

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

Brookings Cafeteria Podcast: A life in foreign service

July 14, 2017

**HOSTS:**

FRED DEWS

BILL FINAN

**CONTRIBUTORS:**

AMBASSADOR JAMES DOBBINS

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews. From Vietnam peace talks through the Cold War to the war in Afghanistan, James Dobbins was on the frontlines of American diplomacy working to advance U.S. national interests and some of the world's most difficult and troubled situations. In his new memoir published by the Brookings Institution Press, Ambassador Dobbins takes the reader through his ventures around the world. In today's episode my colleague Bill Finan talks with Dobbins about his story. After the interview stay tuned to hear Brookings expert Bill Gale's thoughts on the Kansas tax cut experiment. Gale joined Brookings expert Vanessa Williamson on the most recent episode of our intersections podcast hosted by Adrianna Pita. You can listen to that through our website. Also the Brookings Podcast would love to get your feedback on our shows. So if you have a few minutes please visit Survey Monkey dot com slash Brookings podcasts or find the link on the show notes of this episode and take our short survey. And now here's Bill Finan with the interview.

FINAN: Thank you Fred. And thank you Jim for taking time to come to see us today and talk about your new book.

DOBBINS: My pleasure.

FINAN: Your book Foreign Service is your story of a half century of service as one of the country's leading diplomats. It's an extraordinary read, taking us on a personal journey that also offers a bird's eye view of U.S. foreign policy from Vietnam to Afghanistan and Iraq today. But I want to begin at the beginning – what led you to join the foreign service?

DOBBINS: Well I think it was partly my childhood. My father was a government employee, not a foreign service officer. We lived in the Philippines. It was sort of a post-colonial life with a swimming pool, tennis court, five servants. So I said, well how can I continue to live this life now? I wasn't actually able to, because that kind of existence became increasingly rare, but I think it was partially that. And I was moving to Washington where my father was reassigned. And the mother of a friend told me that there was a Foreign Service school at Georgetown at that time, I think the only undergraduate program in international affairs. And so one thing led to the other.

FINAN: You joined after serving a stint in the Navy.

Dobbins: Yeah I took the Foreign Service exam and also the exam for officer candidate school between my junior and senior year and passed both at that point the draft was still active. So I chose to go in the Navy first and foreign service agreed to delay my appointment until I completed my military service.

FINAN: And this was during the Vietnam War and you joined the Foreign Service in 1967 time as you point out was the Haight Ashbury height and San Francisco, a lot of turmoil in the country domestically. Can you describe the life of a foreign service officer at that time when you joined you were posted to Paris initially and took part in the Vietnam peace talks, too.

DOBBINS: Yeah. I mean that was kind of unusual. I came in with a class of about 50 aspirant foreign service officers. We spent a couple of months in sort of Foreign Service kindergarten. It was called the A100 course after the room in the old executive office building that used to be the State Department, where the course was originally

given. About a third of the class were assigned to Vietnam and we had a little graduation ceremony at the end, we each went up and sort of got our equivalent of a diploma, which was our first assignment and my first assignment turned out to be Paris. I could hear sort of gasps in a room of surprise and I suspect envy. So that was a stroke of luck. And then I'd been in Paris I guess less than eight or nine months, and the Vietnam peace talks started and they were located in Paris. President Johnson went on the radio said he wasn't going to run again. Temporary halt of the bombing of North Vietnam and dispatched April Hiram and Cyrus Vance to Paris and I was asked to join the delegation as its most junior member and met them at the airport and worked for them for the next year.

FINAN: There are a lot of people who appear throughout your pages. You mentioned Cyrus Vance. There's a host of others one who appears early on is Henry Kissinger that you had some dealings with. From your recollections. He was as intriguing a man then as he is now it appears the secrecy the concern about how he was described. How do you think history will characterize him?

DOBBINS: Well I think as a person and particularly as a boss he was something of a monster, very demanding, flew into rages. No I never was particularly the object of his but my boss who worked directly for him was and there are lots of other anecdotes and many biographies of Kissinger that showed that side of his character. I think he's mellowed a lot. I saw him recently and recalled a time when I worked for him on the seventh floor of the State Department. At the end of it, he sort of said as I was leaving 'I hope I wasn't too tough on you now', which I thought was sweet. But I mean he clearly was a towering figure. At the time I worked for him, he was both secretary of state and

national security adviser, which was a really odd combination. So he would send memos to the president and then he would put his own memos on top of the memos to the president along with the memo from the secretary of defense explaining what their differences were and recommending a course of action. This couldn't last forever and in the end Jerry Ford, by that time the president, fired the secretary of defense and effectively demoted Kissinger, making him only the secretary of state but not a national security adviser.

FINAN: Was that the only time that had ever happened that someone held both those positions.

DOBBINS: I believe it is.

FINAN: You spent a considerable amount of time in Europe in a variety of positions both before and after the end of the Soviet In fact you served under Nixon Ford as you just mentioned Reagan and George H.W. Bush would you feel comfortable describing U.S. diplomacy in those two areas. Continuity and nuclear anxiety before opportunity and possibility after.

DOBBINS: Well the first part of my career was of course during the Cold War and the 1980s which was when the Cold War was, in retrospect, winding toward a close, it didn't seem like that for most of that decade. In fact it was in many ways the height of tensions. President Reagan came into office with a strong anti-Soviet reputation, talked about the evil empire. At one point jokingly, and, not realizing he was recorded, he said we start bombing in the morning. And at one point a NATO exercise almost led to an actual nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union. It was called Able Archer. It was, I think it was

83 and it was periodically NATO exercise moving to the brink of nuclear war. Now it didn't actually move any weapons. It was a command post exercise. But apparently the Soviets were picking up the message traffic and tensions were already high. We were deploying nuclear armed intermediate range missiles into Europe, some of which could reach Moscow within 15 minutes. So things were on a hair trigger. We only learned years later how closely that we had come. So that was the first half of my European experience was 15 years or so of Cold War which seemed to be getting colder at the time. And then of course there was an abrupt change toward the end of the Reagan administration and then into the George H.W. Bush administration, basically coinciding with Gorbachev's arrival and a much more emollient and sympathetic Soviet leadership. And then I was back in Washington in the European bureau during German unification, end of the Warsaw Pact and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

FINAN: That's one of the most momentous moments I think in U.S. diplomatic history, that the reunification of Germany that occurred and it was a riveting to read those chapters in your book about how that came together under Secretary of State James Baker and George H.W. Bush.

DOBBINS: Yeah I think the team that was running U.S. foreign policy at the time was probably the most experienced and qualified in our nation's history. The president himself was probably the most qualified of them, that's unusual. Usually the president has more qualified advisers but the president had been ambassador to China. He had been the head of the CIA. He had been of course vice president for eight years and quite active in foreign policy with a lot of travel on behalf of President Reagan. And so he came into office with a wealth of international experience and of course he was also a war hero in

World War Two, having been shot down and rescued at sea. And then you had Brant Scowcroft who'd already been national security adviser under Jerry Ford and Jim Baker who had been White House Chief of Staff and Secretary of the treasury before he came to state. I don't think we've ever had quite that combination before and so I think the wrapping up of the Cold War diplomacy surrounding the unification of Germany was, I think, an almost unmatched example of well-coordinated, well conducted diplomacy with tremendous payoff. It was a fortuitous confluence of personalities and not just of the United States. I mean Helmut Kohl and Mikhail Gorbachev were also extraordinary personalities.

FINAN: Under George H.W. Bush you were the U.S. ambassador who was then the European community and during your time it became the European Union. Today we have Brexit and the talk of a disintegrating Union, what do you think has changed from then to now in European thinking?

DOBBINS: Well I think the European Union expanded quickly after that as a result of the breakup of the Warsaw Pact and the changes, it doubled in size, it took in a lot of countries that had only recently emerged from communism countries that were less developed economically than the Western European Core. I think that produced some very beneficial results in terms of stabilizing these countries and allowing them to develop quickly. But it definitely diluted consensus within the community and made it more difficult to manage. The high point of European unity came with the creation of a single currency. I think people expected that that would be followed by a political union a stronger political union with control not just over monetary policy but fiscal policy taxes and expenditures on a European wide basis. But the Europe that emerged from this expansion was too

disparate and too differentiated levels of economic development to move in that direction. You know at the same point there's a tremendous wellspring of support for a European Union in Europe, particularly among elites, who still if they don't remember or at least know about what happened when nationalism dominated European policymaking. I think you've seen in recent elections a resurgence of support and in fact there's a poll just out, a Pew poll, which shows that support in every country including in the U.K. for the European Union has gone up significantly over the past three or four months. And that's probably partly a reaction to it and a horror. Partially, I think a reaction to the American election and shows that the European Union's still got some life in it.

FINAN: I want to jump to Somalia in 1991; there you oversaw the withdrawal of U.S. troops from that country after a disastrous moment in U.S. military history. What are your thoughts on Somalia today? Was it the apogee and the need here of the New World Order George H.W. Bush envisioned?

DOBBINS: Well first George H.W. Bush wasn't responsible for the collapse in Somalia. No, he was responsible for the intervention. But the collapse occurred under President Clinton. If I was going to criticize George H.W. Bush, and I do in the book, it was for allowing the conflict in the Balkans initially and Bosnia and Croatia. But expanding over time into Macedonia and Kosovo to unravel. Yugoslavia is probably going to break up under any circumstances. But I think more attention earlier on might have ameliorated the result. So I think that was if you will the first indication that the New World Order was not going to be as orderly as one would like to be fair it was a lot more orderly than the world that preceded it. You have this impression, because we got involved in Bosnia and Kosovo and Somalia and Haiti in the 90s, that there was a lot going on. But in fact there



was a drastic decline in civil wars a drastic decline in refugees a drastic decline in violence organized violence and virtually no international conflicts during that period and that was largely as a result of the fact that the United States and the Soviet Union and then the United States and Russia could collaborate in ending a lot of these proxy conflicts. And because the international community as a whole dispatched peacekeeping forces and brokered settlements to a lot of long running conflict so the new world order that Bush probably prematurely you know heralded actually did exist it wasn't as perfect as one would have hoped. But the 90s in retrospect looked pretty good.

FINAN: You mentioned Kosovo and actually Somalia seemed to be the moment when you became a point man who ended up being a number of interventions that marked the 90s into the early 2000s Kosovo Haiti Afghanistan Iraq. I'd like you to tell us a little bit about each of those. Can you tell us about Kosovo. That was the first major intervention under Bill Clinton. Well in Bosnia it was the first Bosnia. Right.

DOBBINS: That's right. So I was originally brought in to manage Somalia after the Blackhawk Down incident and the president's decision to reinforce our military position there. But then to withdraw it after a six month period. And so my job was just to make sure there were no further embarrassments, that we got out quietly and that there was a decent interval and that other countries stayed behind to try to pacify the country after we left. And that was successful within that narrow ambit. Now of course Somalia relapsed into what now amounts to 25 years of civil war which is still going on a civil war which has become increasingly radicalized with emergence of you know not just clan based conflict but radical Muslim jihadist groups.

FINAN: I was then tapped to handle the diplomacy intended on our first our invasion of Haiti and then three years later our departure. By that time I'd sort of become Mr. failed state and was increasingly called upon to handle these. I wasn't involved in the original Bosnia American intervention in Bosnia in 95. Dick Holbrooke had that job. And I was in the White House doing Western Hemisphere as a special assistant to the president. But at the end of that decade I was brought back to be essentially what Holbrooke had been assistant secretary of state and special envoy for the Balkans and handled both the stabilization phase in Bosnia which was still going on and we still had tens of thousands of troops there and the intervention in Kosovo and then at the end of the Clinton administration I had intended to retire and was asked to stay on to handle the diplomacy attendant on the intervention in Afghanistan and the formation of an Afghan government to replace the Taliban.

DOBBINS: You mention you in title your chapter on Afghanistan losing the peace.

FINAN: Why I'm critical of George W. Bush administration both with respect to Afghanistan and then Iraq. I think it grossly underestimated the scale of the challenge that it was taking on and occupying these countries and trying to end trying to reform them as we later discovered the jobs were much more demanding we ultimately put over 150000 American troops into Iraq and well over 100000 into Afghanistan. But in the early months we were in denial. We were saying that they were going to welcome us you know with open arms that there would be minimal requirement for reconstruction and in the case of Iraq it could pay for it from its own sources of revenue. And this all began in Afghanistan where you know at the end we'd been in Afghanistan a whole year and we had less troops in Afghanistan are we have today. And there was no Afghan army and there were no

Afghan police force at the time. Whereas now we do have an Afghan army and an Afghan police force of some considerable size. And so there was just a bit of wishful thinking. And I think its source was the fact that the Republicans had been in opposition through the 90s they'd been critical of the Clinton interventions they were disparaging of nation building. If you recall the four and a half hours of TV debate between Gore and Bush in the 2000 presidential campaign the only foreign policy issue that was raised was nation building. And Bush said we weren't going to do it anymore. What a happy time that must have been when you know the only foreign policy worth mentioning was nation building in four and a half hours of presidential debate. But that's what it was.

FINAN: That became a bad word just like democracy promotion.

DOBBINS: It had been controversial in the 90s and so the new administration came in having pledged in the campaign not to do it. And then George Bush, having promised not to do nation building, actually invaded three new countries in his first three years in office so we went into first into Afghanistan in 2001 then we went into Iraq in 2003 and we actually invaded Haiti again for the second time in 2000 and for although we only stayed for a few weeks in Haiti and then turned it over to the U.N. but clearly nation building was a growth industry. And in his second term Bush embraced what he had rejected in his first term and probably went overboard in support of democracy promotion and the idea that these societies could be fundamentally transformed. But in those early in those early months and indeed those early years there was a minimalist approach first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq. You know Don Rumsfeld had an explanation for this.

FINAN: He said that Don Rumsfeld was the secretary of defense under George W. Bush.

DOBBINS: So Don Rumsfeld wrote an op-ed and gave speeches and he said that by flooding Bosnia and Kosovo with international manpower and economic assistance we turned those two societies into permanent wards of the international community. And he said we were going to avoid that first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq by minimizing the commitment of resources he was effectively transposing the argument in the 90s over welfare reform in this country to the international realm. And the analogy could not have been more inapt this minimalist approach in which you reinforce only under failure add more resources and more manpower. Only after your initial commitment had failed. Turned out to be vastly more expensive than facing up to the scale of the problem in the beginning. Making the initial commitments, as we had done in Bosnia and Kosovo, stabilizing the situation and then withdrawing gradually once you've achieved those objectives and I guess we get out of Libya to the list of those countries to where well Libya was in a sense even worse and we didn't even make a minimal effort once the regime collapsed.

FINAN: Donald Trump's entered office calling for a new U.S. foreign policy one that begins with thinking about the U.S. domestically first and world second. Do you have any thoughts on the new administration's first six months of foreign policy, and I'm asking that with the knowledge that you served under 10 presidents and 13 secretaries of state during your tenure,

DOBBINS: I mean it's hard to pin down exactly what the policy is because there have been a number of reversals. Certainly their rhetoric is characterized by resistance to global leadership and the burdens that it requires a willingness to reopen old bargains in the trade area and more generally and a more nationalistic and a more inward looking

approach. Now some of the rhetoric hasn't been matched yet by action and some of the actions have been mildly encouraging. So I do think that the rhetoric and the contradictions and reversals have created significant concerns abroad about the reliability of the United States. I personally don't believe that there's an alternative to American leadership contrary to principal foreign policy and principal economic advisers H.R. McMaster and Gary Cohn wrote an article in which they said there's no global community there's just a group of nations that compete. And the answer is quite the opposite. There is a global community and it's made up of a group of countries that compete and they compete to some degree under a set of norms and rules that have been set by the United States through the creation of the United Nations the World Bank the IMF a whole host of other institutions and is undergirded by American power and American willingness to commit. I'm for one not prepared to say that this is over because there's not another claimant to international leadership. Chinese might aspire to it one day but they're certainly not interested in acquiring it these responsibilities and how the Russians just want to undermine the system. They don't want to create an alternative. And none of the other countries have to wait or really the interest in playing this role. So I think there's a cause for concern. There's also a cause for concern just as there is with any new administration new administrations come into the office with the exception maybe of the George H.W. Bush administration with a degree of amateurism. You know people either haven't been in office for a long time or have never been in office and are now in high positions of responsibility including the presidency in many cases and they tend to make big mistakes like Kennedy and the Bay of Pigs you think of Johnson and the decision to ramp up the war in Vietnam. You think of Iran-Contra with Reagan all of that was a little

later in his administration. You think of the Somalia debacle in the first few weeks of Clinton's term. And of course the worst mistake of all the decision to invade Iraq in the second year of George W. Bush's term in office. So new administrations are prone to make damaging mistakes and this administration has less experience and is slower getting itself organized than its predecessors. So I'm concerned about, you know, inadvertent mistakes either as a result of a failure to take action when it's needed or as a result of as many of these other examples taking action that's ill considered.

FINAN: Jim thank you for coming by today to talk about your new book Foreign Service: Five decades on the frontlines of American diplomacy.

DOBBINS: My pleasure.

(MUSIC)

DEWS: You can find Ambassador Dobbins' book on our web site, it's called Foreign Service: Five decades on the frontlines of American diplomacy. Ambassador Dobbins also participated in an event at Brookings on June 26 hosted by Peter Baker of the New York Times. And now, the Kansas tax cut experiment. Senior fellow and tax expert Bill Gale on why the tax cut experiment in Kansas matters for our understanding of whether tax cuts boost the economy and the implications for tax reform at the federal level. This audio comes from our Unpacked video series, where Brookings experts provide analysis of Trump administration policies and news.

GALE: I'm Bill Gale, a senior fellow in economic studies at the Brookings Institution. The Kansas governor's goal in 2012 was to boost the economy and his way of doing that was to cut income taxes across the board and to cut business taxes to zero. So the state income tax rate on business income went from about 7 to about zero. The idea was this was going to boost investment, boost employment, and get the economy going again. It's kind of a classic supply side trickle down type of theory that has been proposed by Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and many others. The Kansas tax cuts were a good lab test, if you will, of how supply side tax cuts work. The evidence is in and they didn't work very well. Kansas did not grow faster than neighboring states. It didn't even grow faster than it had in previous years. It did not grow faster than the country as a whole. The experiment with tax policy was such a failure that a Republican controlled legislature not only voted to raise taxes and undo most of the effects of the tax cuts but they did so over the veto of the governor. This is not a case of liberals coming to power and undoing what the conservative governor imposed. This is a case of the Republicans in power looking at the effects of the tax cut on the economy and making the decision that the tax cut was a bad idea. Kansas is only a small part of the country obviously but I think the experiment there has important implications for federal or national tax reform. The first one is not to expect tax cuts to boost the economy much, if at all. The second implication, I think, that is important from Kansas has to do with the tree in the business income. Kansas cut the business income tax rate to zero.

They did that hoping to promote a lot of economic activity. It simply didn't happen. What did happen was people characterized income from labor into business forms so that they could take advantage of the non-tax rate on business income at the federal level.

You see the Republicans wanting to reduce the corporate business tax rate to the range of 20 or 15 percent. And the lesson from Kansas is this this might induce some increase in economic activity. It certainly will induce a massive increase in tax sheltering as people move income from labor to some form of capital some form of business income. I think there's another implication from Kansas, too, which is more general than just taxes. When it cut taxes, Kansas's bond rating went down in capital markets and it had to cut essential services and education, infrastructure, Medicaid, and so on. And when people saw that lower taxes meant lower services and they saw what those services were that were being taken away. A majority of Kansans then decided they would not prefer to keep the tax cuts. The implications for tax reform include the idea that tax reform is not just about taxes. It's about what taxes pay for. And we tend to stovepipe policy discussions, talking about taxes at one point and talking about spending at another point, and that misses an important point which is that those two items are linked, and how much we want the government to spend needs to be linked to how much we're willing to pay in taxes. So I would like the tax reform discussion to include a discussion of what it is we're getting from the taxes that we actually have.

DEWS: Hey listeners, want to ask an expert a question? You can by sending an email to me at [BCP@brookings.edu](mailto:BCP@brookings.edu). If you attach an audio file I'll play it on the air and I'll get an expert to answer and include it in an upcoming episode. Thanks to all of you who have sent in questions already. And that does it for this edition of The Brookings cafeteria brought to you by the Brookings Podcast Network. Follow us on Twitter at policy podcasts. My thanks to audio engineer and producer Gaston Reboredo with assistance from Mark Hoelscher. Vanessa Sauter is the producer, Bill Finan does the book



interviews. Our interns are Sam Dart, Chynna Holmes, and Brian Harrington. Design and web support comes from Jessica Pavone, Eric Abalahin, and Rebecca Viser. And thanks to David Nassar for his support. You can subscribe to the Brookings Cafeteria Podcast on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get podcasts. Listen to it at all the usual places. Visit us online at [Brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu). Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.

(MUSIC)