

Sir Harold WALKER (b. 19 October, 1932)

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British Diplomatic Oral History Programme
Interview
with Sir Harold Walker on the 21st August 1996.

Interviewer: Sir Harold, I would like to ask you first, if I may, why you chose the diplomatic career, or is choice the right word?

HW: I think, like so many people, I was very much influenced by my family background; not that it was anything to do with the Diplomatic Service, but it was all to do with serving the country or the state. My father was Navy and my grandfather Army and I had three much older half-brothers of whom two were Navy and one was Royal Air Force. So as far as I can remember the thought that one didn't work for the nation never really entered my head. Certainly business didn't come very strongly into my head until a much later stage. And then my father, for which I thank him very much, did not send me to Dartmouth which might have been the normal thing in those days; he made the conscious choice to send me to ordinary or, if you like, fee-paying schools; and at school I can say that I was not brilliant but at least above average in languages. And in those days that just sort of led to a general feeling that one might be suitable for the Diplomatic Service and as I went through school and university that thought didn't leave me. So that's how I came to join the Diplomatic Service.

The public school I went to was Winchester and one thing that may be relevant is that by my recollection the ethos of service was extremely strong at Winchester during the time I was there, that is to say 1946-50; and it has never been any surprise to me that Winchester has produced lots of civil servants, judges and other servants of the people whereas, as they say, it is Etonians who produce the Prime Ministers.

I then went on to Worcester College, Oxford and the reason primarily was that the then Provost, the late Sir John Masterman, was a great friend of my father's; and again I am sure he had an influence because, of course, he had served the State, not only in the educational sphere, and quite likely was a kind of talent-spotter for people who might join the Foreign Service or other branches of HMG.

Interviewer: I see. Could we go on from there? Could I ask you if you would like to give us perhaps a brief outline of your career, whether you see a pattern in it and

perhaps what kind of diplomacy, as there seem to be various kinds nowadays, you think you were mainly involved in?

HW: Yes. Well, as it turned out, I was very much an Arabist. In those days, and I think it is still true today, one did a year in the Office before being assigned to anything else. My recollection is that after I had been in the Office a year, or at any rate some months, I was summoned by the Personnel Department and was told that you, you and you, because there were colleagues of mine also there, are going to learn Arabic unless you have objections. But, of course, as I know from my own time in Personnel Department later, we have since evolved much more sophisticated means of choosing our so-called hard language students. My recollection is that I had been thinking that I had not joined the Diplomatic Service just to move in my own cultural sphere, but I very much wanted to learn a hard language; and I thought that say Chinese would be beyond me and that Arabic was just what I was looking for and that I leapt at the opportunity. In the event, I was probably as much specialised, and I may say by my own choice, in my career as anyone else. In fact, all my overseas postings bar two were in the Arab world and, of those two, one was in Washington DC as a First Secretary and the other in Ethiopia as Ambassador. At home I had a wide variety of jobs including being Private Secretary to a Junior Minister and two spells in the personnel function. So I had a specialisation in geographical or regional interest but a wide range of working experience. The one thing I never did, which has become much more important in our service, is delegation work, or work in the big missions like New York or Brussels.

Interviewer: What one might call multilateral diplomacy?

HW: Yes, I did very little of that.

Interviewer: But you were involved in bilateral negotiations?

HW: Oh yes, certainly. With several governments including the Ethiopian and including, totally fruitlessly, the Iraqi.

Interviewer: Yes I would like to come back to that. But perhaps before we get to these very big questions I could revert to your time, although it was later, in personnel which perhaps gives you a good vantage point to comment on how the diplomatic career has

changed over our time.

HW: I would like, if I may ... I would like to spend quite a lot of time on this. I don't know how many other people will comment and I think there is an importance to diplomatic history, with a small 'd' as it were.

First of all, I will mention some sort of semi-technical points about the way our work has changed. For example, working hours have changed out of all recognition - I remember, it now seems unimaginable, that during my first year in the Office I used to find time, maybe once a week, to go and play tennis on Battersea tennis courts with a friend in the Office. I can't imagine now anyone in the Office having time for more than a hastily eaten sandwich at his desk. But I could apparently find time, as a very junior officer, to spend two hours to spare for tennis! So in those days clearly we were idle and we have gone the other way.

Interviewer: We did work Saturday mornings.

HW: Well, that is another change which I hadn't actually thought of mentioning. Anyway, since then and, up to a point rightly, there have been continual economies and continual pressures to work harder; and my opinion is that these had already gone too far, at any rate by 1979 when I remember writing a serious letter to the Chief Clerk, expressing how low my morale was at the continual appeals to do more work for the same money and so forth and saying if I, who regarded myself as a very lucky officer, felt like this, what about the generality of less lucky officers?

Of course, another area at which things have changed at this semi-technical level if you like is in the position of women. Until sometime in the '70s, was it? or - I can't remember the date - women, again it seems hard to imagine now, had to resign on marriage and indeed lost their pension rights if they had not served for a considerable length of time. I particularly remember one very talented First Secretary, Mary Galbraith, who had to resign on marrying a member of the Service. I may say that it didn't do her any harm as she went on to be the boss of an Oxford College but in retrospect it seems unbelievable and monstrous that clever people, just because of their sex, should have been required to resign.

Another big change has been the gradual amalgamation of the grades as between what, I think, are still called the administrative grades and the executive grades and this I think is a very good thing, one of the few areas in which I can claim to have attempted to make a policy move when I was Head of Personnel Operations, that is to say improving the lot of the executive grades. The process has not been an unmixed blessing because I think now if you go to the Foreign Office and look for a desk officer for any country other than the most important you will find that the desk officer is not from the administrative grades and may not be of the same high calibre as used to be the case; but overall I am sure that this has improved the morale of the Service a great deal.

Another area that has improved enormously is training. When I joined the Service there certainly was, as I recall, very, very little training and when you joined they more or less said there is your desk, get on with it. Quite rightly now there is a lot more job-specific training and a lot more training for the diplomatic life generally. Generally also the Foreign Service, or Diplomatic Service as it is now called, has moved over to a more businesslike way of man-management. The report forms on people have been many times revised and the whole business-inspired technique of Management by Objectives and so forth has come on and has been, mostly, improved although sometimes, I think, overdone.

And then, of course, there are the methods and speed of communication. The fairly recent one that strikes me as worth mentioning is that, in the 1980s when FAX came in, I remember a very cautious Circular to overseas posts saying: do be very careful because FAX will be very expensive. Though now we realise that FAX is a lot cheaper than a normal telephone call because your words zip through the air very fast. Now I have described all these things so far as semi-technical points in how the Diplomatic career has changed and, if I may, may I now move on to some more substantive points. One is the effect of this speed of communications on which I just touched and the obvious one, which I think everyone would agree on, is that it's really rather rare nowadays for an Ambassador to have to take a decision overseas without having the time to refer to head office. Really I can only think, it sounds rather trivial, off hand, of one decision I took as an Ambassador of some moment. When I was Ambassador in Bahrain, a British citizen who had been a prisoner in a Saudi prison escaped, got across the water, came to us in the middle of the night and said please ship me onto Britain. I

thought that it would be grossly unfair to burden the Resident Clerk or Ministers with a decision about this in the middle of the night although it was clearly a matter of considerable political sensitivity, because one might be accused if one stopped the chap of letting down a British citizen whereas if one sent him on his way to Britain the Saudis would certainly kick up a big fuss. Anyway I did take the decision to send him on to Britain without referring to the Foreign Office in the middle of the night. There was a minor fuss but my judgement was backed by Ministers and, in a sense, all was well. You may think that that was a fairly trivial decision, but nowadays, if it had happened in the middle of the day, certainly one would have been on the telephone to the Foreign Office saying: I think what I should do is this but do Ministers agree? So speed of communications has made a great deal of difference to decision-making of people overseas while at the same time, for everybody, increasing the need to react immediately to events and have a sensible comment on them for Ministers because Ministers may be faced at any minute with a question in the House. That, I am sure, is common ground amongst most commentators.

Another substantive change has been the range of subjects that the Diplomatic Service has to deal with. Again, I think, it is common ground that we now deal with drugs, the environment, the climate, things that a few decades ago would not have been thought remotely diplomatic.

Another subject I must mention is commercial work, because even recently there seems to have been a propaganda line from the Foreign Office that the diplomatic service is going to do more work in support of British exporters. And a line from the shadow Foreign Secretary that if Labour became the government some businessmen would be appointed Ambassadors. My recollection is that ever since I first had an overseas post in 1958 we have always been told that the diplomatic service must do more for exporters. I can remember literally walking around the Souk, the bazaar, in Dubai in 1957 with, for example, samples of British hair dye in my briefcase, saying to local merchants: wouldn't you like to be the agent for this make of hair dye; and the word was we must do more for British exporters. Meanwhile at the headquarters end there have been ceaseless reorganisations of the Whitehall machinery, the British National Export Council and now the combined DTI/FO unit which deals with it. So it seems to me an awful old chestnut and the idea of appointing businessmen as Ambassadors is something I am not very much in favour of although you can get away with it in a huge

diplomatic service like the American.

To revert to personnel management, my observation is that spouses play an infinitely more important role in the thinking of the personnel departments than they used to. It really used to be the case that in the Diplomatic Service, it being a Service, you could be ordered about and a young man, going back to the days when women had to resign on marriage, could be told: you lucky man, you are going to be in Zaire in a month's time and he would say 'yes Sir', and go. This is no longer possible and although technically the Foreign Secretary or the Diplomatic Service could order its officers to go wherever they are due to be sent under the mobility obligation, in practice management sensibly doesn't do that and it tries to take account of family circumstances in arranging an officer's posting; that's only sensible, but there is a suspicion - there has been a suspicion, I know, on the part of some people - that it leads to unfairness in the sense that people who make a fuss about their families, saying I can't be posted to a difficult part of the world because my spouse is a doctor or my spouse is this or that, tend to end up with the better posts whereas those who play the old loyal game and just do what they are told end up with what's left; and I think that there is something in that. I said that I had been a happy Arabist. I think that the degree of specialisation that I accepted for my career is almost no longer possible because, whereas in my day it would have been perfectly possible to say to a young man with a double First: you are a clever chap, you are going to end up as Ambassador in Cairo, you are going to be an Arabist, it would not nowadays be equally possible because with Britain's declining absolute and relative power, to end up as Ambassador in Cairo is no longer what a really bright young man or woman would regard as the pinnacle of a successful diplomatic career. So I think that what has had to happen, and what does happen, is that, yes, you still teach a calculated number of say Arabists; the people taught Arabic still sensibly go to the Arab world for a posting, but they are then immediately posted to an OECD or European posting so that they can see whether they want to fight their way up the greasy pole where all the glittering prizes now are. By the same token, our work has been very much affected by our joining the EC, EU. I can't put a date to it but for a long time now it seems to me that for any British Ambassador overseas faced with any kind of problem the instinctive reaction now is to consult their EC/EU colleagues, just as it has long been the practice to consult in the first place the United States Ambassador. I am afraid that concurrently the habit of consulting one's Commonwealth colleagues declined and the importance attached to the Commonwealth has in the

Foreign Office, in my observation, much declined since, I suppose, the arrival of Mrs. Thatcher's first government. I regard this as a great pity.

The most influence on our work that has grown up in the last two decades is of course, the development of the media, on which books can and have been written; but, in brief, one cannot now really make any recommendation or take any decision without thinking how it might look if the media reported it. I was very much exposed to the media during my brief time in Iraq and I am very conscious of their influence on foreign policy - we will talk about it more, if you want me to, later.

And lastly amongst my so-called substantive points on the matters that have affected the work of the Diplomatic Service during my time I would mention briefly relations with Academe. I do think that in my early days the Foreign Service, as it was then called, suffered from a bit of a superiority complex and didn't do a lot of consulting outside the Foreign Office; but more and more over the years the Foreign Office has seen that it ought to keep in touch with other kinds of people and I myself would claim credit for the words in what we used to call the Order Book - I don't know if it still exists - which required officers or requires them to keep in touch with academic thinking on their subjects.

So that's about enough said about how the Diplomatic career has changed during my time.

Interviewer: There are a number of fascinating items there. We won't be able to come back to all of them but certainly to some. I wonder if we could change gear a little, so to speak, and ask if there are particular posts that you would like to talk about in more detail, about your work there and perhaps with examples about some of the things you have been talking about. You did mention Iraq and, of course, you have a whole clutch of other Arab posts to choose from.

HW: Well. Iraq, certainly, in a sense I could talk at length about, although I know very little about the country because in the whole eleven months I was there it was a time of total crisis. All I really know very well is the Foreign Minister's office, my office in the British Embassy and the offices of my EC colleagues and I know very little about the country, Iraq. But perhaps two points about that extraordinary time are worth drawing

attention to in a history project of this kind. One is that it is the normal instinct of diplomats to talk in any crisis, jaw jaw better than war war, and one of the real curiosities of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the crisis created thereby was that the coalition that then formed against Iraq or at any rate the leaders of the coalition in the shape of the United States, Britain and so on, formed the view that since the offence was so clear-cut, namely the taking over of one UN member by another UN member, the remedy was equally clear-cut i.e. the invading country must get out and therefore there was nothing to be talked about. And it was a strange and unusual cardinal element of western policy that we should not send emissaries to Saddam Hussein to talk about the crisis, because that would only give him the feeling that there was something to negotiate about which, in our view, there was not. My second point of interest perhaps to a project like this, arising out of the Iraq crisis, concerns the way the Foreign Office took decisions. I may say that in the whole of this crisis I had very few disagreements with the Foreign Office; the only one I can recall offhand was over the decision to close the operations of the British Council which I was against. But I was really amazed and grateful at the speed and also efficiency with which the Foreign Office answered my queries during the crisis and I couldn't think, knowing the procedures of Whitehall, how they were getting their answers to me so quickly; and I found out, when I went home on a week's leave - over Christmas 1991, was it? - and attended meetings in the Foreign Office, I then found that extremely senior officials were reading all the incoming telegrams overnight by about 7 a.m. and were holding a meeting at 7 or 7.30 a.m.. First a meeting purely of officials and then a meeting, as I recall, with a Minister of State and at these meeting they took decisions, having discussed matters orally, that would normally have been the subject of written submissions that would have taken several days to go up through the chain to the Foreign Secretary. So in this time of crisis there was the most effective apparatus of decision-making that I could observe in Whitehall, but not one that one could keep going all the time because it was desperately hard work for senior officials; and anyway, no doubt, would have attracted questions in the House at the amount of decisions being taken by officials in normal times.

Interviewer: If I may intervene there, I would like to add something. I happen to have heard Sir Christopher Mallaby describe to a German audience, so it's public knowledge in a way, how decisions were taken during the Falklands crisis; and there again there was a - what you might call a sort of pre-breakfast - meeting of people who had already

got themselves fully up-to-date; and that may have been an earlier if slightly different, because we were already at war, that may have been an earlier development which led to the kind of apparatus you described.

HW: Well, talking of apparatus, I don't know when it came in but of course, there was then, and there is, a thing called the emergency room and, I think, during the Iraq crisis many administrative procedures proved themselves and little problems were solved. Now, for a small example, my recollection is that, at first, officials who, as I have described, were working intolerably long hours, would say to themselves well I will do three days on and then take one day off. On the whole they found this impracticable as the need for continuity was so great; so I think the practice was developed that officials would work rather a long period of days and then take say three days or a week off; that's just a detail but I think in any bureaucracy the way in which decisions are taken is very interesting and my experience, being at the far end in the Iraq crisis, was that the Foreign Office machine, and indeed the Whitehall machine, was extremely efficient.

Interviewer: One addendum, I think in the case of the Falklands, very senior Ministers and including sometimes the Prime Minister actually took part so that decisions were probably made mainly by senior Ministers.

MW: I don't know if that was true through a lot of the Iraqi crisis. As I say, I only observed it as I happened to be recalled, very kindly recalled I imagine, for a few days leave over Christmas '91 and sat in on some of these meetings in the Office. That is all I would volunteer for these purposes on Iraq, the Iraq crisis, although one can be a bore on this subject.

The other posting of particular interest to me both at the time and increasingly in retrospect, I think, was my posting to Ethiopia where probably over 60% of my time was spend on aid-related work and in retrospect a great work was performed by the international community in the time I was there, let's say 1986-89, because we had drought in '86 and '87, but lessons having been learnt from the famous famine of 1984/85 this drought was not allowed to turn into famine. The international community did a mammoth and, of course, extremely expensive operation of bringing in grain and other aid. Now the point for a historian that I would like to bring out: in such circumstances you need a high degree of co-ordination, of course, between all the UN

Agencies and the Embassy and local government and it seems to me, and this is very relevant to things going on in the UN now, that it is absolutely essential that you appoint somebody who is called something like the Special Assistant to the Secretary General to run the UN operation, otherwise the UN baronies go on operating in an uncoordinated way.

Interviewer: Thank you. I wonder, unless there is some other particular post you would like to reminisce about, whether we could go on to the ..., since we have mentioned Ministers, perhaps the Ministers you have worked most closely with and what you think historians ought to know about working with them. Presumably mainly the Prime Ministers or the Secretaries of State for Foreign Affairs while you were Ambassador in various posts.

HW: Yes, I can volunteer a few remarks about political personalities but perhaps before that there is something I would like to say about another post. My first proper post overseas, after I had learnt my Arabic, was Dubai from 1958-60 which, of course, was pre-oil and pre- quote independence.

Interviewer: I believe it was pre-electric light - was it not?

HW: Well, yes you are quite right, of course, pre-public electricity. Rich merchants and the British Political Agency, as we were then called, had our own generators. Something that intrigues me about history is the impossibility of deciding, here and now, what features are going to last. Now when I was in Dubai it was still called a British Protected State and, strange as it may seem to say so in 1996, we still had, we the British, extra-territorial jurisdiction: that is, if a non-local subject was involved in a crime he came before a Court conducted by, well me, the Assistant Political Agent in the first instance, which was like a magistrate's Court. It seems quite extraordinary now. Likewise we were still manumitting slaves. Now this all sounds like another world. By contrast, when the Wilson government announced that we were going to remove our military presence from the Gulf by the end of 1971, many commentators commented that within a few years the Sheikhly regimes would fall because they were only protected by the British military presence. Well, here we are in 1996 and all these Sheikhly regimes, whatever one may say about their actual state at this minute, are still in existence. Now would anyone in 1958 have forecast that the slavery would have

gone, the courts would have gone but the Sheikhly regimes would still be exactly as they were then. Some things change rapidly and some things seem to persist and I am not a believer in political forecasting, partly because of what I have just said.

Now to revert to your question about people, because I spent so much of my time overseas and never was a Private Secretary to a Prime Minister or anything like that, I don't have an enormous amount to offer; but a few little vignettes may or may not help. It is often said that what civil servants want from their Ministers is that they should be decisive, that they should be able to carry their colleagues in government, in cabinet and that having taken decisions they should then let their officials get on with their jobs. From the time when I was a very junior official in the department dealing with Egypt, I can say, at any rate on one occasion, Alec Douglas Home absolutely fulfilled these requirements. We were involved in a terrible Whitehall round of correspondence with Treasury and so forth about how the British subjects should be compensated who had had their property sequestered during the Suez crisis, I think it was. One day the Secretary of State, which Alec Douglas Home then was, summoned me and a colleague of mine along and he said 'tell me, how much money do we need to settle this problem?' So we said '10 million pounds, Sir'. So he then went to Cabinet and got 10 million pounds and the problem was solved and then, of course, he let the officials get on with settling the problem. This, of course, is what one likes to see in Cabinet Ministers. I think for that reason George Brown was popular, although in many respects awkward for officials; but he did have ideas and he could take decisions and he could sometimes get decisions through Cabinet; but he did, historians should know, that he did lose his temper and he did drink too much and I can remember once when he had been visited by an Ambassador at only 6 o'clock in the afternoon and spoken to his brief about something they were going to do for the Ambassador's country, having to run down the corridor after the departing Ambassador and say 'I am sorry Ambassador, Mr. Brown forgot to say that this help we are offering you is conditional on something' - George Brown by 6 o'clock in the afternoon had already had quite a few drinks, had forgotten to say half his brief. I am a great admirer of Ted Heath, who happily is still with us; in the days when I was Private Secretary to Peter Thomas, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary in the Foreign Office, the arrangement was that the Private Secretary would process all the Parliamentary business for all the Foreign Office Ministers in the Commons. (There is now a separate office called the Parliamentary Unit). So I used to process Ted Heath's parliamentary business when he was, as he said, neither a Privy, a Lord nor a

Seal and he was awfully good to work for, not only because he was a top politician, but he was actually as good as a civil servant at the things civil servants are supposed to be good at, if not better, and, moreover, he was a friend and a colleague and did not come over, not like the rather cold picture that has often come across on television; for example, after a late debate in the House, he would call his staff into the office and open a bottle and be very friendly. Ted Heath, to the people who worked with him, was not the cold fish he sometimes appeared to the public. And lastly, I would like to mention amongst Ministers I have worked for, another sort of ideal minister, namely Chris Patten, now Governor of Hong Kong. When he was Minister of Overseas Development when I was spending, as I have already said, most of my time on aid matters in Ethiopia, for rather a different reason: namely, he would listen to what one said, and actually take it in, because if one saw him a few months later he would refer back to what one had said. This is extremely encouraging for civil servants giving advice to Ministers. That's all I want to say about political personalities.

Interviewer: I am grateful for that. I think these touches are quite illuminating - thank you very much. I don't know whether you would like to go on to more general questions. I was going to ask you what you thought about Britain's withdrawal from the Gulf and its consequences for British interests generally and particularly in the Middle East, I suppose, including perhaps the Arab revival and the very different patterns of government we see in different Arab States of the so-called Arab world in the present day.

HW: Well, there are an awful lot of questions there which I don't think I can answer comprehensively! I think that the withdrawal from the Gulf was quite inevitable although, if you remember, it was not very well handled because, - oh dear I have forgotten his name - a Minister who is now dead, a very nice man, came around the Gulf at one point and effectively was saying to the Sheikhs we Britons are here as long as you want us and then, because of the Cabinet crisis over devaluation and so on, he had to come out, the same Minister, three months later and say: correction, we will be gone by the end of 1971. Goronwy Roberts - I wrote to him years later sort of teasing him about this three month change of face, but he always played a very straight bat as a good Minister and loyally stuck to the guns of his Government. No, it was inevitable. As to the rest of your questions I can't unscramble the thoughts in my mind except I'll just make one point which goes back to something I said earlier about the automatic

consulting with the US Ambassador. One of the lucky features for British diplomacy since the end of World War II is that mostly there has been a bipartisan foreign policy and we haven't had crises of conscience between Labour and Conservative supporters in the government and been worried about elections except in 19-, - sorry I can't remember the date -, when the Labour Party were both unilateralists and against Europe. Then, if they had won, many members of the diplomatic service might have found things difficult; but by and large we have had a bipartisan foreign policy and the key element in that bipartisan foreign policy has been support for NATO of which obviously the United States was and remains one of the great pillars. So I think that ever since the end of World War II it has been natural for British officials to consult their US opposite numbers over any more or less major policy matter. I would only say, of course I can't prove it, that where the Middle East has been concerned the British have overdone the role of being the loyal NATO supporter of the United States. I believe that we ought to have expressed policies, to do with Palestine in particular, different from those of the United States over many periods of post World War II history and that we were held back from doing so by an unnecessary sensitivity on the part of the Foreign Office that if they criticised the US policy toward Israel they somehow would take it out against us. My belief is that, over these periods, provided we were a loyal partner of the United States over the essential matter of NATO, we should have been more independent in the Middle East in particular.

Interviewer: Yes, thank you. That too is illuminating. Perhaps a commentary on the mistaken idea that you have always to be one thing or the other - if you are British you have to be either pro US or pro EU whereas, in fact, as sensible Americans keep pointing out to us, we have to be both and the diplomat would, I suppose, naturally prefer that. You mentioned your curious time in Iraq and I gather it was really lack of time which prevented your seeing much of the country or perhaps even forming a very precise idea of the peculiar regime that there is there. There is a tremendous contrast between the regimes say in the United Arab Emirates and a place like Iraq or Libya; and Saudi Arabia is different again. Would that be a matter for comment?

HW: It is a great mistake to imagine that all the Arab States are like each other. They patently aren't. There is no connection between, say, the old Lebanese merchant, the French educated lot as there used to be, and the Sheikhdoms of the Gulf, the Algerians, French-educated socialists, and the Egyptians. The fact is that Arab countries have

historically developed in the same way as, say, European countries. On the other hand, however, they are held together by cultural ties; these are probably stronger than similar ties covering any other group of countries; by which I mean the language above all and the Muslim religion which is so powerful in the region that it even culturally takes in the Christians in the Lebanon and elsewhere and of course the language and the religion are intimately bound up; and then, perhaps above all, Arabs tend to have a vision of a golden age after the expansion from the Arabian peninsula and by contrast they feel a sense of bitterness and almost, I think, an inferiority complex that in the modern world they have frankly been so unsuccessful. They have been unsuccessful in their domestic policies and they have been unsuccessful in their international policies, notably over the Palestine problem. So it seems to me that Arab politics have a particular element of bitterness in them when two Arab countries disagree. What tends to happen is that two Arab countries are disagreeing over their vision of the great golden past. They are saying: I represent the Arab world and you are a traitor to this vision; so that their quarrels have an extra edge to them. I am not explaining this very well, but I do think that there is something special about the Arab world in this cultural sense which, as I have said, lends an added bitterness to their quarrels; but the other side of the coin is that it is a great mistake to think of the Arabs as some kind of unified political block which, quite obviously, they have not been, if one cares to think in any detail about the politics of the Middle East.

Interviewer: I have seen something of the Frenchified side of Algeria in recent years and since then that picture has been crossed by fundamentalism of a particularly murderous kind. Did you come across manifestations of fundamentalism in your experience of Arab States?

HW: No, not directly; but certainly I have been conscious of it since the late 1970's; but again I would say that one needs to be extremely cautious about using such generalised terms as Muslim fundamentalism. Although I suppose one has to for the purpose of journalism. If you examine manifestations of Muslim fundamentalism in detail I think that you normally find that there are specific causes, that is to say Muslim fundamentalism in Egypt will have a different origin to that of Muslim fundamentalism in Algeria and they are not normally connected; they normally have quite specific causes. Unfortunately they can be brought together by the attitude of the outside world. I don't believe the outside world has handled its relations with the Islamic States very

cleverly, not least because the outside world has shown itself rather unsympathetic to Islamic causes such as over many years Palestine and more recently Bosnia.

Interviewer. Changing gear again may I go back to something you said earlier? You mentioned the media as one of the influences for change on the diplomatic career. I feel sure there must be something more to say about that.

HW: Yes, I will mention something specific arising out of the crisis over Iraq. You remember that the Iraqi regime executed an unfortunate Iranian-born British journalist called Farzad Bazoft on bogus charges of spying. Now on the day he was executed I was in danger of not being able to do my Embassy work because of the sheer number of telephone calls from the media in Britain. So when the big crisis over the invasion of Kuwait came, my recollection is that I was instrumental in an arrangement that was rather remarkable, in retrospect, that the Foreign Office agreed to: that we in the Embassy would not answer the telephone from media people in Britain but, on the other hand, would be extremely co-operative to media representatives on the spot. So I did a very great deal of giving background briefings to TV and radio representatives, giving on the record interviews on the radio and most visibly giving many live TV interviews to mainly BBC and ITN and also others. TV is a peculiar mechanism; obviously in that it can only operate by pictures and it is difficult for TV people to portray the concept that the British government has protested to the Iraqi government. The only way they can do it properly is by getting the Foreign Secretary to say it and since they can't have the Foreign Secretary every day the next best is to have the Ambassador. So I was performing a service to British TV by stating on the record certain facts that perhaps they might have preferred to have stated by the Foreign Secretary and I think I was performing a role in helping to give a true picture to British people of what was going on. Regardless of all that, it does seem to me that the media are an absolutely unavoidable part of the lives of officials these days, not just diplomatic service officials but obviously military ones as well. There is no use as it were trying to resist the tide; you have to live with it. As I think I said earlier, books have been written on this already and all I want to say is that during my time in Iraq I think that I was an illustration of a change in diplomatic service practice towards the media. We were for good reasons becoming much more media-friendly.

Interviewer: Thank you, I think that sums it up. The influence of TV on things like the

Vietnam war was I believe enormous, although dictators soon tumbled to the idea that all you had to do was to keep the cameras away from the action because it is, as you say, a visual medium. I think that we have covered a lot of ground in quite a concentrated way. But I would like to ask you if there are any particular personal satisfactions or indeed dissatisfactions or approving or disapproving views of any other aspects of the work and its importance to Britain that you would like to record at this point.

HW: I have very few reasons to complain on a personal level. I think that my talents, such as they were, were fully used. I was never going to be the sort of officer who would aspire to Washington or Paris. I think that I was very well used as mainly an Arabist albeit with a wide variety of functions covered. A personal minor dissatisfaction, although my wife might not like me to say it was minor, was that during my time in the service we never found a way of compensating spouses. I suggested from Addis Ababa, where we had a huge house, that the inspectors should look at the work being done by the spouse and rate it on the scale of X percent of a full time house-keeper; but the then Inspectorate or Personnel Policy Department or whatever ruled that this would be too close to the Head of Mission deciding the fee or salary of his own spouse; so that idea didn't get anywhere. And as far as I know we have never got anywhere with compensating our wives and sometimes husbands for the enormous amount of unpaid work they do. I think that generally it's not been an easy time, my career has not been an easy time to be a member of the British Diplomatic Service because it has been a time of national decline. Our international power has declined both absolutely and relatively; so we have in a sense been managing withdrawal from here, there, and everywhere. For reasons which would take a book to write about, governments and in this case I mean ministers have down-graded or given less importance to the idea of public service which is sad. To have been a member of a public service during a time in which the country's power has been declining and ministers have given less credit to such values as loyalty and service to country and so on. But, as I say, personally I can't complain that there was anything wrong with my career; I think that I was well used and got a lot of job satisfaction.

Interviewer: Thank you very much. If I may, I would like to indulge in one more tiny story from my side and tell you what Sir John Barnes said to me when I was inspecting his post in Tel Aviv. He was, of course, the Ambassador to Israel. He said that he had

to write as much back to the Office as he did because he had to compensate for the input of the nineteen Arabist British Ambassadors in Arab countries. That is the most extreme expression that I have ever heard of a sense of clique of trained Arabists in the service. Although their time at MECAS does seem to make them a bit of a core within the service. Did you ever find anything of that within the inside so to speak?

HW: Yes, I think John Barnes has a point. When I was in the personnel function we aimed off for specialists by appointing, for example, a non Arabist to be no. 2 to the Ambassador in Cairo who would be an Arabist. We were conscious of this danger and we aimed off for it. But there is a serious academic point, more than academic, which I half alluded to in talking about are the Arabs special. If you look at the invasion of Kuwait, for example, how is it that Arabists like me - and I don't say I have sleepless nights about it -, how is it that Arabists like me failed to forecast that Saddam would actually invade? If your specialist can't allow for that sort of thing, is there something wrong with the whole notion of specialists? Of course, I would argue there isn't; but there certainly is a danger in specialists becoming too specialist! Now to go back to John Barnes, I can remember when I was in Damascus in the '60s that sometimes the commenting between Tel Aviv, Damascus and other Arab posts would become very bitter - we did tend to take sides. This is something to be guarded against and as I hinted when I was in Personnel we did guard against it; but we never in the British diplomatic service went as far, as I think the Americans did under Kissinger, and forbade the post in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem to copy its telegrams to Arab posts and vice versa.

Interviewer: You mentioned the difficulty of forecasting. I suppose it was all the more difficult because Iraq had made aggressive gestures towards Kuwait before and never actually invaded. Were there any other particular reasons that made it difficult to forecast? I have heard it said that an unfortunate remark by the US Ambassador may have been misinterpreted by Saddam.

HW: That interview between Saddam and the US Ambassador is famous and no doubt it did something to persuade Saddam that the reaction to an invasion of Kuwait by his troops would not be too severe; but I can't believe that any ruler, even Saddam, would be persuaded entirely by one interview with an Ambassador. No, I just expand on something I said before, about my uneasiness in not myself having forecast, or not

myself even actively having allowed for the possibility, that Saddam would invade Kuwait. Of course, I am in good company. Nobody else did. But should not an Arabist have worked out that Saddam might do it? And apart from my personal worry about my failure there one has a worry about regional specialists in this sense, that regional specialists generally took the view that this was another Arab quarrel. They had seen many other Arab quarrels. These tend to get sorted out - this one would be sorted out; and moreover we were being told by the Egyptians, an Arab government, that this would be sorted out and that Saddam had said he would not invade. Now in retrospect why did we generally, including the regional specialists, assume that Egypt, an Arab government, would know Iraq, an Arab government, any better than anyone else? This may well have been a thought on the part of regional specialists getting too wrapped up in their specialism.

Interviewer. Yes, I see, thank you, that is fascinating and certainly new to me. The question that occurs to me is what would western governments have done if Ambassadors had written and said that we think that there is a real chance that Saddam may carry out this threat, after all he went into a crazy war with Iran.

HW: That is a very good question. Facile talk about drawing red lines in the sand really is facile because democratic governments, as has just been brilliantly pointed out in an article - in I forget in which paper - by Jonathan Eyal of the Royal United Institute for Defence Studies, find it very difficult to take pre-emptive action against crises in other parts of the world. There are many simple reasons, one of which is that if you start talking about what military action you would take you are accused of being a war-monger; and democratic governments don't like it; democratic populists don't like being told about military actions to draw lines in the sand. It is extremely difficult for democratic governments to take preemptive action.

Interviewer: Yes. Getting away from crisis management, I wonder if I could ask what was your most satisfactory posting in the sense of British interests? Where did you feel that we were really being most useful?

HW: Yes, that is a good question. I think that there is tremendous satisfaction to be gained from working for one's country, working for one's fellow citizens, protecting their interests. I have already said that throughout my time in the diplomatic service, at

a very mundane level, I have spent a lot of time and effort helping British exports. In the Middle East generally, where I spent so much time, there has been a quite specific British interest in peace and stability. First of all, again, because we want a peaceful area in which to do trade and it has been satisfying to be part of the British effort, - albeit rather an unsuccessful one if you like -, to bring about peace and stability in the Middle East; but more than that, I think that a country like Britain, with the history it has got, surely still has the will to play its role as a permanent member of the Security Council with the generalised duty to try and maintain peace in the world. Then again if you are working to that end as a British Ambassador or as a junior official in an Embassy there is job satisfaction in it. However, you did ask me which of my posts was most satisfying. I think there I would switch from politico-military, strategic interest to aid and say that for me personally the most satisfying post I had, at any rate in retrospect, was Ethiopia. As I said there was a mammoth international aid effort there which we can say, in the period stated, probably saved up to seven million lives; and there is no doubt at all that the British effort in the international effort was considerable. I was playing a role in advising Chris Patten on what that role should be. The international effort would not have been as effective if the British had not been playing a full part in it and I think that that humanitarian effort, although it was very expensive for the British and world taxpayer, was something that the British Embassy could be proud they had played a part in.

Interviewer: Thank you.