by the Carnegie movement. After all, the proliferation of libraries in the United States and around the world was something that he was remarkably influential in seeing take place. Not uniquely, but certainly you went to small towns all over the United States and there was the Carnegie library, quite a distinguished building. But it opened the door. And I loved libraries. As a kid, I found the kids' library but I quickly migrated, in my small town in suburban New Jersey, upstairs. It was the old Presbyterian church and so the basement had the kids', but I got tired of the kids' books very early. My aunt's sister, who lived in town, was the librarian and she allowed me to wander upstairs and I thought that was terrific. And I got very interested in books and in reading and wandering around the library. So I always had loved libraries.

Q: Is that when you vowed to marry a librarian?

Pickering: No, I had no idea that I would ever get near a librarian.

[Laughter]

Pickering: And she didn't either because we met in graduate school. After our first or second assignment, she said, "You know, I like reading and books and the library, and I want to work and have something useful to do." And I said, "Sure." So she then started to take courses here at Catholic University [of America], which is a good library school. And I think over a space of six or eight years, she got her degree and then she worked while we were here in town at the Fairfax County [Virginia] library system.

Q: And while you were abroad all those many years, did she find her way to local libraries?

Pickering: She did, and made contacts, but that wasn't the only thing she did. I mean, she was very interested in U.S. foreign policy and foreign affairs. She was in the Foreign Service before I was.

Q: Oh, really?

Pickering: Yes. She was in USIS [United States Information Service].

Q: Right. You met at Tufts [University]?

Pickering: We met at Fletcher [School of Law and Diplomacy], yes.

Q: At the Fletcher school? So you associated Carnegie with libraries, for sure.

Pickering: Yes, I did, sure.

Q: Did you associate him with—or come to associate him—with the cause of international peace?

Pickering: Yes, very much so. Of course. Well, I'd—Carnegie Endowment [for International Peace], the International Court of Justice, and all kinds of things that, one way or another, his mark, his touch, had been put on. So of course.

Q: His touch where?

Pickering: He had put his touch on all kinds of things that, one way or another, promoted international cooperation and the search for peace and all of those things.

Q: His touch and his wallet.

Pickering: His wallet. That's his touch.

[Laughter]

Pickering: The Midas touch. The magic touch. [Laughs]

Q: It's been pointed out to me by Carnegie that the money that he [laughs] gave when he created the Carnegie Corporation, and maybe with the Carnegie Endowment, was a sixth of the federal budget or something of that sort.

Pickering: It was. It was something quite enormous.

Q: A tremendous amount of money.

Pickering: And it's grown, with good stewardship. You can't imagine. You couldn't imagine in that day what the Carnegie Corporation would have in its bank account. [Laughs]

Q: Has it taken a hit in recent times?

Pickering: Well, it took a hit for a while in 2008. They're remarkably well-served by a wonderful woman, who happened to be a graduate of Bowdoin College, where I went, who has done their investing [D. Ellen Shuman]. And I think she's done a fantastic job. There was one year, I think, where we slowed down a bit, but she's been able to take advantage indeed of how to make money on a slowdown.

Q: The son of my niece—I don't know what you call that—

Pickering: [Laughs] The son of your niece. [Laughs]

Q: He's starting at Bowdoin in the fall.

Pickering: Is he? Wonderful, terrific.

Q: You had a good experience there?

Pickering: Oh, I loved it, yes. It was great.

Q: Perhaps this can't be answered, but does Andrew Carnegie—Andrew Carnegie and his life—does it have a felt presence even now at the Carnegie Corporation?

Pickering: Sure. Sure he does. And I think one of the things Vartan does is he reminds us of this. He takes a look at the hundredth anniversary, but before—the things that Carnegie was doing and saying and how they relate to what the Corporation is doing. So Vartan, with his historical hat on, I think, was in some ways a major instrument in keeping the Carnegie image and ideas alive. He thought it was important and I agreed with him.

Q: Right. Carnegie, as a non-operating foundation, provides funds to applicants who represent all sorts of endeavors in the foundation's field of interest and those applicants then go out and they do the work, right?

Pickering: Right.

Q: How much, would you say, looking at the whole program of the foundation, is inclined toward the idea of spending money to influence public policy, as opposed to spending money just to enhance knowledge?

Pickering: [Laughs] That's a very interesting and difficult question, the answer to which is fraught with political questions, too. My sense is that to be effective in influencing public policy, you have to have a way of enhancing and diffusing knowledge. That good public policy is not made on the basis of importunings and public advertisements, so much as it is made in influencing policymakers about the critical facts and the critical assessments that relate to the challenges and approaches to the challenges they're dealing with. So I would say the two are inseparable but that the basis has to be, in that way, the production of knowledge, ideas, assessments and suggestions that are well-grounded. Otherwise, it would appear that you're spending money [laughs] to entertain politicians or produce ads or to create influence groups, which is not what Carnegie does.

I would be, therefore, very cautious in saying that the primary purpose is to influence policy. A primary result of their work is that it has an impact on policy. And in the fields in which they're engaged there is no question at all that in education, the search has been for new and effective paradigms in making American education, at the primary and secondary levels in particular, more effective, more influential, more useful, more widespread and more successful.

Q: True in foreign affairs as well?

Pickering: In foreign affairs as well. What are the new and better ideas in how to deal with proliferation of nuclear weapons, and how do you get at those? Are there negotiating opportunities there? In the world of Islam is there way to have a more effective dialogue, understanding what Islam is about? What are the differences between the wild men [laughs] and the rest of the world that professes Islam—much the same as there are among Christians or Jews? You know, these are things that I think are all worthy. I think that you cannot adjure the notion that public policy, which is to carry the load for making change effective in many cases but not uniquely so, ought not to be, in a sense, changed as the result of the work of a great foundation.

Q: Did you have contact as a board member with Stephen [J.] Del Rosso [Jr.]?

Pickering: Sure. I worked very closely with Stephen. Stephen was a Foreign Service officer.

Q: Right, he was. And also a graduate of Fletcher.

Pickering: Yes.

Q: You know, he likes to bandy around this term “trace elements.” You ever heard him use that?

Pickering: No.

Q: He's talking about how you fund this scholarship or that scholarship and then sometimes you see trace elements of that work in some State Department paper or advocacy or Defense Department or something, where people, whether they be a committee staff member on the [Capitol] Hill or a deputy to an assistant secretary or something, doesn't even know where that—

Pickering: —piece came from, no.

Q: —chain began!

Pickering: It's true. I think that the analogy is a reasonable one. I think the conclusion is a reasonable one. Having worked in foreign policy, there were many ideas that came from outside the government, or they went inside and outside. Part of it began with one set of ideas, migrated out, somebody did some more work and looked at it and modified it and it came back and then was discussed back and forth. And then it was adopted inside the government in a way that would help it deal with whatever problem or issue of the moment required this kind of an effort toward solution. So, I agree. I think that, you know, victory has many fathers [laughs]—

Q: Right.

[Laughter]

Pickering: —is also true. And anybody who pretends to take full credit for a unique idea in foreign policy is probably lying. [Laughs] We all stand on the back of everybody else here.

Q: Right. Right, right. Some of which, I mean—and I don't—

Pickering: And some of it is, inside the government; the wit and wisdom to know when the time is right and where all the pieces are. And then secondly, the ability conceptually to fit those into a framework that can be sold to the political masters as meeting their needs and dealing with interests of the U.S.

Q: Carnegie, it's certainly one of the most prestigious American foundations.

Pickering: It is, yes.

Q: It's not one of the largest, though, is it, really?

Pickering: I don't know. I wouldn't think it is.

Q: No. I think it's barely in the top fifty in terms of money.

Pickering: Yes.

Q: But certainly one hears about it as much as one hears about any American foundation.

Pickering: Well, I think its name is solid. Its work has generally been successful. So it is seen as a kind of bellwether, if you like, or the *Good Housekeeping* Seal of Approval-type foundation that can give both an impetus to and, I think, a prestige to a project.

Q: When we resume today, I'd like to talk about some of the specific areas that they had worked on in your time.

Pickering: Sure.

Q: Their anti-nuclear proliferation work, the Responsibility to Protect work.

Pickering: I'd be happy to do it. And I have to tell you that, like a lot of other people of my age, certainly in the Foreign Service, I learned that when I went from one place to another, everything in the former place got put back into some bin somewhere in the far reaches of my mind so I could focus—

Q: [Laughs]

Pickering: —my full attention on the new.

Q: [Laughs]

Pickering: Which is a polite way of saying that my memory isn't what I would have hoped it would be but—[laughs]

Q: Well, I hope your memory is good enough that you'll allow me to—

Pickering: But you can stimulate it. You're doing a great job. [Laughs]

Q: —to inquire into your time particularly as ambassador to the Russian Federation after the Soviet Union broke up and where you think Russia is today.

Pickering: I'd be happy to do that, yes.

[END OF SESSION]

3PM | Session #2

Interviewee: Thomas R. Pickering | Location: Washington, D.C.

Interviewer: Myron A. Farber | Date: July 27, 2012

Q: This is Myron Farber continuing the interview with Thomas Pickering in Washington for Columbia's oral history of the Carnegie Corporation of New York. This is session two. Mr. Pickering, [William] Bill [H.] Gates made a remark once that if you make a mistake in business the marketplace is going to kick you around. And that it was [laughs] much more difficult in philanthropy to get a handle on whether you've got things right.

Pickering: Hmm, yes.

Q: My question to you is, have you any sense of how one measures success or failure in programs in philanthropy, including the Carnegie Corporation or anything like it?

Pickering: Yes, it's measuring on the basis of judgments about the achievements that have come out of a particular investment. The primary judgment base would be, basically, the quality of reports or other material produced in research. The second order of judgment, but very important, would be the influence or impact on policy making or popular public attitudes or on the resolution of particular problems. And I think that's important. Tertiary, but also very important, is the degree to which it changes what one would call the field of common knowledge [laughs]—the underlying assumptions, the basic accepted wisdom of the masses, if you can put it that way. Or at least those who are, in a major way, influential in acting with and for the public.

Q: Or paying attention.

Pickering: Or paying attention. Yes, exactly. And those are all hard but not impossible. They are not highly objective. They tend to reflect a lot of subjective treatment. Subjectivity can be palliated by a diversity of respondents to a series of questions or interviews with respect to a particular project.

Q: Well, do you recall, in fact, this ever coming up in board discussions as to whether something was working out or not working out?

Pickering: It did in a couple of ways. It did when, in fact, people, including yours truly, questioned some of the projects and their relevance, whether we were merely funding a reinvention of ten-year-old ideas on the cycle of change. Whether, in fact, in particular, education had been too much the subject of whimsy, individual influence, latest fad, a kind of fashion preoccupation—one could put it that way. I don't think that we undertook—and maybe it would have been a better idea to say there ought to be a small part of Carnegie that after a particular period of time looks and relooks, against my three benchmarks or somebody else's better three benchmarks, at the accomplishments of the board through the operation of the program, if I could put it that way.

Q: They claim to do that though, did they not?

Pickering: I don't know. That doesn't ring a bell with me. It was not something that I remember as being a major set of activities on the part of the board.

Q: Right.

Pickering: But I think it's a very important piece. I think the evaluation of success or failure is useful. There were a significant number of opportunities that were presented to the board to, in fact, talk about the success of a particular project, its accomplishment. So there wasn't an effort to move away. Was there an ongoing process that did this regularly and against a set of stated benchmarks and reported in numerical terms and things like that? No. I didn't see it if it was.

Q: Okay. Let me talk about a few of the things that Carnegie was engaged in during your time. You mentioned the Islam Initiative this morning. Do you have a good sense of what that entailed and whether that was useful? I think they're sort of moving away from their original concept.

Pickering: I think they are and I think to some extent, in my view, there was evidence of a struggle in coming to grips with it. And while I didn't sit down and examine in great detail the various project proposals that fit within that compartment, my sense was that, like a lot of other people, there was competition to do projects like this. There was a willingness to be pretty diffuse and pretty broad in bringing projects in under that rubric. There was a certain attraction, as it were, for a lot of people with dialogue and with support for dialogue.

Q: There were no Muslims on the board were there?

Pickering: Not that I recognized, no.

Q: Right.

Pickering: Aside from Vartan and me.

[Laughter]

Pickering: We all spent a lot of our lives around Muslims, so I suppose that, not being of the faith but sometimes embraced by the faith, we are halfway there. [Laughs]

Q: Let me ask you about something, again, that you mentioned this morning that sometimes gets overlooked, and that is the work in Africa, the libraries that have been supported in Africa. Without having in my hand here the appropriate measurement of success, what is your sense that that has been a success and is useful?

Pickering: They certainly spoke about it in ways that could note satisfaction and success with the project. None of us went to the field and looked at it or did an audit or, in fact, I think, raise serious questions. The point being that libraries are a very useful way to put at the service of the community significant resources, intellectual resources, and that if you put it out there, they will come. And one had a sense that that paradigm was in operation. But the measure, I think, of

libraries, I suppose, is in large measure how useful the public feels it is and what use they make of it.

Q: Of course Dr. Gregorian had been head of the New York Public Library.

Pickering: He was a great librarian. [Laughs]

Q: That's right.

Pickering: So he was not somebody who was kind of blindsided by the field.

Q: He was standing on the shoulders of Andrew Carnegie in a way.

Pickering: He was, well, [laughs] he and Andrew were standing side by side.

[Laughter]

Q: That's probably as he would put it.

Pickering: He'd like to put it maybe.

[Laughter]

Pickering: Or he'd want me to put it that way.

Q: [Laughs] How about the work in higher education in Africa. Had you some sense of that?

Pickering: I did and I had my qualms, particularly about Nigeria, and I think in a sense we backed off a little bit from too deep an investment in Nigeria in large measure because of some unreliability in the handling of finances and some concern that Nigerian standards of administration were not maybe sufficiently robust to be able to handle the things we were talking about. I also felt some sense of concern—but there was a limitation on the Carnegie money to work within the Commonwealth—on the fact that we ignored francophone and lusophone Africa fairly studiously. But I think there were maybe charter-type responsibilities for that.

I think overall, they did make a positive impression in the university work. They looked and struggled with the ideas as to how and in what way technology, particularly information technology, could speed closing the gap in African universities. And there was a real struggle with that. There are a lot of different and very unique and interesting ideas—satellite downlink, wideband communications access for university students and the facility and everything else—as a way of trying to leap over the lack of reference books in the library and generally inadequate reading materials.

Q: Was your view with regard to Nigeria colored at all by the fact that you had been an ambassador there between—

Pickering: No, no. It was informed by the fact that I had—

[Laughter]

Pickering: —been ambassador there. It wasn't colored at all!

Q: I withdraw the question.

[Laughter]

Pickering. You had been ambassador there in 1981 to '83. That's a long time ago.

Pickering: Sure. And things have gotten worse, not better, because I stay in touch with Nigerian things.

Q: Even unto this time?

Pickering: Even unto this day. I wouldn't proclaim myself the world's living expert on Nigeria by any means but I do stay in touch with people who follow Nigerian affairs fairly closely and who I see fairly frequently.

Q: You mentioned this morning in passing, I believe, The Century Foundation.

Pickering: Yes.

Q: Were you referring to the report on Afghanistan?

Pickering: Well, that I co-chaired with the former Algerian foreign minister. And so, coming out of that, it became readily apparent when we did that report that the problem was much more Pakistan than it was Afghanistan and that we had a misconception and a misfocused approach in large measure because we had all of our investment in Afghanistan for reasons having to do with September 11 and al-Qaeda. But the real issue for the United States and its longer-term interests was not Afghanistan but Pakistan. And so to some extent, I got the impression that if we were spending any more money in the area we ought to be taking a hard look at Pakistan. When I began that look after the report came out, I think in March of 2011, it was to say there's a really important follow-on job but nobody seems to be focused on it right now. So that's just beginning. We had a conference call this morning on the early stages of the process of doing the Pakistan report, which Carnegie has agreed to fund.

Q: Did they fund the Afghanistan report?

Pickering: A piece of it, yes, along with the Rockefeller Brothers [Fund].

Q: Right. Well, since you mentioned that, let me ask you: have you any sense of whether it's productive to partner with other foundations?

Pickering: Yes, I do. I think it makes sense.

Q: But there aren't that many, are there?

Pickering: [Laughs]

Q: Well, I mean in the area of, let's say—

Pickering: Is marriage a good thing? Yes. But there aren't enough women to go around.

Q: [Laughs]

Pickering: Okay, I got it.

Q: Well, that's right. But in international affairs, are there that many foundations working today on a scale that Carnegie could work on?

Pickering: Well, I think you've narrowed the question to get an answer: probably not as many as there should be. But I mean, there's some larger and some smaller and some dabbling and some serious. And I don't think that there's a huge paucity of them. I think that some are shifting their targets on a regular basis. I think international had died out but it comes back from time to time, depending upon how the international situation affects the thinking of people who are running these foundations and then their boards. But I think there are enough around, and I've worked on

a number of projects in which there's been multiple sources of funding, and it doesn't seem to hurt. One of the things that I found the most difficult, beginning, say, ten years ago, was the degree to which there was a reluctance to partner because then you were dividing up your capacity to lock in donors maybe exclusively. And as a result, partnering meant that your donor base might be poached on or become a risk or otherwise fall into somebody else's hands. And so there was this narrow, rather nationalist view around each foundation which kept that happening. I didn't feel that that was a problem with Carnegie for the reasons obvious. [Laughs] They don't have a donor problem.

Q: Right, right.

Pickering: They had a donor. But I like the idea of synergy. I like the idea of groups cooperating together. I worked here a few years ago on a report on the future of the United Nations, which Frank [R.] Wolf in the Congress sponsored. And the [U.S.] Institute of Peace was the central management part of it but we had five other Washington institutions, all more private than the Institute of Peace, engaged in the work, from Heritage [Foundation] to Brookings [Institution]. And it was a good effort and we got a good look and we had everybody from [Newton] Newt [L.] Gingrich to yours truly, if I could put myself on the opposite side of most things with Newt. [Laughs] It was co-chaired by George [J.] Mitchell [Jr.], right behind me. George chaired it and I don't think Newt co-chaired it but anyway, everyone from George Mitchell to Newt Gingrich was involved in this thing. And in the end, it worked out really well. It was interesting because I've seen this two or three times with Newt. It was a transformation of Newt from an ideological "can't" to an absolutely deep fascination with problem-solving. And when he got into the

problem-solving mode, he was a lot better [laughs] than he was as a prisoner of ideological "can't."

Q: George Mitchell. He had more success with Ireland than he had with the Middle East.

Pickering: Yes, he did, a great deal more.

Q: So you produced this report for the Century Foundation, partly with Carnegie's help, and it was released in March of 2011, as you say. And you and Lakhdar Brahimi, the former Algerian foreign minister, called for a serious effort at a negotiated political settlement. Now, were you whistling Dixie?

Pickering: No, I mean, the U.S. has embraced its view. Marc Grossman is actively working on it. They aren't doing—one of the things that we said was important was to involve the international community and to try at an early stage to get an international facilitator at work to help bring parties together in a construct, which we thought made more sense than where they are. Or alternatively, because I deal with Marc all the time, maybe Marc is still in a very preliminary stage of what we laid out. [Laughs] But we thought it was very useful at a fairly early stage not only to get the Afghan parties who are going to negotiate engaged, but to get them, in a sense, in an area and in a relationship in which the regional and other outside players who had an interest in the outcome could surround them in a way that they could collectively push the parties in the directions which had to be gone in to make a solution.

Now, this may be facilely dismissing the idea that the Pakistanis would pull in one direction, then the Indians in another, the Chinese and the Russians and the U.S. in another. But we thought the big role the U.S. should play in that negotiation was, in a sense, to play the very significant role among the outside parties in beginning to build a consensus around a lot of the areas where, fundamentally, we thought they agreed. And that our role with the Afghan parties would be very important, clearly, because the Taliban felt they had to talk to us and the Afghan government felt they were dependent upon us. But we also would play a very important role with the Pakistanis. And the Pakistanis had at least the modicum of the beginning of common interest with us in the outcome in Afghanistan. They don't want Afghanistan to be a problem for them. So there were a lot of those things that I think—

Q: I'm sorry, they don't want Afghanistan to be a problem?

Pickering: —Afghanistan to be a problem for them, yes.

Q: They've been supporting the Taliban for some time, have they not?

Pickering: Yes, they have, and in large measure because they feel the Taliban is their best of all possible insurance policies against Afghanistan becoming a problem for them. Particularly, their concern is now heightened by significant Indian presence, and action in Afghanistan by that Indian presence, and by that Indian relationship with the present Afghan government.

Q: Are you suggesting the Pakistanis can be relied upon to do something and stick with it that is a positive—

Pickering: Yes, I mean, when their interest is at stake, of course. They're not any different than anybody else. [Laughs]

Q: What leads you to believe that the Taliban leadership, such as it is a unified force, would have a deep interest in this?

Pickering: Well, because we interviewed eight of them from different factions and they told us that's what they were interested in. And they've since started talking to the United States.

Q: In Qatar?

Pickering: In Qatar.

Q: And that's going on right now?

Pickering: Not now but I mean it probably could be revived. It has its ups and downs.

Q: Right.

Pickering: And in the long run, the Taliban themselves are worried about not winning. And so, at some point, they'll have to find a way to make the best deal they can.

Q: And you can actually envision, rather than just pray for, a stabilized situation in Afghanistan even after United States forces were to leave?

Pickering: Yes, I think maybe particularly after the United States gets out.

Q: The popular view is that they'll be at each other's throats as soon as—

Pickering: They're already at each other's throats. [Laughs] I mean, there are two outcomes after we get out, or three, but one of them is only a process outcome. The process outcome is continued civil war. The other two outcomes are, essentially, that they make a deal or they divide up the country.

Q: But in terms of Carnegie Corporation, they put some money behind you doing this and you're saying, actually, that these kinds of thoughts that were incorporated in the Century Foundation report are making their way into the State Department?

Pickering: Yes, they have.

Q: They have, yes.

Pickering: They were partly there when we started. We stayed in very close touch with the White House. But I think that our report came on a very timely basis. It came within three weeks of the secretary saying, in effect, that she was dropping the previous American position, which was that preconditions should be fulfilled by the Taliban before talking with the United States.

Q: Alright. Let me turn from—

Pickering: So it is, in my view, one of the more successful reports in terms of the thousand-foot shelf of reports that exists in Washington.

Q: You say that as co-author.

Pickering: I do with some pride.

[Laughter]

Q: Okay.

Pickering: And not too much humility.

[Laughter]

Pickering: I was co-chairman, not co-author. I did a lot of the writing but I didn't pretend to hold the pen. [Laughs]

Q: You're familiar with the bicycle principle?

Pickering: Oh, yes, I quote it all the time.

Q: What is the bicycle principle?

Pickering: The bicycle principle is if you're not riding forward, you're falling down, of course. Having ridden a bicycle for a few years.

Q: And that would apply here.

Pickering: Without training wheels.

Q: Right. And that would apply here?

Pickering: It would apply to the Middle East peace process. It doesn't apply here as much because there's a serious effort to move things forward. But the Middle East peace process has been abandoned to the vicissitudes of electoral politics at the moment.

Q: Well, actually, that's true not just in the Middle East peace process but of a lot of important things.

Pickering: No, but there's been a kind of almost four-year abandonment. And on top of an eight-year abandonment, it's not a good thing.

Q: Right, right. Let me turn from one easy case—

Pickering: [Laughs]

Q: —like Afghanistan, to another easy case where Carnegie may have had some involvement, and that's Iran. You wrote an op-ed in the *New York Times* on February 2 of this year.

Pickering: Was the number two in a series of three.

Q: Okay. And how'd you manage to get all that space, then?

Pickering: How did we get all the space?

[Laughter]

Pickering: I don't know.

Q: [Laughs] Were they all—

Pickering: The *New York Times*, in a fit of desperation, had an empty hole on the op-ed page, obviously.

[Laughter]

Q: No.

Pickering: [Laughs]

Q: Now here in this op-ed done with [William] Bill [H.] Luers, what are you really arguing here?

Pickering: We're arguing in the face of what was then a very significant amount of public momentum, perhaps backed up privately, toward the use of military force against Iran for a negotiating process.

Q: And do you think that the Iranians, especially given, let's say, the outcome of the Moscow talks last month, I think it was, are interested in—

Pickering: Oh yes, I do. I think that the Iranians and the United States—the United States and its partners are both asking for too much in return for too little. But that's very much [laughs] the way in which negotiations begin.

Q: Would you say it's a sine qua non of the U.S. position and the European position that Iran should give up any idea it may have of having nuclear weapons?

Pickering: Oh, absolutely. And it's apparently also the Iranian position.

Q: Oh, really?

Pickering: Oh yes.

Q: Of giving up having nuclear weapons?

Pickering: Absolutely.

Q: Why do you say that?

Pickering: Because they have a political-religious decree that says so and because they've never asked for it in a negotiation.

Q: Well, you also point out that the Ayatollah [S. Ali H.] Khamenei, he's a suspicious fellow. He's suspicious!

Pickering: Very suspicious guy. [Laughs]

Q: Right, suspicious of the United States!

Pickering: [Laughs] Almost as suspicious as we are of Iran. [Laughs]

Q: But actually, you point out, he's got some good reason to be suspicious, right?

Pickering: He does, right. Yes, yes.

Q: Is it your understanding—or your belief—that the Iranians are embarked now on producing nuclear weapons?

Pickering: My view—and I think it's the U.S. Intelligence [Community] view—the Iranians are embarked on mastering all of the technologies and all of the material required to produce nuclear weapons but have not made a decision to make nuclear weapons and have said they have no intention of doing so.

Q: And you have some faith in that?

Pickering: All but the last. I think we need to find ways to do everything we can to strengthen that resolve and to do it through a negotiating process.

Q: Do you know the name Kenneth [N.] Waltz?

Pickering: Sure. I think he's out of his mind, but that's—[laughs] I read his piece, yes.

Q: Well, Mrs. Waltz doesn't think so. I mean—

[Laughter]

Pickering: Well, maybe Mrs. Waltz doesn't today, but—

[Laughter]

Pickering: —others of us could give her a good reason to doubt.

Q: Now, in the current issue of *Foreign Affairs Quarterly*—I don't know if they still call it quarterly. It's certainly—

Pickering: *Foreign Affairs* magazine, yes. It's no longer quarterly. It hasn't been quarterly for a long time. It comes six times a year.

Q: He has a piece. Have you seen that piece?

Pickering: Yes.

Q: Essentially, he's saying, "Look, it's not a problem if Iran gets the bomb and that would further stabilize the Middle East."

Pickering: Yes. No, I think, you remember years ago, Mao Tse-Tung said nuclear weapons are splendid, everybody should have one. But even he changed his mind. And everybody who gets a nuclear weapon has two initial inspirations. One is, what are we going to use this goddamned thing for? They don't know. But the second is, let's make sure nobody else ever gets one. And the whole idea of proliferation, which, in fact, has been embraced as an American policy by large numbers of Americans is that the more you have, mathematically, the more chances are that one will be used. And that nuclear use has been the one red line we have adhered to internationally since August 9, 1945 because in the end, use will certainly provoke the potential for even more significant use. And that the weapons are so powerful and so dominating and so destructive that no one sees any possible virtue in having them used. I was in the Senate on Wednesday talking about reducing American nuclear weapons to 900.

Q: General [James E.] Cartwright's in favor of that, isn't he?

Pickering: He was there with me. He's the guy who really put the idea together.

Q: He used to run the—

Pickering: He used to run SAC [Strategic Air Command, renamed U.S. Strategic Command].

Q: Actually, I think he may be, I'm not sure, associated with a group called Global Zero.

Pickering: I am and he is, at least because the commission that produced the report that he played a major role in putting together and what I signed was within the ambit of Global Zero.

Q: And Global Zero, do they get money from Carnegie?

Pickering: I don't believe they do.

Q: I'm not sure. But in any event, let me quote a sentence here from Ken Waltz's piece in *Foreign Affairs*. I mean, *Foreign Affairs* is a responsible publication.

Pickering: I know. I wonder whether they haven't lost their mind. But Richard [N.] Haass tells me he has to print all views, so [laughs] even the lunatic.

Q: Well, let me quote this. Yes, but Waltz has been around for many years.

Pickering: Well, that's alright, I have been too. That doesn't make me sane.

Q: No, but—

Pickering: [Laughs]

Q: And when I say he's been around, I don't just mean he's been hanging around.

Pickering: Yeah, actively around, sure.

Q: I mean, he's been involved in this issue, active in this issue for many years.

Pickering: We all run on our own treadmills. [Laughs]

Q: "Once Iran crosses the nuclear threshold, deterrence will apply, even if the Iranian arsenal is relatively small. No other country in the region will have an incentive to acquire its own nuclear capability, and the current crisis will finally dissipate, leading to a Middle East that is more stable than it is today."

Pickering: The first half is true and the second half is pure bullshit. There is every reason to believe that India got the bomb, as it claims it must have it, because China did, and that Pakistan has it because India has it certainly. So there is, in our view—and the resurgence of interest among the Arab states in so-called peaceful civil nuclear programs is in large measure due to all the publicity surrounding the potential or at least, as you have assumed until this moment, the absolute certainty that Iran has only the objective of making a nuclear weapon. And so we have seen in the past serious interest in Egypt and serious interest in Turkey, in the past three decades, in moving into military nuclear programs and it was with hard effort and, indeed, a lot of work that we dissuaded that from happening. And I feel very confident that if Iran goes, Saudi Arabia already has its bomb picked out in Pakistan and totally paid for.

Q: But you don't think it has to be that way.

Pickering: No, of course not.

Q: I mean, you don't think so from a real—

Pickering: I think it's a great mistake to see it go that way.

Q: Right, but you—

Pickering: And Ken is whistling past some kind of graveyard in this silliness that he just asserts, that nobody will be interested in the rest of the world because our deterrent will work. Well, we haven't yet committed ourselves. One of the things that we can do, even as we struggle against an Iranian bomb, is to begin to think about how we can strengthen the guarantees coming out of our own possession of nuclear weapons should, God forbid, anything like that happens. But there's a great deal of concern in the administration that we do that in a way that never looks like we have given up on the Iranian bomb. And for the moment, therefore, that kind of reassurance isn't being passed. It's a very complicated [laughs] subject.

Q: Right. No, no, no. But the bottom line here is that—

Pickering: Well, I agree with Waltz that our deterrent will certainly operate. [Benjamin] Bibi Netanyahu, even, I think, will admit that. He's concerned the Iranians will hand out bombs like cotton candy to al-Qaeda and Hezbollah and Hamas. Well, I think that's crazy too. I think that the idea that you get a bomb—and you only got one or two—and hand them out to a bunch of wild men who are likely to use them and bring that deterrent down on your head because forensics will tell us where the bomb came from is just absolutely crazy.

Q: Correct me if I go wrong here as I'm prone to do.

Pickering: [Laughs]

Q: Your position, or your thinking, is that, one, Iran doesn't have a nuclear bomb now. Two, they may well not be interested in producing a nuclear weapon. And three, they can be brought into an ambit where assurances can be gotten that they're not doing that.

Pickering: That they won't go for that, that's right. Yes, and that's the only result of a negotiation, if you have a result. And the alternative to that is either adopting the Waltz view—it's simply splendid, let's go ahead and enjoy it, we'll dance around the maypole when it happens because all of these wonderful promises, unbacked up by any experience or history, will become true—or the alternative is we go bomb them, and there we have the great capacity to do two things at once: set them back four years at the maximum and, two, convince them that they've absolutely got to have the bomb because they were attacked.

Q: When certain Israeli intelligence people and others leak stories—

Pickering: [Laughs]

Q: —to the effect that Israel may try to knock out the nuclear facilities—

Pickering: No, it isn't Israeli intelligence people. Three heads of Israeli intelligence organizations, the Mossad, the Shabak, and the Aman, have all said it's crazy to attack Iran. And they have been obviously supported in this by the last head of the Israeli military forces and by the present one.

Q: So are you saying that's just not going to happen?

Pickering: Well, no, I'm saying Bibi can make it happen despite his vocal and public opposition from his intelligence and operational people.

Q: You think that could happen?

Pickering: I mean, I've lived in Israel four years.

Q: You were ambassador there.

Pickering: From ‘85 to ‘89. I think that the Israeli military are still subordinate to civilian authority. And I think it would take quite an earth-shaking development to see that change.

Q: Do you think that Netanyahu could go ahead and do that?

Pickering: Yes.

Q: These talks in Moscow. There were a series of talks in Istanbul and Berlin I think.

Pickering: Yes. And there was one last week too.

Q: Now they seem to be going downhill rather than uphill. I mean, I think that they’ve downgraded the level at which the next talks will take place. Isn’t that right?

Pickering: Yes. I think both sides have a domestic political problem. This president can’t be seen during the period before the election making great concessions to Iran to stop a bomb. And Mr. Khamenei, even if his suspicions were allayed to the point where he was ready to do so, has, in my view, still got some problems in the Iranian body politic from opponents, many on the harder right than he is, in making that kind of a deal right away. So we have to figure out steps and stages as to how to get there. At the moment each side has come in and said, “We’ll give you a rabbit but you’ve got to give us a horse.”

Q: Well, as you say, [President Barack H.] Obama can’t give a horse.

Pickering: That's right. [Laughs]

Q: Certainly not now.

Pickering: And neither can the Iranians. Can we have a horse for a horse? But maybe we've got to start with a rabbit for a rabbit, is what I'm saying. The problem is, the Iranians aren't there either. [Laughs]

Q: The Carnegie Corporation has been involved for years in anti-nuclear proliferation.

Pickering: It has. It's been very careful about Iran. I think you—have you talked to Vartan at all?

Q: Others have.

Pickering: Yes. I think because of Vartan's own background and birth and upbringing, he's been cautious for things that may be overly scrupulous but are probably more right than wrong, in trying to do too much stuff on Iran right out.

Q: Well, but in terms of anti-nuclear proliferation anywhere in the world, this goes back at least to David [A.] Hamburg.

Pickering: Oh, before David, but I remember years ago talking to David about it.

Q: In fact, I would say that was his signature issue.

Pickering: It was, and quite rightly so.

Q: Right. And would you say, having had a closer association with Carnegie for eight years as a board member, that that is an avenue in which the foundation's money is well spent?

Pickering: I believe it is. I can't say that everything that has been done has led to instant success but there is an accumulation of significant work and an accumulation of significant ideas that come out of that work that I think are helpful.

Q: Well, one, for example, is of course the amendments to the legislation in '91 or '92 called the Nunn-Lugar [Cooperative Threat Reduction] legislation.

Pickering: That's right. Although Nunn-Lugar has thousands of fathers—you have to be careful. But the Nunn-Lugar legislation was extremely important and led to a set of programs that I think has made a real contribution, as between us and the Soviet Union, now Russia.

Q: In fact, the New START [Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty] treaty is a sort of son of that, is it not?

Pickering: Well, the New START treaty comes out of a number of traditions. But one of them began back in the Kennedy administration, with the idea that we would move ahead on nuclear disarmament in a serious way. And, of course, the failure to get a comprehensive test ban treaty is the black sheep of that department.

Q: Well, we'd be worse without New START, right?

Pickering: Much worse.

Q: Right. It's sort of stagnating now?

Pickering: No. It's being implemented.

Q: But in terms of carrying it further?

Pickering: Well, this proposal to go to 900 is an effort to move us along the path to the next stage. I think nothing will happen until after our elections.

Q: Right.

Pickering: But then we have another opportunity. I think New START was not only useful in itself but it helped to characterize the reset, which now some people believe is falling into pieces because we don't have an instant follow-on mechanism to move it. And part of it is, obviously,

part of Mr. Putin's difficulty of how does he run a country when, increasingly, people are prepared to go on the streets and tell him he's all wet.

Q: Let me come to that in a moment. The Nuclear Threat Initiative funded, certainly substantially, by Carnegie—was Sam Nunn involved in that also?

Pickering: Well, of course Sam's essentially the manager of that, the intellectual boss of it.

Q: And [Robert E.] Ted Turner [III] was also involved I believe.

Pickering: I think Ted's put some money in it too, yes.

Q: Yes. Then the value of his stock sunk at one point.

Pickering: I'm involved in his initiative. And the value of the stock sunk there but he hung on.

Q: Right. Let me get to Russia. Are you still co-chair of the U.N. Association of the U.S.A.?

Pickering: That has folded into Ted Turner's United Nations Foundation. And so it's kept its name and I'm chairman of a committee—in lieu of the board because the United Nations Foundation board covers both the organizations—that is an advisory committee to the United Nations Foundation board in and for the United Nations Association, to give you complexity made simple.

Q: That's right.

[Laughter]

Q: Before I leave Iran altogether, and North Korea, where the good leader just got married, it appears, or is now showing off his wife—

Pickering: He's courting. I don't know that the marriage ceremony has been yet promised.

Q: Carnegie has put money in these areas—North Korea, Iran—into what's called Track II Diplomacy. And at a talk that you gave this very year, I think, maybe at George Washington University, the moderator let slip that you yourself—

Pickering: [laughs] That's right!

Q: —Tom Pickering—

Pickering: Here I am, yes. The Track II guy. [Laughs]

Q: —was involved in that Track II stuff. Is that right?

Pickering: Yes, sure.

[Interruption]

Q: Now, Carnegie has put money in that over the years. Give me your assessment of how that's gone and whether it's worth it.

Pickering: Our Track II in Iran began in 2001 or '02. I joined it shortly thereafter. It was done under the United Nations Association and it lasted until about 2009, when I think [Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad killed it off. And it produced a number of things. In general terms, it produced a much greater degree of understanding of what was happening internally, on both sides, in the capitals of the other. It produced a draft communiqué, written in the form of the Shanghai communiqué, which reflected the areas of agreement and differences, which both sides had made available to them. And it produced a continuing set of relationships among various players that have been exploited since the demise of the formal Track II to continue those relationships and has led to the op-eds you saw. It's led to a paper, which we hope to produce in September, which attempts to examine the pros and cons of military action without taking a position on it. It will lead to another look at sanctions and their efficacy in terms of dealing with Iran and perhaps some other kinds of activities. But we have regular contacts with both governments on an ongoing basis and we have been talking to the Congress frequently about this. And we recently expanded the initial group, which was essentially former American diplomats and some congresspersons, to begin to include some military and then some individuals who have been part, recently, of the highest levels of the State Department and the Defense Department.

Q: Now, with regard to the North Koreans. They are open to this kind of conversation?

Pickering: The North Korean government has pursued Track II and I've been either a participant or a victim, depending upon how you want to call it, of at least two meetings with the North Koreans. There, there are no real Track II people, they're only Track I [Diplomacy] people, but ours were Track II people.

Q: When you sit there and you have these discussions with North Koreans, can you have any confidence that, in fact, those are influential people?

Pickering: No, you have only confidence, since they're government officials, that they write reports, and whether the reports are read or not, I don't know. One would assume that since their principal preoccupation is the United States, somebody serious in North Korea would take a look at the reports. But you don't have any guarantee of that.

Q: I see that you must have noticed the other day where a high-ranking military official was removed in North Korea, Marshal—

Pickering: [Vice] Marshal Ri [Yong-ho]. I think he was here as a guest in the Clinton administration after Madeleine [K.] Albright went to North Korea.

Q: Does that tell you anything at all?

Pickering: No, it doesn't tell me anything, but I'm not a real expert on North Korea. And I think that what it says is, basically, one of the old leading military figures has been pushed out of his job by the new young leader, whatever that means.

Q: At another talk that you gave—

Pickering: And I would say that in North Korea, most leading figures are believed to be fairly conservative guys. [Laughs] There isn't a lot of plurality of opinion.

Q: At George Washington in April, you said that the curse of Congress is, "While every"—that's what you called it, the curse of Congress—

Pickering: Yes, sure.

Q: "While everything has—"

Pickering: That's done more in jest to introduce a subject than it is seriousness.

Q: Okay. "While everything has been said—

Pickering: [joining in] "—has been said, not everybody has said it yet." [Laughs]

Q: That's right. Well, that's like the U.N. though, isn't it? I covered the U.N. one session for the *Times* many years ago, before—

Pickering: You could say about the —

Q: —before you were there—

Pickering: —I have no reluctance to do that. [Laughs]

Q: Right. But it brings me back to the U.N. for a second—

Pickering: You know, Congress happens to be a little more serious about it, but [laughs]—

Q: It gives me an opening to come back to the U.N. for a second. Another area in which the Carnegie Corporation has put serious money, during your time, too, I think, is the development of what's called the Responsibility to Protect. When you were on the board, were you mindful of that effort?

Pickering: Yes. In fact, a good bit of that effort came out of and through a man by the name of Gareth [J.] Evans, who was president of the International Crisis Group, where I was co-chairman of the board.

Q: During that time?

Pickering: Yes.

Q: At one point, there was a commission set up at the U.N., and I believe in 2005 and 2006 the U.N. adopted the idea of Responsibility to Protect, both by the General Assembly and I think by the Security Council.

Pickering: I don't think Security Council did. I think it was by the General Assembly.

Q: Well, in any case, how has that worked? The Responsibility to Protect wasn't around in Rwanda, right?

Pickering: Nope. In fact, it's one of the reasons why the concept, at least, has been adopted now.

Q: And applied—given serious thought when crises arise. How about Syria?

Pickering: Well, Libya was a test in which people would have said the response was not bad, even if it meant taking sides in a civil war and supporting one side over another, which didn't, in the short run, do a lot to protect the people who were in the way of the civil war that you were working on. But in the end, it provided an exit strategy, or potential exit strategy, against—what one saw in Libya was the continued long term violent, indeed, murderous suppression of people in Libya by the leader. And to some extent there's a current problem in Syria that covers much of the same ground but under different circumstances. The Responsibility to Protect says that when

a country cannot protect its own people or, more often than not, is responsible for abusing them, then the international community has a responsibility to step in and take on that difficulty. There's a great deal of difference between saying it and having it operate with some degree of automaticity. And for the moment, countries like China and Russia have opposed United Nations Security Council resolutions, which move too robustly, in their view, toward the direction of assuming that kind of responsibility, even if in a very indirect way.

Q: Well, but do you think it's because countries like China and Russia have an ideological or a theoretical or even a realistic concern about their own sovereignty perhaps one day being impeded by this Responsibility to Protect? Or is it something unique to Syria?

Pickering: No, it's not unique to Syria. China and Russia had the same concerns, not as highly developed, in Libya. No, I think that China and Russia, if they accept the Responsibility to Protect, do so with severe limitations.

Q: Well, how about some of the countries, particularly in Africa, for example, that were colonies? I mean, couldn't they have a legitimate interest in saying, "Wait a minute, Responsibility to Protect? That means that's another cover for you to come and invade us."

Pickering: Well, some do, although interestingly enough they went along in enough of a majority to get a resolution passed in the General Assembly. But I for a long time have thought, sure, they see this as the rebirth of colonialism or the advent of neocolonialism in their view that this justifies the international community—guess who, the five permanent members of the Security

Council and their attendant supporters inside—voting for, essentially, intervention in the internal affairs of all of us African countries who are struggling to set our own people free, but under our own terms and conditions and in our own fashion.

Q: Well, since we're recording this on July 27, 2012 and someone might listen to it, as I say, fifty years from now and say, "Really, that fellow Tom Pickering, he really was on the ball—"

Pickering: [Laughs]

Q: —let me go ahead and ask you: whither Syria?

Pickering: I think that we don't know. Increasingly, there is optimistic talk about the fact that we have may have reached, in Churchillian terms, the end of the beginning or even the beginning of the end. I'm not so sure. I spent four and a half years living next to Syria and Jordan. I spent a lot of time there visiting, and my sense is that, while there seems to be positive steps in favor of change by further defections of more people and high-level military folks, the bulk of the military power is still in the hands of the government. The government at least has the twelve percent Alawite minority, but still some of the Christian business community and maybe others. And the old axiom about "the bigger they are, the harder they fall" may well apply here. It has, obviously, because it's ambiguous, it could have two meanings [laughs]: the harder it is to take them down, or the faster they go down when it's time for them to collapse.

Q: What do you think is going to happen?

Pickering: I think that there is a certain amount of rottenness in the [Bashar H. al-] Assad regime. That it is, and has been for a long time, bulked up by the twelve percent of the population that are Alawites and by the people they have co-opted through various means. That the co-optees are sliding away. That we need to continue to keep the pressure on. There is no instant answer, unfortunately, to the wholesale killing that's taking place and the civil war may well spread. My own view is that sooner or later there'll be time for a political solution. And, indeed, one may evolve through the use of military force, the way it has in Libya. Everything ends with a political solution. If I were doing this, I would begin now to open up the prospects for an election. I think the asking for Mr. Assad's early departure is perfectly splendid, but it's Tooth Fairy kind of stuff to believe that he'll immediately, or even over a long term, accept that alternative as a way to go. But I would think that an effort to establish a kind of electoral commission that had a big international role in it, to try to assure that the elections would be held on an open basis—and then, indeed, to say to Mr. Assad, "We accept the hints and the intimations you've given of moving toward an election to determine the future of your country"—that wouldn't be a totally crazy idea.

Q: You mean, even as he's using heavy weapons against his own people?

Pickering: He's been using heavy weapons against his own people for months. If you classify heavy machine guns and artillery as heavy weapons, he certainly has.

Q: Well, helicopter gunships, I think.

Pickering: Helicopter gunships, sure. I think the more he gets involved in the disastrous use of such publicly abhorrent weapons, the more it will be of value for us to suggest a way out. And the one way out is to say, "If you're totally loved by your people, we will move forward to an election and let your people decide what it is they want." Now, there may be people on our side who greatly fear, that the Syrian public would choose to go out away from Assad, although I don't think that's probable. Or that somehow the administration would have a way of so determining the outcome of an election that it would be impossible to hold one there. But an election would have to be accompanied by a ceasefire. And it would have to be accompanied, in my view, by a very large international presence. I happened to have been an ambassador in El Salvador when we held an election that looked like it would be highly controversial, but there were thirteen hundred international observers and we took them everywhere and it turned out to be a great success. And people voted for change.

Q: Were you involved in the so-called Iran-Contra affair?

Pickering: Yes, but only, happily, on the periphery. [Laughs]

Q: How far on the periphery?

Pickering: Way, happily, on the periphery. I was an ambassador in Israel when arrangements were being made with a man by the name of Amiram Nir, with whom I had frequent contact but he would tell me nothing, who worked for Shimon Peres, who was then prime minister. And the

only other piece of involvement I had was that, when I was ambassador in El Salvador, the Salvadoran ambassador, I think to Nicaragua, gave me a piece of paper, which listed arms and ammunition that someone—he didn't tell me who—was providing to the contras. It wasn't the United States. And I provided that to [Oliver] Ollie [L.] North, who was handling the brief in the White House, rather than to the State Department, which I should have done. But George [P.] Shultz rose to my defense and said I did what I was supposed to have done.

Q: But you handed it to Ollie North?

Pickering: Yes, I provided it to Ollie North electronically.

Q: Oh, that's too bad. In other words, you didn't have an opportunity to hand it to Fawn Hall?

Pickering: No.

[Laughter]

Pickering: Missed out.

Q: Missed out.

[Laughter]

Q: Your ambassadorship to Jordan in the mid-70s—was Assad's father then running the country?

Pickering: Yes. Hafez al-Assad was, yes. He seemed then almost indestructible and fairly close to being eternal.

Q: Did you have occasion to meet him, then?

Pickering: I saw him, I think, socially on one occasion. He came also to King Hussein [bin Talal]'s funeral and I caught sight of him there.

Q: Right. With respect to this whole business about Responsibility to Protect and the U.N. and its viability and what have you, somewhere you, actually, I think, suggested that maybe the setup of the U.N., the veto in the Security Council, ought to be rethought.

Pickering: I did. Absolutely.

Q: Why?

Pickering: [Laughs] Because it was working against our interest in dealing with genocide, as you have seen.

Q: Well, you how far would you go?

Pickering: I would've gone, as I explained, to a qualified veto.

Q: To?

Pickering: A qualified veto, either two or three states opposing would be required.

Q: I'm sorry—

Pickering: In other words, the—

Q: Right now any of the permanent members—

Pickering: Five, and I would have gone to the point where two or three would have been required to block passage.

Q: Two or three permanent members?

Pickering: Yes.

Q: Right. Have you floated that idea outside this room?

Pickering: Oh, wildly. [Laughs] Wildly with almost no pickup. You can imagine how appetizing it is at the State Department. [Laughs] As I say when I float this, you have to be considered a lunatic among the permanent five, to suggest the veto is anything but eternally wonderful.

Q: Well, you don't seem to have any qualms about being regarded as a dissident from time to time.

Pickering: [Laughs] No, I don't, happily.

Q: Let me turn to Russia for a minute. You were there between '93 and '96. Do you remember actually when you got there?

Pickering: May 22, 1993.

Q: When was it?

Pickering: May 22, 1993.

Q: Now, Yeltsin—again, correct me if I go wrong here, Yeltsin was fully in control then, was he not?

Pickering: Yes and no. By October, Yeltsin had a shootout in his front yard.

Q: October of?

Pickering: ‘93. No, he was not in full control. He had a parliament—

Q: When you say in his front yard, you don’t mean literally in his front yard, do you?

Pickering: Well, in the front yard of the parliament.

Q: By the way—

Pickering: [Laughs]

Q: —I’m not acquainted with this—the term that is sometimes used with regard to Moscow, the White House.

Pickering: Yes.

Q: Well, we’ve got a White House down the street here, but—

Pickering: In Russia, it’s called Bely Dom, which means White House, and it was a large white building, and it was at the time the seat of the Russian parliament until they revolted, took arms and took over the building, chased people out of next door buildings with brute force, went and tried to take over the TV station, and were defeated by the government the next morning. And

then the Bely Dom, which was then on fire, was repaired by Turkish contractors, made white again on the outside, and became the seat of the Russian prime minister. And the parliament moved downtown opposite the Kremlin in the buildings that used to be happily run by Gosplan. Gosplan was the State Soviet Planning Agency that, indeed, made all of the decisions for the marketplace.

Q: Didn't [Dmitry A.] Medvedev head that at one time?

Pickering: Medvedev? No.

Q: No. But is that still true of the White House?

Pickering: It's still the seat of the Russian Prime Ministry, yes.

Q: But in any case—

Pickering: And it's still called the White House.

Q: But in any event, you got there in '93 and you were coming from ambassador to India. First, you had been ambassador to the U.N. during the First Gulf War, isn't that right?

Pickering: Yes.

Q: And then you moved to India, and then you moved to the Russian Federation. Now, at that time, is it fair to say that whatever openness he might have supported or did support, [Mikhail S.] Gorbachev, left of his own accord, would have preserved the Communist Party?

Pickering: Oh, yes. I had conversations with Gorbachev and that was essentially what he was saying to me. I mean, he spent his time telling me how the Yeltsin government was entirely off track. They were not paying any attention to machine building. [Laughs]

Q: To machine building?

Pickering: At a time when the IT [information technology] revolution was beginning to take off. And that, in effect, the Communist ideas were all simply splendid, they were just badly administered and they needed some tweaking.

Q: Yeltsin is probably going to be remembered by people who are not specialists in Russia as much for his occasionally bizarre behavior—

Pickering: [Laughs]

Q: —as for anything he did. Is that fair?

Pickering: His occasional indulgence in alcoholism, yes. [Laughs]

Q: Is that regrettable?

Pickering: Yes, it is too bad. Yeltsin, in my view, had firmly resolved to reform. His key decisions in the main were informed by an interior democratic compass that was pretty good, with the exception of Chechnya, in which I think he was both misled and allowed himself to be misled. In part, because it was in some ways connected up to his anticipation of a second elected term and how to get that, figured in part in his judgments on Chechnya. But on other things I think he did pretty well. He precipitated the crisis in October of 1993 that I've been describing to you by proroguing the parliament. The parliament had passed by majority votes something around three hundred amendments to the Russian Constitution. This parliament was "freely elected," but only among communist candidates; for each position there were two: [laughs] Tweedledee and Tweedledum. But it was seen, at the time, as a great movement by Gorbachev toward a new and brighter world, because Gorbachev, in effect, it was in his period when that parliament was elected. And then along came Yeltsin and along came the right-wing revolution in August of 1990. And not only did Yeltsin save Mr. Gorbachev's bacon but he opened the door out of which Mr. Gorbachev quickly left.

Q: Yes, but that's, you say, around 1990 or so.

Pickering: Yes.

Q: By the time—

Pickering: And in 1991 [laughs] Mr. Yeltsin called together the leaders of all of the republics and said, "You're on your own, guys. You've got our full backing for becoming independent."

Q: Yeltsin is saying that.

Pickering: In December of '91, yes.

Q: Now, having been an ambassador to virtually every country in the world—

Pickering: [Laughs]

Q: —you will appreciate this remark, that last year Gorbachev was interviewed by *The Guardian*—the British newspaper—and he told *The Guardian* that he should have gotten rid of Yeltsin several years before Yeltsin became his direct rival. "I was probably too liberal and democratic as regards Yeltsin. I should have sent him as ambassador to Great Britain—"

Pickering: [Laughs]

Q: "—or maybe a former British colony." And mind you, he's looking down on that! That probably spelled his downfall, the idea that ambassadorships were not—

Pickering: Hardly.

[Laughter]

Pickering. That's a great quote. I hadn't heard it before. But it hardly shakes my view in the supremacy of ambassadors. [Laughs]

Q: But in any event, Gorbachev gave way to Yeltsin. Yeltsin—and I gather, really perhaps in real genuine sorrow—saw that he was finished and gave way to Putin. He—

Pickering: No. He engineered his succession because he had the wit to understand that succession was a fraught time in their system and, therefore, he could ensure stability. And the maintenance, he thought, of continued change by blessing this fair-haired boy who had served him so well and putting him first as prime minister and then as president. And so, in a sense, Mr. Putin got to where he got because Mr. Yeltsin felt he was the right person to take over.

Q: Right. Now, looking back on it, I assume—

Pickering: And, of course, Mr. Putin decided, when his second term ran out, that Mr. Medvedev would be the perfect person to share power with him, but that they would do this duo and then reverse the tables.

Q: Now, I raise this all because I have a sense that you have followed and been involved somehow or other with Russia ever since you've been ambassador there.

Pickering: No, long before. I negotiated disarmament arrangements with the Russians beginning in 1960.

Q: Okay.

Pickering: Yes.

Q: But I mean, how would you characterize the situation in Russia today? And also, I wanted to ask you, the Carnegie Corporation has spent a lot of money—I like throwing that term around because I don't know the figure.

Pickering: [Laughs] Okay.

Q: Carnegie Corporation—

Pickering: [Laughs] With the name Carnegie, you could count on a lot of money being—

Q: Alright, well, they've spent, I'm sure—

Pickering: —an acceptable characterization.

Q: —tens of millions of dollars in a program that Vartan Gregorian seems to have a keen interest in strengthening scholarship and research in the former soviet union. Now, they were doing this while you were on the board.

Pickering: They were, yes.

Q: So, would you tell me, do you think—through this higher education in the former Soviet Union program, the CASEs, the Centers for Advanced Study [and Education]—have you any sense—and here, perhaps, you're uniquely qualified as a board member to know—whether this has been useful? But I'd like your larger view, also, on the condition of the Russian Federation today.

Pickering: Yes. I would say, first, the following about Russia. Putin's reelection was foregone as a conclusion. What was not anticipated—

Q: His recent reelection.

Pickering: The recent reelection, yes, the only one that counts [laughs]—was the degree to which this would begin to engender popular disapproval in a very demonstrative way. It was kind of earth-shaking because, of course, the one thing that communism sought forever to prevent, was any coalescence of public opinion contrary to state policy. And, in fact, Russia inherited this and so it's only been now, 2011, 2012—twenty years after the collapse of communism—that you've seen growing up in Russia, particularly among youth, a movement of change. And movements

for change. And even more, that the state is no longer capable of using the traditional instruments to bludgeon these movements out of existence. So we don't know where these will end, but we do know that at the moment Putin's policy of a combination of intimidation of the leadership and co-option of some of the ideas of the movement are the best he's been able to do to deal with it. And they won't be successful in putting the movement down.

So the movement now is moving toward the question of whether it will assume political proportions and political institutionalization or whether it will remain, as in Egypt, a Tahrir Square demonstration mechanism only and not have political leadership. In Russia, there are plenty of volunteers, and some very able ones, who would move into positions of political leadership. At the moment, Putin has been successful in blocking that through intimidation, through arrests, and through pushing people around and keeping them out of standing for electoral office.

But the next shoe to drop will be whether, in fact, that process continues up from the streets and into what one would call a party arrangement. If it does, Russia will end up having two political parties instead of one in several guises—I don't count the Communists as being serious contenders any longer and [Vladimir V.] Zhirinovsky is a kind of joke—and we'll move from the Latin America-like official party to a country of either bi-party approaches or multiple-party approaches. And that is yet to be foreseen but it is something that Putin hasn't found an absolute mechanism to stop, which is antithetical to his own views. His own views are characterized by traditional Russian views of power and the need to have power to prevent the disintegration of an otherwise fractious and fissiparous state. And to some extent he fears, very much, the potential

for disintegration and, like all Russians, is brought up on the really baneful history of the civil war and how awful it was and how destructive. And all of this was done—

Q: Which civil war?

Pickering: The Russian Civil War.

Q: Right.

Pickering. Yes—to reinforce the Communist ethic that we all have to stand as one, we are all proletarians, we're all united in this effort, and anybody who thinks to the contrary is obviously a lunatic. So what we're seeing is the gradual evolution of what is potentially a much more democratic Russia, even in and around a man whose potential for admitting this, much less embracing it, is very low. And some Russians now tell you that Putin's days are really very numbered. I don't know that that's the case. But in a way, he wants to prevent Syria but he doesn't want to use [laughs] Syrian tactics to prevent it. So I think we'll see a gradual evolution of increasing continued pressures. The programs feed into this.

Q: The Carnegie-supported programs.

Pickering: Yes, among many others. They're not unique but they are important. They feed into free inquiry. They feed into free debate. They feed into excellence in intellectual activity and research. They set a standard. They are not, in my view, politically oriented. They're not

agitational. They're not teaching how to go into the streets by any means. But they're opening up windows and vistas that Putin has tried to close through his manipulation of the media and his control over the media. And they're going back to the universities as a way of trying to influence next generations and the youth bulge. The youth, as they are in all countries, are somewhat polarized. Some are inevitably recruitable into extreme nationalism and those are the ones that Putin is trying to co-opt. Others are much more open to free inquiry and those are the people who will go to the streets with the middle-aged group. The elderly will stay out of this. They're too traumatized. They've been made hamburger of too much.

Q: Well, you were, as I say, ambassador from '93 to '96. This is 2012. Would you have anticipated or could you have anticipated then the conditions that prevail today?

Pickering: Yes, and I think we were disappointed they didn't occur immediately, naive as we were. I mean, I think I had hopes that things would move faster and that was naïve, and there were a lot of people around who said that they're not going to move at all and I thought that was unintelligent. The fact that they moved somewhere in between is not surprising.

Q: Right. Have you ever noticed Putin making reference to Guantanamo Bay?

Pickering: Yes.

Q: Doing that in what context?

Pickering: In context of opposition to the U.S. and encouraging people at home to believe that the U.S. is not, basically, that paragon of virtue that its opposition to communism tended to allow us to lavish in.

Q: You were on a human rights forum at the State Department not long ago.

Pickering: Yes, I was.

Q: And I noticed you said there that the actions of Congress were unconscionable with regard to Guantanamo Bay.

Pickering: I don't know that I said that.

Q: Well, I wouldn't say it if you hadn't said it.

Pickering: No, well, I may have been quoted but I'm not sure that's what I said.

Q: [Laughs]

Pickering: If it's what I said, I didn't mean that. I meant that our actions as an administration in running and operating Guantanamo Bay the way we did, particularly in the early days, were unconscionable—that I thought we ought to close Guantanamo, but even more, I thought that preventive detention interminably was not a right enshrined in our Constitution for anybody.

Q: Well—

Pickering: And my principal point was, in a sense, detention without trial, even of these reputedly terrible actors, was contrary to our whole ethic of the rule of law. And I was saying this in the midst of people who were being paid to promote that ethic.

Q: I mention that about Putin because it was my understanding that he has drawn attention to that and used it—

Pickering: He has drawn attention to Guantanamo, yes.

Q: But the—

Pickering: I understand from the press.

Pickering: What kind of marks would you give the Obama administration for—

Pickering: Guantanamo?

Q: Yes.

Pickering: D minus.

Q: D minus. Why do you think it's played out—

Pickering: They've gone to military commissions when they could go to District Court.

Q: Why do you think it's played out that way?

Pickering: I don't know, except that he's concerned, maybe, about antagonizing the right[-wing] too much or making a mistake. He doesn't want to be in a position, I suspect, of having been charged with releasing three, four, five, six other guys who end up like some others as recidivists and come back and kill us. And I sympathize with that. On the other hand, does that give you an absolute right to lock people up for life? And I, as an American citizen, do I want to be in a system that is tending that way? No thank you.

Q: Well—

Pickering: Particularly, if you think I have a kind of kernel of an ounce of a scintilla of dissent in my body.

Q: It was soon after you left the government, really known as the diplomat's diplomat, with a distinguished career behind you when George [W.] Bush—when September 11 happened and the Bush administration created Guantanamo Bay.

Pickering: Yes, they did, and that's what I was complaining about.

Q: Were you complaining about it then?

Pickering: No.

Q: Why not?

Pickering: I don't know. [Laughs] I didn't have any idea of how, in what way, it would be used. But I certainly told my friends I thought it was lunatic that we should go down to Cuba on the presumption that it wasn't part of the United States and seek to create some kind of a facility out of the ambit of the American Constitution's jurisdiction.

Q: You were ambassador to Jordan.

Pickering: Yes.

Q: Let me lay aside El Salvador. You were ambassador to Jordan in the '70s. Now, given, that's some time ago. But apart from Guantanamo Bay, one of the programs that the Bush administration inaugurated, initiated in its own fashion, was something called extraordinary rendition.

Pickering: Yes.

Q: Now, Condoleezza Rice said, I think in 2005, that we don't torture anybody and we don't send anybody anywhere to be tortured and that we have in place a procedure whereby these governments have to say they're not doing it. Something along those lines. Now, you were ambassador to Jordan. Jordan happens to be one of the countries, I believe, where some of the people who were pulled in on extraordinary rendition were sent. Of course, this is thirty years after you were there. But having been in the State Department a long time, what do you think of that extraordinary rendition and the prospect that we might be sending people where they could be tortured?

Pickering: I have no problem with extraordinary rendition under two conditions. That we operate in a foreign country with the full cooperation of the foreign country and that we bring them to trial in the United States.

Q: Well, that's not what this program was—

Pickering: No, some were brought here.

Q: Yes. No. Yes, some were ultimately brought here but not for trial. In fact, there's been virtually no trials.

Pickering: No, there've been three hundred trials of terrorists in the United States.

Q: Oh, no, I'm not speaking of those. I'm talking about people who were actually—

Pickering: Yes, I don't know how many of the extraordinarily renditioned [laughs] have been tried in the United States.

Q: And there have been any number of cases of people who've—

Pickering: I mean, a large number of the Guantanamo people were eventually let go or sent back to their home country for good or ill or whatever that meant.

Q: Even during the Bush administration.

Pickering: That's right, even during the Bush administration, yes.

Q: That's right, that's right.

Pickering: And, you know, some never should've been taken at all. But I have a real problem. I happen to be on a commission looking at this, with rendering people into places where torture is known to be the acceptable medium of behavior and where in fact some even hoped that torture would produce information that could be used to our advantage. And one of the great unknowns is—but I think the presumption is coming down very much on the side against—that torture produces useful information.

Q: True, true. During that period, people were sent to places like Libya, Syria, I believe—

Pickering: Syria, sure.

Q: Egypt, for sure.

Pickering: Egypt, certainly.

Q: That's right.

Pickering: Probably Jordan.

Q: That's right. And these are people who have not been brought back here for trial. Some of them have never been seen again.

Pickering: No. Some of them also went into the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] overseas hospitality system.

Q: That's right. The black sites. As an ambassador, were you ever in line? I guess this is before September 11, so it doesn't really apply.

Pickering: No, I mean, look, when I was in Jordan, the popular name for the headquarters of the Mukhabarat [General Intelligence Directorate], among many, was the fingernail factory. So they were already known as treating their own people, at least, fairly roughly.

Q: Right. Michael [F.] Scheuer, who was involved with the CIA program for a while, said that taking the assurances of foreign governments as Condoleezza said they would get wasn't worth "a bucket of warm spit."

Pickering: I agree with Michael. And I think even if you had worked out a program to monitor it, they probably would have found ways around it unless you locked a console in the cell with the guy.

Q: I tend to say "finally" but I never really mean it—

Pickering: [Laughs]

Q: —but it means I'm getting close. A few years ago, you were asked whether, like the idea of containment that emerged after World War II, you could conceive—more recently, a couple years ago, this was—of a unified field theory for American foreign relations. And you said that—I think your focus was that "our national interest is undergirded by all we've stood for as a country," which certainly has to do with Guantanamo Bay, whether Putin uses it or not. But you also have said that there are certain home truths, that almost all foreign policy is reactive and is a response to media provocations and is made on the run. Is that really true?

Pickering: Sure.

Q: Isn't there any—I mean, the idea of containment, even if it was misinterpreted by some people, that wasn't made on the run.

Pickering: No, no.

Q: It wasn't—

Pickering: But that was one piece. If you take foreign policy, the large number of daily actions in the State Department, either to confect or carry out actions in the interests of the United States—the containment was very important as a very large umbrella, but in fact, in terms of the numbers of actions taken, it was just a very tiny piece.

Q: All right, then, let me put to you in 2012. Is there some—apart from what the United States stands for or has stood for as a country—is there any principle that can guide foreign policy?

Pickering: All of the things that we have stood for are principles to guide foreign policy. The real problem is how and in what way they are weighted. And dealing with any particular set of problems is, in fact, a measure of the wisdom of the president and the people around him who have to make those decisions. Principles are fine on their own, but when it comes time to apply them, you get into very hard cases.

Put it this way: imagine we had a mathematical algorithm in which all of our principles were deeply embedded and we had a way in a computer of feeding in a problem and letting the computer use the algorithm and get an answer. This is what you're talking about. And that's certainly well beyond the ideal and certainly an impossible situation. So we weigh the value of argument and dispute and alternative ideas as being part of the measure of producing a successful foreign policy. And in a very practical way, that comes out. And in a very practical way, we can many times find answers to the problem which are both consistent with our principles but also serve the interests, broadly or narrowly conceived of, in a particular set of problems as we go ahead.

Where I come out in foreign policy is that you constantly must understand the assumptions, stated and unstated, which you bring to the table when you deal with a question. And then you must test them all, including those that are designed to deceive you into being the obviously immovable, because sometimes you can find very good ways of moving ahead, preserving your principles but figuring out innovative and careful ways to deal with the problem. Many times, but not often, you're asked to set a whole new set of policies with respect to relationship. There, we tend to try to make them congruent, so that the principles that overlap and overarch Russian policy in many ways play a similar role with respect to China. We don't tend to try to adopt sets of principles attuned to a particular case. But it is quite hard [laughs] in some ways. And sometimes we have short-term interests that transcend longer-term ones.

Indeed, one of the problems I think about our American foreign policy these days is we tend to be too dominated by the short term. But that's true of every administration. The problem is we get more short-term problems and less long-term thinking, given the paucity of people and, indeed, the nature and the number of problems that crash in on you all the time. The other is that we have, beginning in the Bush administration, tended to believe that the military could solve a lot of foreign policy problems if we only let them loose on the issue. And now we know for a fact that there isn't a cheap, easy, "quick and dirty" military answer to all problems and, indeed, the military tends to create more problems by being involved than it resolves. Look at the legacy of Iraq.

Q: Before I go, there was an area the Carnegie Corporation during your time was involved in that from time-to-time was called States at Risk, States in Transition, Failed States—States in Transition, I think it's called now, where their current accent is on what they call peacebuilding. Are you familiar with that?

Pickering: Sure.

Q: Did it amount to something in your time? Or should it amount to something now?

Pickering: Yes, it should amount to something.

Q: Vartan Gregorian once said in 2007, "Today"—this is in 2007—"more than a quarter of the world's states are considered at risk of instability or collapse."

Pickering: That's true.

Q: Still true?

Pickering: Sure.

Q: Can Carnegie do something about that?

Pickering: Yes. I think Carnegie can help. It's long-term, it's how and in what way states deal with a combination of economic, internal insurgency, outside problems, internal politics, governance—the whole plethora of ideas that have to come together and actions that have to come together to make a state either viable or not viable.

Q: For example, Egypt.

Pickering: Yes, exactly, Egypt.

Q: And there's a role for a foundation like Carnegie?

Pickering: There is a role for a foundation in talking about ways to proceed, how to organize, what steps to take, all of those. Of course there is.

Q: You mean, until Michele [M.] Bachmann hears about it.

[Laughter]

Pickering: Do you know Ileana Ros-Lehtinen? She's the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. Republican, Cuban American, very hard over to the right. So Ileana is the kind of actual Michele Bachmann in being.

Q: I don't want to go without saying that, you know, if there's something here about your service as a trustee of Carnegie or about Carnegie or about whether you think Vartan, by and large, has done well or where he's failed or anything that you want to add, by all means.

Pickering: No, I think you've done a very good job. [Laughs] I don't know why we spent all this time on me and my ideas. I was just a humble board member.

Q: No, no, no.

Pickering: [Laughs] I didn't realize I was going to be so severely tested by your interview.

Q: Well, there you have it.

Pickering: [Laughs]

Q: But think, for one second, is there something about your service on that board—I mean, was it really worth it to you for your time?

Pickering: Oh, yes. I did. I learned a huge amount. I think I made a humble contribution. I came to respect Carnegie. I thought it played an extremely important role. There were particularly exciting things that were happening in education that I thought were fascinating and interesting and I learned a lot about and I wanted to learn a lot about because I think that fundamentally this country's got a failing educational system, particularly at the primary and secondary level, for the large majority of American students. And I think we have to find a way to fix that. But constant change is not the answer and I think Carnegie pursued, with care, its ideas so it wouldn't be in the faddish fetish, if I could put it that way. And I think that was all very interesting and varied. The people on the board, I thought, were interesting and had a lot to say and had interesting things to say. So I found all of that very valuable. I think term limits are a good idea, despite the fact that, one, when you leave a board like Carnegie, you always feel somewhat bereft about how what you have learned isn't going to continue in the same way.

[Laughter]

Pickering: You can't be part of the continuing story. But that's okay. I think that that's all part of life and I grew up in a life where I changed jobs on the average of every two and a half or three years anyway, so that's never been, in my view, the seed of great tragedy.

Q: Right. You did have a term limit?

Pickering: Yes, I think we're term limited on the number of times we can be on the board.

Q: Right. Okay.

Pickering: Yes.

Q: I thank you, Tom Pickering.

Pickering: Yes. It's just great to see you. And thank you very much.

Q: My pleasure.

Pickering: It was a wonderful conversation.

[END OF INTERVIEW]