

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH ALAN V. LeBARON

CONDUCTED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT and DEDE YOW

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TS: Alan, why don't we begin with you just talking a little bit about when you were born and where you were born and a little bit about where you went to school?

AL: [I was born in] 1947 in Boise, Idaho. When I graduated from high school in 1965, Boise had approximately thirty thousand people in it, which, in a way is misleading, because Boise was the largest city between Portland—400 miles away—and Salt Lake City—300 miles the other way. The only city that we were close to was Salt Lake, and that had close to 200,000; we thought that was pretty big. The other way, Calgary, I guess you would have to get to before you found anything heading north. Las Vegas was another 1,000 or so miles [away] also.

TS: Now, is Boise the state capitol?

AL: Yes

TS: Okay. So you've got all the government complexes.

AL: It is.

TS: That's still a very small town.

AL: It was small and very isolated in the 1940s and '50s. In fact, when I grew up in the early '60s, we, like other parts of the United States, were far removed from the areas that were influenced by Berkeley or, say, Freedom Summer, which I never heard about. Bob Dylan was not well-known, or Joan Baez even—not in Boise, not in my group. We were still listening to music of the 1950s and wearing our hair like Elvis Presley.

TS: Well, that's true of a lot of the country as late as '65.

AL: Yes, it was not as it is now.

TS: Yes. Well, you must not have gone straight to college because your graduation date was '74 according to the college records. That would be nine years later, so what happens in the interim after you got out of high school?

AL: I didn't go for any of my degrees straight without a break in between or a deviation. When I graduated from high school, it wasn't really a graduation; it was more of an exit pass because my GPA was a 1.62. I was not . . .

TS: You're kidding! In high school?

AL: In high school.

TS: You've got to try real hard to be that low in high school.

AL: You do. My absentee rate in high school was 50 percent in my senior year.

TS: What were you doing?

AL: I was doing about everything except going to class.

TS: You're not out walking the trails or becoming a nature lover?

AL: No. Unfortunately, I was just pretty much living on my own and doing what I pleased, which was just hanging around with my friends.

TS: So you're not living with your parents when you're in high school?

AL: I was living back and forth with my grandparents and my parents. It was a time period in which I think the schools did not demand much, and my family did not demand much because my family was not of that class. So I pretty much did what I wanted, which was a poor choice.

TS: What class were they?

AL: My father was a farmer and . . .

TS: So did you all actually live on a farm?

AL: We did when I was born, and then as I was growing up, we lived on the far edge of Boise. So we had farming animals around us and lots of . . .

TS: Did you grow potatoes out there?

AL: Fruit and vegetables, yes. But my father also worked various jobs in construction.

TS: So it wasn't an academically oriented family, is what you're saying.

AL: No, no, not at all. I am the only one to graduate from college.

TS: So, given the fact that you hadn't heard about Freedom Summer and all that, you're kind of a rebel without a cause at this point?

AL: I was without a cause, but I'm not sure I was a rebel! Yes. I ended up in the military. When I graduated, I immediately went to Oregon where I picked fruit and worked in the fields. That was my first rural experience with immigrants and with winos, people that would figure prominently in my life as time goes by.

TS: So were they Mexican people that came up to pick the fruit?

AL: Yes. Well, the Mexican people were the fruit pickers in large part. There were also older people left over from the Ozarks, the Depression era people who never found steady jobs. The winos were mainly white and out of . . . just alcoholics. But after six months working in the fruit, I was turning eighteen. So I joined the Air Force at that point since all my friends, as soon as they were becoming eighteen, received draft papers. I was not in college and had no other easy out. Really, I had no idea of where Vietnam was or what was going on there. I was very uneducated. I mean, to get out of high school with that diploma, I was very unaware about the world.

TS: Well, it's really not until about 1965 that people started focusing on Vietnam.

DY: Yes, I was going to say, you were not alone in not knowing where Vietnam was.

AL: Most people going into the military, as you know—certainly the ones going to Vietnam—were largely uneducated about it. In fact, I think the only real reason that I joined instead of waiting until I was drafted is that people I knew, my friends, were all trying to join before they were drafted. That seemed to be the way out, the only way out that my group knew. I had never heard of anyone going to Canada.

DY: Or into the National Guard.

AL: Or into the National Guard. I didn't even know if that was an option, and I don't think I would have cared anyway. I was pretty much directionless, and going into the Air Force sounded like a good plan.

TS: Well, was it a good plan?

AL: It was in many respects because that was when I found some discipline, like a lot of young men in my circumstances in that time period, and during World War II and such. As an American historian, you're well aware that the military is actually what gave [many young people] a direction and their first taste of education.

TS: Right. Well, how many years did you have to sign up for?

AL: Four years.

TS: So you spent four years in the Air Force?

AL: I did. Three years and ten months. They gave a two-month early-out, as it was termed in those days.

TS: To go back to school?

- AL: No, it was a way for them to cut costs in the military. I was already at a point where I think I was not considered that useful. People at the end of their careers—or the end of their four-year terms—if they were not re-enlisting, they were easily expendable as new people were coming in.
- TS: Did you pick up a skill while you were in the Air Force, or did they train you to do anything in particular? To be a mechanic or anything?
- AL: Very mildly. No, I was in administration. My test scores that I took when I entered—which could not be based on any education I had, but just on innate skills or luck of my pen—demonstrated that my high skills were in science and abstract thinking, in a number of categories. My lowest skill was in a category they called administration.
- TS: So they made you an administrator. [laughter]
- AL: I swear to you, that's the absolute truth! I heard a few other people share the same story. So I think that what happens is, at that time, regardless of your scores, if you're an enlistee—especially in the time of Vietnam when so many people were going into the Air Force—they put you in the slot that was empty at that moment when you were there. They didn't take the time to put you anywhere . . . Maybe because I was just an enlisted person in the Air Force, they considered it not very important which field you were put in. But I did learn something about office work and on a very, very primitive basis—not only on the level, but considering the point in time—in computer programming.
- TS: Yes, it was pretty primitive then.
- AL: Yes, it was awfully primitive. It was mainly making a few marks on a card and sending them back to a computer room. So, yes, I suppose I developed some office skills, but more than that, I developed the skills of learning to think in a broader way about my life. I spent three years in England, so that gave me a strong international background, at least a foundation.
- DY: Did you travel while you were over there?
- AL: I traveled around England a lot; my first year, I hitchhiked extensively all around England from top to bottom. Then, in my second year, after I bought my own car, I picked up hitchhikers. Europeans in the 1960s—young Europeans—hitchhiked a lot, and it was not considered a bad thing as it is now. Most people realized that they were probably university students, and this was an accepted part of their education. I found myself fascinated by the people that I picked up, coming from these places that I'd never heard of. I had a very, very shallow knowledge of where places like France or Germany were located. So that was a very influential part of my life, too. When I left there, of course, I went back to the United States. In fact, I was shipped back and stationed in Texas for the last six months. After that, I worked in Chicago for about six months in a warehouse, saved my money, and went back to Europe. That was my dream that had fermented in my head as I

picked up these hitchhikers, to go back and do that myself. I spent nearly a year hitchhiking around Europe and North Africa. All of that before I started college.

TS: Did you pick up languages easily?

AL: No, I never picked up languages easily. I had to struggle for language. I think part of that is that my own English language suffered. When I started college, my reading level was quite low. I struggled for the first two years just to read textbooks. I became a very serious student from Day One in college, [just] as a number of our students at Kennesaw become very serious after they've had a life of mishaps or when they're older.

TS: Well, you have a lot in common with our students as a nontraditional student, I think, going back.

AL: Yes, and I think this has done me well. It has made me understand our students in ways that I may not have been able to understand otherwise. As a matter of fact, my first college classes ever were two college classes with the University of Maryland in the overseas division they have for service people, while I was in England. Although I did moderately well in those classes, because I was somewhat still into my old habits of being footloose and fancy-free, I spent more time exploring England. But still I realized at the end of those classes that I really enjoyed doing college. That, I think has given me, yes, a real sense of some of our students and a certain confidence in them and a willingness to work longer with the nontraditional ones, knowing that many of the ones who come to us with this mixed-up schedule of coming into college, going from one degree to another, or getting everything backwards, so that by the time they're ready to graduate, they've got courses here and there, they've got Cs and Bs, but I've noticed in my class that they can actually do good work if they're directed to it. So I don't mind spending a little extra time with these students. I feel that I really would have no excuse not to.

DY: Well, you would, but you just choose to serve, and I guess you have a tremendous sense of empathy, too. It's a gift you bring, especially to this institution at the time that you came. Let's see, you didn't get to Kennesaw until '91, so we need to fill in some other spaces.

TS: Where were you intellectually when you came back to college? You obviously didn't know a lot, but you had broadening experiences with all that travel, I would think.

AL: I came back with two intellectual goals, or two intellectual thirsts, which, in a way, I really had even before I became interested in school or before I became a good student. Even during the time when I was a bad student in high school, I had a real interest in philosophy. I didn't read so much philosophy—I read some while I was in England—but I did meet some people who liked philosophy. I was loosely associated with a group that might have been termed a philosophy club—

maybe as close to that as a group of enlistee grunts in the military could be. But our discussions and our interests—and sometimes our topics—were based on different points of view and philosophies. So I really had an interest in learning philosophy and considered a philosophy degree. The second one was international. I was interested in the international world before. Maybe being from Boise, I realized that Boise was in the middle of nowhere. My sister and I were watching television once [when] I was about ten. I saw this old black-and-white movie, and this fellow—obviously a country bumpkin—gets out of the taxi and hands the guy a dime. The taxi driver is insulted with the dime. And then the guy gets out, and he's looking up at these tall skyscrapers. Wow! He's so impressed; he's looking around, and he's making one foolish country mistake after another. Someone asked him, "Where are you from?" He said, "Boise, Idaho." [laughter] And I thought, "Hmm, am I from an isolated, far-out area?"

But, yes, my hitchhiking and my experiences—the two places I went in the military—the two years in England, and then there was a one-month temporary duty in Libya, which was just before [Mouamar] Khadafi took over. I was there in the last months, so they were coming up to the base and protesting. We were not allowed to go into the cities, which I and a few others did anyway. It was punishable if we were caught, and some people who went in were knifed and killed, so it was dangerous. So I had learned enough and also I met a lot of people rotating into England that were coming out of Vietnam, so by the time I left the service—and certainly by the time I had finished hitchhiking—I was pretty aware of the world. I was also anti-Vietnam; the war, that is. I had some strong political views before I went to college by my experiences.

During hitchhiking, I met a lot of college students, and I ended up befriending various university students in Berlin and Holland and various Italian cities. I met socialist students—this was in 1970 and '71, over that time period. So there were some strong socialist movements among the universities, and I met and interacted with the students. In Chicago—though I only spent six months there—I became involved in the Young Democrats group. I remember I took part in a rather large Spiro Agnew demonstration when he came to Chicago, and I was in some [other] marches in Chicago. So even though I was totally uneducated when I went into the service, by the time I got out—and by the time I had hitchhiked around Europe and spent the time in Chicago—I was pretty well politicized.

TS: Okay. Well, actually you got through Boise State pretty rapidly, given that history. You were through by '74, and it sounds like you really weren't there as a student very much before '71 or '72.

AL: I worked very hard as a student, but I was also very active as a student. I was campaign manager for some people running for president. I was campaign manager for a team—a Mexican-American for president and an African-American for vice president—who ran on the same ticket, which was pretty radical in those days at Boise State. The vice president actually won in a split ticket, but I was involved in that.

TS: You're talking about student government president?

AL: Yes, yes. I became chair of a number of committees. I helped create the first international student committee, because, although we only had fifty or sixty students—just like Kennesaw when I came here—international students were lumped together with minority students. That's still a problem on this campus. They still haven't outgrown that, which puts them several decades behind. But there are special interests in turf wars here—you can delete all that.

TS: It's part of the history of the institution.

AL: It's come a long way, of course, on this campus, but it was something. I was much involved with student government there. I also traveled; I spent my summers traveling. In my first summer at Boise State, I had a two-month Ameripass, if you remember those with Greyhound Bus. For \$150, you could have an unlimited bus pass through the United States and Canada. It could be extended for another fifty dollars, and I did that. Actually, I only spent six weeks, but I traveled all over the United States and north Canada. And then the second year, I spent two and a half months traveling by pickup truck with a friend of mine. Starting out from Boise, we crossed over the southern United States, went through Mexico, went into Central America and went to Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, and came back. We were camping out, which I had become very good at, hitchhiking around Europe. I was dedicated. I actually worked very hard. My last semester, I took twenty credits. After the first two years, I managed to get down to where I could read fast and do other things. I took speed-reading classes—things to get me going.

TS: You graduated from Boise State in '74 and then [from] the University of Maryland with a master's in '76. Are there any mentors from those years that stand out who maybe helped direct you where you wanted to go, faculty or otherwise?

AL: There are quite a few people that influenced me in various ways, but during those years, I was never very close to any faculty members or to any one area. I was very much an involved person with the students, but I suppose by that time, I had become a rebel with a cause. [chuckle] I was quite radical in my approach and my criticism of—I don't know; I don't want to say I was so critical, but . . .

TS: Alienated from mainstream culture?

AL: Yes, I think that might be a good way to put it.

DY: Well, probably from university administration.

AL: Yes. I don't think I found myself angry, though—not at university administration. I liked many of my instructors; they were important to me. I took all my classes seriously; I learned a lot from them. I don't remember being in any class that I thought was a waste of time. I found, though, that . . . I think I was

searching. I know that I wanted to learn. I was not satisfied with the mainstream; I could not believe in the mainstream. But I was just so busy; I don't think I ever really settled in on one person.

TS: When did it start to dawn on you that you wanted to teach?

AL: It never really dawned on me that I wanted to teach. [laughter]

TS: All right.

AL: I think probably the real thing I wanted to do was to learn. I liked the university life; I wanted to continue learning. I felt from the beginning of university that I was behind. I knew that I had missed a lot of years, and I knew that I was weak in many areas, especially when I met someone with a thoroughly solid education my own age. People, for example, that I would meet had a grounded education in English grammar or science, mathematics, history, literature—especially literature. They may have read some of the great works of literature. Of course, we're all limited in what we remember, but it became obvious to me—especially in those early years—that I was limited as far as what a person who had graduated from a university was expected to know. I knew that there were a lot of holes.

DY: Well, I guess if you judged it against the established canon of what one was supposed to know, but my guess is that you probably had experiences and reading on your own that would have been outside that canon but very worthwhile.

AL: Yes, that's true. I did read things, and, certainly, I had experiences that were way outside the canon which were probably very strong experiences. But I think that I would never have held myself up as a person capable of teaching. I never thought about teaching. The time when I became a teacher is immediately after I graduated from Boise State. I obtained a job teaching English in Japan. That was not because I wanted to teach; that was because that was the job available in Japan, and I wanted to go to Asia. My first plan was to go back to Europe and try to go to graduate school in Europe. When I got back from Europe—hitchhiking—I had no money; I was flat broke. I got back to the United States with, I think, sixty dollars in my pocket. I had nothing in the bank; I had no job; I was essentially, I suppose, homeless.

So I went to live with my grandparents. At that time, no one questioned whether I had been living in Boise or not, so I easily got into Boise State, which was very good for me. What I wanted to do was to go to Asia—to see Asia. My plan was to see the entire world at that time. So I ended up teaching. I spent a year and a half there the first time I taught in Japan, before I went to the University of Maryland. It was during that year and a half that I really discovered that teaching was something that I liked to do and something that I thought I could do. I realized that by teaching, I was still learning a lot. As a matter of fact, that's the first time I had a chance to go back and learn English grammar to a certain degree, because as I taught English, I had to learn a lot more about it.

DY: I didn't learn English grammar until I taught developmental studies at the University of Georgia and I had to teach grammar.

AL: Yes.

TS: What did you do your master's thesis on?

AL: Latin American history.

TS: But what was the thesis?

AL: Guatemala and the time period from 1945 to 1951 was the focus. That was the period of a president by the name of Juan Jose Arevalo, who was president of Guatemala from 1945 to 1951. He was the first legitimately elected president in Guatemala. In 1944, a dictator had been overthrown, and a popular government was established.

DY: Who was that dictator?

AL: Jorge Ubico.

TS: That's about three years before the CIA intervention.

AL: That's right; the CIA intervention was [in] 1954. That was my original interest—the CIA invasion. Being a child of the times and having my first real intellectual awakening in the Air Force, I'd begun to learn about the Vietnam War from people I met, the people I talked to, and from the propaganda sessions that the military had with us. To me, from Day One, the first one of these training sessions on Vietnam we had in my first month in the Air Force—even as an uneducated person, it was painfully obvious to me [that] it was pure propaganda.

TS: We're fighting to make the world safe from communism.

AL: Exactly. It was too overblown, too over the top to believe. At any rate, that was my original focus. But by the time I finished my master's thesis, it was concentrated on the 1945 to 1951 time period.

TS: Well, I'm impressed by the diversity of your interests. I can see how you would get into global history because you spent all this time traveling in Europe, but then you want to go to Japan, but then you do your master's thesis on Latin America. So there's not one place in the world that you're saying, "This is what I really want to know about." It looks like you're interested in everything and how it all runs together.

AL: Absolutely. Before I went into the Air Force, I had tried to join the Navy; that's what I really wanted to do.

TS: And see the world?

AL: Yes. My major education before that was a few things I had picked up from television and comic books. One of the things I remembered in my head as I was trying to apply to the Navy was this Navy show, or this show I saw where some sailor said, “I joined the Navy to see the world and to learn how to fight.” That sounded like a reasonable goal in my head at that time. I thought, “Yes, that’s what I want to do, see the world and learn how to fight.” [laughter] But the Navy was full; so many people were trying to get out of Vietnam. They didn’t have the pure reasons like I did, see. [chuckle]

TS: And, of course, they didn’t want somebody that wanted to get in there to learn how to fight.

AL: When I was in undergraduate school, one of my history professors asked me, “If you go to graduate school, what would you like to specialize in?” I said, “World history.” He chuckled and said, “There is no world history. You can’t do world history; you have to have a specialty.” Which was true at the time, and it’s still mostly true now.

TS: That’s what you’re battling against now, isn’t it?

AL: Exactly. When I was in Guatemala, I was much influenced by my trip there, as [by] my other trips. I saw the Maya of the Highlands in Guatemala, and I saw the Guatemalan military with machine guns around as well. I suppose I was fascinated in the Maya in a way that tourists are usually fascinated, that is their brightly woven, skillfully woven clothes and such in the villages—their round, dignified faces that are so tied to the earth. But I did a research paper on the CIA invasion into Guatemala, and the resources at the time were pretty evenly divided between those that said—and these were usually the Guatemalan-Latin American sources—that the United States invaded out of its imperialistic interest, and the United States . . .

TS: To protect the banana plantations?

AL: Yes. But the U.S. authors at the time—and this was pretty much across the board, the academic presses as well as the popular presses—claimed that the CIA invaded because it was a necessary move to thwart the communists and make sure there was no communist beachhead established in Guatemala. When I finished the report at Boise State, I completely did not know. Both arguments seemed possible and . . .

TS: The guy, I forgot his name now, but he wasn’t communist was he, that they overthrew?

AL: No, no. Arbenz. Jacobo Arbenz. No. Of course, the allegations are that he was a communist sympathizer, or he was an opportunist that took advantage of the socialist movement. There are various ways of interpreting him, but it would be hard to demonstrate that he was [a communist].

TS: But he was for social reform, wasn't he?

AL: He was in favor of reform. Whether it was socialist reform or not, it is sometimes dependant upon the observer. For example, is land reform socialism? It wasn't socialism when the United States forced land reform on Japan during the occupation after World War II, but it was socialism according to the US government when it was tried in Guatemala.

TS: But you're being very objective at this time, given your radical views, that you say that you can't decide . . .

AL: I think I've always been open. I hope that I have remained open to argument. I think I was very objective at that time. I was trying very hard to understand. When I ended up in graduate school at the University of Maryland and was given a topic, or told to choose a topic, I came back to that because I had been so left in the air with that research paper. I wanted to go back and pick it up again. For my master's, I was able to use the archival material in Washington, DC. I read extensively. In fact, I used the Freedom of Information Act and got dozens of CIA documents freed under the Freedom of Information Act. I was really one of the first ones to utilize that act and maybe the first one to open up some of the Guatemalan stuff. I also used extensively archives in Guatemala City. I spent some six months in Guatemalan City, so I uncovered a tremendous amount of archival material just for my master's.

TS: Did you continue with this theme when you got your doctoral program?

AL: Yes, I also wrote the doctorate on that.

TS: You did that at the University of Florida?

AL: Right.

TS: You graduated in 1988 with a Ph.D.

AL: Right.

TS: Had you made up your mind then what had gone on down there?

AL: Yes, mostly by the end of the master's, I had a very good idea of my point of view; but by the time I finished the doctorate, I had a much clearer idea of my views.

TS: Were there any mentors in the doctoral program that stand out?

AL: Yes, the doctoral program, of course, is much more intimate, and I worked with people much more closely. Lyle McAllister was one such, and Murdo [J.] Macleod was another.

DY: Were these Latin American historians?

AL: These were Latin American historians. And then another one, David [I.] Bushnell. But these are people that influenced me, say, in the way I did research. They are all excellent scholars and very proficient and skilled in the field. I learned a lot in that regard. Ideologically, I think I learned from them to be—how can I say?—I don't want to say less radical, but maybe more understanding of the complexities, maybe less idealistic in the sense that one could expect reality to be complicated.

TS: Less dogmatic, at any rate.

DY: Right and wrong are relative.

TS: Okay. So you graduate from there in '88, and then it's '91 before you came to KSU. Did you go back to Japan?

AL: I went back a number of times. I went back after my master's, not to Japan, but to Korea. I taught for the University of Maryland overseas, and I stayed there for a year and a half. Then I went to Japan and taught there for awhile until I started at Florida. When I left Maryland, I think I left in '76 or '77.

TS: Your degree was '76.

AL: Okay.

TS: Did you take any courses there beyond the master's?

AL: No. I left immediately when my master's was over, and I went to Korea. I was in Asia for the most part from 1976 until I began study at the University of Florida, which was, as I recall, 1982. During those six years. I spent most of it in Asia. During that time, too, I did spend a few months at a time back in the United States. I'd come back for a month or two and go back, especially when, say, my mother was sick once; then I came back for a while. But I moved back and forth between Japan and Korea, teaching for the University of Maryland but also teaching for various companies, teaching English. I was involved with an English company for awhile where we actually sold programs. In Tokyo, I worked for awhile training Japanese executives in traveling to the United States—what to expect, how to negotiate . . . that is, how to have the proper manners. One of the things I would do, I would change *myself*. After living in Japan for quite awhile, I learned how to conduct myself in a way that was appropriate to Japanese society and manners. I appreciate the Japanese way of manners and social grace. But I would leave the room and announce before I left that I was going to come back a different person; I was going to come back [as] the ugly American that they might meet. When I came back, [I would be] this robust fellow, say, from the Texas oil fields. They would walk up, and I would clap them on the back and say, "How ya doin', Toshi?!" And then this would generally be what would happen: The poor Japanese executive would immediately tighten up; the shoulders would go up, the

whole body would collapse together, and they would be in shock that this person would come up and slap them. In Japan, one doesn't do [that]; you don't do touching to start with in Japanese social manners, and you certainly don't come up in a boisterous, noisy way and slap them. So I would say, "No, no, no; you can't do that. You've got to take it. You've got to be relaxed. You've got to smile if you want to play the game the American way." They were very much into a strategy of going to various parts of the world and learning how to adapt to that language, that culture, that business climate and its various rules. That's one of the major ways that Japan was beating everyone at that time. They were willing to learn, and, of course, they've been willing to learn since the nineteenth century.

But at any rate, I worked at that, which, I guess is a little un-American of me. And in one noted deviation from that, my plan had been to go to Guatemala and get a Ph.D. at the Universidad de San Carlos. My plan when I graduated from the University of Maryland was not to get a Ph.D. in the United States. So I went to Asia to make money, save up money, then go to Guatemala and get my Ph.D., under my theory that I would really know Guatemala much better by being in Guatemala than any U.S. university.

TS: So why didn't you do that?

AL: I did not do that because things in Guatemala fell apart very quickly in 1980 and 1981 with the violence. They had been fighting off and on in the countryside since the 1960s, and in the late '70s, there became a huge increase in killings and violence. The military was fighting large groups of so-called guerillas in the countryside; the Maya villages were starting to be wiped out. In '80 and '81, the violence started to spill over in a major way into Guatemala City. When I arrived in Guatemala in 1981, it was just at the start of a series of assassinations that killed some of the university professors, sent the others running in exile—some of them went to Mexico, the United States, anywhere they could go. My topic was Guatemalan Revolution. [laughter] So the people I needed to talk to, the people I needed to work with, the work that I needed to have done was just impossible at that time.

So what happened was I went to Nicaragua. And that was just a year and a few months after the Sandinistas had taken over and thrown out [Anastasio] Somoza. I decided I would stay there. I joined a university there, the Universidad Centroamericana—Central American University—which is a private university. I started taking classes there with the thought that I would get a degree through them, some kind of degree, or just stay there for awhile until maybe things got better in Guatemala or I could think of what else I was going to do for a Ph.D. I got involved with the Nicaraguan groups, the Sandinistas, I was fascinated with what was going on in Nicaragua. This process of what I was witnessing in Nicaragua in 1981, which had been going on since '80 or '81, was very similar to what I had read about and what I had [learned] in my interviews with the surviving revolutionaries in Guatemala. It was the same kind of enthusiasm,

hope, self-confidence that things were getting better—this tremendous amount of energy that was coming about by this group of mainly young people who had achieved a revolution and was very sincere in bringing about a better world.

It didn't work out all that well for me. I had made one major mistake, or had one major disadvantage. My plan had been to go to university in Guatemala. So coming from Guatemala to Nicaragua without any advance preparation into Nicaragua, without being attached to any of the Nicaraguan-Sandinistan groups previously, without having even lived in the United States for a number of years, having lived in Asia instead . . . When I showed up in Nicaragua and began staying in Nicaragua, when I tried to extend my visa and have permanent status in university, I was refused.

TS: By them?

AL: By the government. They didn't know who I was, and there was a great deal of suspicion. See, I got there at the time just when Carter was on the way out and Reagan was on the way in. Carter had been somewhat positive to the Sandinistas initially, but Reagan was very negative and immediately began funding the Contras. So where the United States had long suspected a communist under every bush during the Cold War, at that time, the Sandinistas suspected—and probably suspected rightly—a CIA agent under every bush. And I fit a CIA agent profile, I guess, very well.

TS: So you and Oliver North.

AL: Yes. But I found it difficult to stay there. There's quite a long story to my Nicaraguan stay, but to make a short story out of it, at one point I had been refused an extended time on my visa and told not to come back. I went to Costa Rica, where I was finally given permission by the Nicaraguan Embassy to return and study in Nicaragua. But when I got back to Nicaragua, at one point I was supposed to go into the office in Managua in Nicaragua with my visa. And I saw the same person, the same official that had told me never to come back. That pretty much put an end to it because they nearly put me in jail.

TS: Well, I guess, really, you know, if you think of someone who seems to be sympathetic, but he wants to know everything in the world about all the revolutionaries, it could sound like a CIA profile.

AL: It could. And another aspect to the story is that while I was in Asia, I spent a long time studying martial arts. It was, after all, the time of Bruce Lee and such. But that first year in Japan, I began to study a thing called Aikido, which is actually a very soft style and very artistic style; it's not the break-them-up style or be-mean style. I studied many other styles after that, but always kept to the philosophical base and felt that I learned a lot of Asian philosophy and Asian history out of it.

When I was in Nicaragua, I lived with a family, an extended family; I had met them, and they offered me a place. It was this lower middle-class household that

had four small buildings that made up their complex with a fence around it. They were a very wonderful family that I became very attached to, and there was a Sandinista policeman living there as well, a friend of the family. He had been in the bush. He had fought against the Somoza dictatorship as a young boy—as a peasant boy. He was probably eleven or twelve years old when he began fighting. He had survived, and he was still young, but he was working as a policeman. There were a number of other people in the household, and it's kind of hard to hide those things. I was young at the time, and people would be drinking and talking. As it turned out, I started to teach them some self-defense. They were all enthusiastic about it; they had never experienced any formal Asian ways of defense before. The daughter of the family and the policemen were especially good students; the policeman would be killed two years later fighting against the US backed “contras”.

So here I had this small group of students. But toward the end when this official in the Nicaraguan visa office refused me, it was obvious they had been researching me. When he told me never to come back again—he made it very clear . . . he told me he knew I had been teaching karate techniques, and that was another piece of evidence that I was probably working for the CIA because how else would I know karate? I don't know; there could be some logic there, but one of his final words was to say, “Just remember, bullets are stronger than karate.” [laughter]

TS: Okay. So you went back to the University of Florida then.

AL: Exactly.

TS: How did you get to Kennesaw State?

AL: After Florida in 1988, in fact, I made the finishing touches on my dissertation while I was in Japan. I had gone back to teach at the University of Maryland Asian Division, and I had planned on teaching and living in Asia when I finished. But as time went by, I realized that I wanted to be a Latin Americanist; I wanted to be more connected to Latin America. I loved teaching for the University of Maryland because I was teaching the exact kind of people that I had been. Remember, my first college classes had been while I was in the Air Force, and the people I taught for the University of Maryland in Japan and Korea were military people who chose [to take classes]. They didn't have to do it; they just did it. I was very free to teach whatever I wanted. I had small classes—ten, twelve, fifteen people. We sat in a circle; we got to know each other. It was always a seminar style; they were thirsty for knowledge. They had traveled some, and they knew what they wanted. They were amazingly, unexpectedly, liberal for the most part. You might think, as I thought when I first started teaching essentially under the wing of the military, that I would be in some way watched or proscribed, told what to teach. But no. Not at all. I was completely free. I have never felt so free in teaching.

I feel much less free at Kennesaw or any United States institution, because here in the United States, we have some reckoning to pay with student evaluations and social expectations with our reputation. So there shouldn't be—and maybe there isn't, but I think realistically there is—some indirect pressure on people, if, say, they wanted to [hold] what would be an unpopular point of view. Not that everyone avows to this, but it's more present here as a factor than it ever was teaching in Asia. So I enjoyed teaching a lot to those people. Especially because of the small numbers, because they were thirsty, they were people out of my background, and I felt particularly useful to them. But I was living out of a suitcase. I was spending six months here being sent to another place, and I had enjoyed that all my life—I'd moved around; I was really a wanderlust person. I loved the hitchhiking, the sleeping outside, the long trips I made. I was traveling a lot. I traveled through Asia; I'd done other things. I'd take little trips with my money.

But, suddenly, I was in my forties, and I one day thought, “I need a place. I need to settle down.” That year I looked, and when I came to Kennesaw, it was really the first year that I looked for a job from Asia. I had actually come back to the United States. I took a guest scholar position at the University of Oregon, which just meant that they gave me an ID to their library. But from there, I was able to read the AHA's [The American Historical Association's] *Perspectives* and make some applications. There were a number of jobs that were available that year, but when I came to Kennesaw, I felt the growth of the school and, more than anything else, the extreme friendliness of people. I was treated very nicely in the department, and I felt appreciated. I was a guy that when I got here felt very much [like] a fish out of water. I was comfortable in Japan, but here I knew that I was not comfortable as an American. In Japan, all you have to be is polite and soft-spoken. Here, I was really—I guess I felt, and I still feel in some ways—a fish out of water. The United States feels like a strange country. I have no idea what people are talking about when they talk about TV programs. For one thing, until I got here in 1991, most of my adult life from the age of eighteen was outside the United States. During that time, I didn't have television. I didn't see movies; very seldom. I certainly had no idea what was going on in the United States. So a lot of the popular discourse was way over my head; I had no idea what people were talking about.

And even now, I don't have a TV. I don't get used to it, so I still don't know what's going on in the world. I have no idea about sports. Like, you were asking me [before the interview] about [the football team at] Boise State. I really don't know how to play football; I don't know how it works. I don't know how to play basketball. I used to love baseball; I've still got my baseball cards that my father had saved and my grandmother saved from when I was a kid, but I'm clueless . . . I liked sports. But I'm just clueless; I don't know, I've never learned, and I've never caught up. I don't have time because, as you can see from what I do, I'm way too busy. So, to a certain degree, I've always felt like an international person. I think that's one reason I so easily gravitate to the international programs on campus and to world history.

TS: What was your perception of the intellectual climate at Kennesaw when you came here in '91?

AL: I was very impressed with the history department, with the individuals of the history department. I think all of our history department could carry on a conversation. In fact, I always felt a little intimidated—and sometimes I still do—when we get people like Tom [Thomas H.] Keene, Akanmu Adebayo, Ulf Zimmerman, and other people that I know. If they're sitting around in a circle and talking, I sometimes have to motivate myself to say, "Okay, go ahead. Admit your ignorance, and let them know that you don't know what they're talking about." No, I've always been impressed with how well read the people in the department are. Now, I like to think I choose my friends carefully, but I think the history department is special in that regard. But even more, what I really think it comes out of—and I'm not just saying anything that's not true; I'm certainly not saying anything just for the record or just to build up the institution—I sincerely was impressed with the dedication of the people to teaching at Kennesaw. But KSU is growing. I think that its growth in the last fifteen years since I've been here has brought out some of the unevenness of the campus.

DY: That's an interesting observation. I mean, the fact that you would use the term unevenness. I like that. Where do you see that?

AL: Unevenness in the perception of what the university should be and also unevenness of strengths. Certainly, unevenness in the consensus. At one time, and when I arrived—officially, this is still true, but I think it's losing its truth—the consensus was that the one point of strength we all should have, that would be respected and allow us to be a professional in and of itself, was to be a master teacher. Our dedication was to the student, with the recognition that we needed to read a lot. This is where I saw the intellect of the campus, not in the publications, not even in the service, but in the teaching. The people in their love of teaching actually dedicated themselves to their material. I think Tom Keene is a wonderful example of this. His thirst and his appreciation of knowledge are obvious, but he put them into building up the campus. I think it's obvious that he could dedicate himself—and many other people on campus could dedicate themselves—to research if they wanted to, but they felt more dedicated to the university and to the teaching mission of the university. But this, along with the idea of service, of course, has been challenged recently.

DY: Where do you see the source of this unevenness, or are there multiple sources?

AL: I see it mostly within the faculty itself and with many of the new faculty who want it to be in a more research-oriented university. But it's also a stigma of our field, I think. That is, in the academic field, you only achieve your highest level of fame and respect among your fellow colleagues across the United States based upon what you've published or how many times people actually quote you or they quote your particular theory. I think that the feeling on campus when I got here was more a sense of pride and self-worth in what we were doing. But now that

we've reached a point to where we feel ourselves in potential competition, say, with Georgia State, in the eyes of some, the inevitability that we will become a more research-oriented university—now suddenly there's this new reflection in the mirror. And this unevenness of the university is where many people that are a part of this university are looking at the mirror and seeing it wanting—angry even that there are too many of the old groups that remain, or that the new ones aren't living up to expectation, or the administration isn't moving fast enough in this regard. [They might feel] anger that the regents won't allow us to do this or that. This is what I mean about the unevenness; it comes along with growth.

I think this is symptomatic of many universities that begin to see a notable increase in their reputation. I've seen it at other state universities. I saw it to some degree at the University of Florida as well, and I've heard about it and perceived it in other state universities through national colleagues. There gets to be like a gold fever, this sense that, "My gosh, I might be Number Ten!" We might really be one of the top institutions in the United States. *U.S. News & World Report* is going to list us pretty soon. That gets to be a gold fever. But it is, I think, something that makes the university uncomfortable with itself. We've begun to see this at Kennesaw.

DY: I think you're right in terms of saying growth and stages of development . . . it's when the adolescent begins to turn and look outward and be aware that there is a perception out there and, ironically, begins to lose what was the strength of being.

TS: Yes, I've thought exactly the same thing. It was kind of a shock when I woke up to see that the young faculty coming in thought very differently than those that had been here for awhile. Yet, we were on the search committees that brought them in.

AL: Yes, yes. It may be that people were brought in gradually with the expectation that research would increase, but we may have reached that take-off point where that [new] faculty want to be a part of a research institute and have higher expectations for new people—each step.

TS: Well, you just recently won the campus-wide Distinguished Service Award. That seems to be the direction you've gone since you came here—wasn't it in '91?—where teaching was your first area, and service would be the second instead of scholarship?

AL: I think in my first year or two, I declared scholarship. My original goal when I came back to the United States, my original thought was that I would pick up my research again. As part of the package of my changing sense of my life in Asia and my sudden feeling of my middle age that maybe I better find a career—one that is stable, where I have an office in one place—is that I would do research. I had never dedicated myself to research before except during the times of my dissertation. During my master's and my dissertation, I researched and loved the research. I would go from morning till night with the research; it was very much,

as they say, the document fever that hits us and almost has to hit us for anyone to get through a dissertation. But at Kennesaw, I quickly became pulled into service.

I think the first reality that hit me when I came to Kennesaw was that I needed to retool myself as a teacher. I had been, I think, an excellent teacher for the University of Maryland. I know that the people at Maryland thought I was, and the students all told me I was. But the reality of teaching at Kennesaw was a night-and-day difference. There weren't ten to twelve highly motivated students sitting in a circle that you would not only spend hours talking to, but you might end up at the PX afterwards having a couple of beers talking about U.S. policy for another hour after class. You never had to worry about anything because many of these people were your own age; it was all a very different world, more like at graduate school. And in Asia also, I think I had been a very good English teacher. I made pretty good money at it for awhile, but none of that prepared me for teaching in the classroom.

So the reality was I had to learn how to teach again. I think one of the first things that happened—and a person at Kennesaw that stands out in my mind as a person that influenced me or had a lot to do with my success and my direction is Ann [Ellis] Pullen—when she nominated me to be president of the Southeast World History Association [SEWHA], and no one nominated anyone else; so I was elected, and I ended up spending the next four years as president of SEWHA. A lot happened during those four years. SEWHA had always met in Georgia before that time; it was really in most respects a Georgia association. I and a couple of others insisted at that point that it be held around the South. Within four years, it was established and remains a truly regional, one of the probably three most powerful, active, and successful of all the regionals of the World History Association.

At the end of that, I was elected to a three-year term on the executive council of the World History Association. That got me involved with the world history people and got me to do one of the ten national Advanced Placement training camps for teachers. All of this came out of the hand Ann raised to nominate me; it really put me deep into the World History Association from that time. That is really what, more than anything else, put me in service. The other person that put me in service was Tom Keene. My job when I got here was to be involved in Study Abroad. One of the things that was in the job description was they wanted someone that might be able to run a study abroad [program], I guess my long years [outside] the United States and traveling was seen as a plus for that. So I naturally got involved in international things on campus as well.

TS: You were talking about the ten Advance Placement centers across the country for the World History Association. Why don't you explain that a little bit more. I know you spend a lot of time on that each year and just got through with that for this year.

AL: Yes. World history is new as a discipline. As I said, when I wanted to study world history in graduate school, they laughed at me. The history professional field accepting a sub-field that would be a specialty in world history is only recent and still uneven. But there's a World History Association that has established itself and has taken the baseline theory; that is connections—how the world is interlocked and the universalities of the human experience—and has developed the theory in a number of seminal books as well in other areas. In 1998-1999, the College Board became interested in a world history Advanced Placement test. The World History Association achieved a grant for funding from the National Endowment of the Humanities—a \$250,000 grant, which was given another \$50,000 by the College Board to develop an Advanced Placement curriculum and to initiate a series of training institutes to train a first cadre of high school teachers that would then be able to go and teach world history. Of course, world history has been taught in high schools for a long time but [not necessarily] under the standards developed by this committee put together by the World History Association. For the world history program accepted by the College Board, the teachers had to be trained to teach in this way. For one thing, most world history taught in high schools—and in colleges, for that matter—has been strongly leaned toward the Western Civilization story with other things added on. Even if efforts were made to be equal to various parts of the world, it might still be just some of this, some of that, without finding connections.

TS: Right. So you say, “Now we're going to talk about Asia today, and next week we'll talk about Latin America, and the week after that we'll talk about Africa.” But the concept of world history is that you'll talk about everything together in its interrelationship.

AL: That's right. And one has to be trained to do that because it's not something [on which] we were trained in our graduate schools, certainly not in our specialties. It's also a way of thinking. One of the major parts of the AP test, and parts of the world history theory itself, is that we have to think in terms of the large themes. Even when we analyze, say, a narrower area of history—that we, in the popular phrase of the day, “think globally,” think of the larger world—even if it's just in a minor way, it still adds a lot to an area of research. So they had to learn the themes, the approaches, the teaching methodology, and the content itself. I was involved in some of that initial discussion of what kind of content would go into it, but I was not involved in the actual grant writing, nor was I involved in some of the initial work. But I was one of the ten directors in the United States that held the first series of institutes. We were the only one of this kind of institute held in the South, and our institute in the year 2000 was an eleven-day institute. For that institute, I had a budget of some \$30,000 or so, but it was not a budget that allowed me to hire help. It was a budget that we put into this mega-purchasing of books, of national administrative costs, of program development and hiring teachers. I did not teach it myself. I directed it on the local level, and I found and brought in a teacher from New York and also another person from the state of Georgia, Mark Gilbert, a professor at North Georgia [College and State University]. The two worked as a team and taught eleven days of institute. I was

involved in choosing the material, choosing the books, and working with the team directors. I was there during the institute, communicating with the national director about what was going on in other areas and writing the assessment afterward. I did the budget.

For that one institute, I probably spent a full two years—a year leading up to it, involved in the processes, meeting with the national director, [handling] communications and e-mail, developing the program, putting it all together at Kennesaw, [receiving] people's stuff. But a lot of it was just learning how to put an institute together, flying by the seat of our pants. I had one of my students helping. He was an honor student in the Honors Program, and he worked for credit. We had 20 plus teachers chosen from around the United States.

TS: Right, right. So they would go back and teach the other teachers?

AL: Exactly. The second year we had such a demand—and there were so few other places in the United States that were teaching—that we did two of them back to back.

TS: You don't have very much staff support yet at that point?

AL: No, I don't at that point. I did most things myself those first couple of years.

TS: What about course releases? Did you get any help that way? You're doing these in the summer I guess, aren't you?

AL: We're doing them in the summer, and, therefore, I did not get course release. I did make an arrangement early on that some of the proceeds would go to give me some course override money. Now the first two years, I had grant money so most of the institute was paid for by the grant. Probably from the second year, part of my time was paid for by the money—not from the grant, but from the money that we charged as tuition. It did not pay for the tremendous amount of work that went into it. Some of it is my own fault, I believe. As I told you, when I went into the Air Force and they gave me testing on my abilities, my administrative abilities were my lowest. I find it curious that I found a lot of my life in some administrative task. I have learned to be much better; I've had to learn. Also the national level was learning; we were all learning as we went. Our main focus was trying to develop material and find ways to get to the schools. But from the third year, really, I had more and more help. It still takes time.

TS: Secretarial help, you mean?

AL: Secretarial help.

TS: I guess this was the sixth year in 2005?

AL: That's right. Sixth year and seventh institute. I don't know of anyplace else in the United States that's had as many institutes as us. George Mason [University]

might have, I'm not sure; but we're certainly one of the few most active since that time.

TS: And you take about twenty or twenty-two at a time?

AL: Right. The average has been about that. Last year we had twenty-seven or twenty-eight. The year before as well.

TS: So that's got to have an influence on high school teaching around the area then, with that many people going through the program.

AL: Yes. And now as other institutes have developed across the United States, we only get a few people coming from outside the state. We usually get a few people from Florida and one or two from South Carolina here and there; but for the last four years, most of the people have been from Georgia. So out of those seven [institutes], I think about 150 teachers were trained, and most of those are still active. Altogether we've had thousands of students take the AP world history exam. I must say that I'm quite pleased with this. The reason that I devote myself to the World History Association and to AP is that I'm not just an academic believer in the approach, I'm a *firm* academic believer. I think it raises the academic bar tremendously in the professional field and will continue to raise the bar tremendously. But, secondarily, I believe that it's quite important that we as a nation begin to understand that our Western Civilization is not as unique as we think it is. We are not, therefore, as superior as we think.

I find that world history, although it doesn't discount the importance of culture, more easily makes it understandable how geography, economy, and natural forces of change are still a vital part of the world today. For example, that old theme of the rise and fall of great powers, or the shifting of the centers of power, is something that our students need to be aware of. I don't propose world history out of a sense of multiculturalism or out of a sense of international brotherhood; I propose it out of the academic belief that it is a superior way to look at global history. But also, it is necessary for us to really start learning from history in a major global way. We are, after all, global, and so it's out of the importance I see in the field that I've dedicated so much time to it.

TS: When did we start teaching our general education course at Kennesaw according to the World History Association's approach?

AL: I'm not sure that we *are* completely, but I think that we are to a fairly respectable degree. I think most of our full-time world historians, those who teach world history, have been exposed to world history enough now through the seminars we've had on campus, through the discussions we've had on campus, through people that we've brought. We brought a couple of world historians to campus early in the '90s, largely through our meetings and through our world history group that Ms. [Carole] Alexander and Ms. [Masako] Racel have had in those little seminars for us every once in awhile. And we also have guidelines to give

to the other faculty [regarding how and what] to teach. But it's an on-going process for all of us, still even for me—on how best to present the survey classes in a way that's digestible for our students while still presenting the sophisticated parts of the world history.

TS: Well, this is certainly one major area of your service, but there are a number of others that I'd like for us to talk about, too, today. Of course, you have a scholarly interest in the Mayan Indians, but you've also translated that into your work in Cherokee County with the Mayan community there, I think. Would you talk about that a little bit? What you've been involved with?

AL: Most actively from about 2000 and in bits and spurts before then, but actively since the year 2000, I've been involved in interacting with a group of Maya from Guatemala who have migrated or immigrated into Georgia. The first year in my History of Mexico class, we had a Maya conference where the students put together mock-ups of some of the cities, educational tables on Maya writing, Maya religion, and various aspects about Maya history. We had a workshop display, and we invited a dozen Maya from the community to come in and talk to us about the Maya culture and to interact with the students. Although the Maya that we invited didn't speak English, and few of our students spoke Spanish—we had to have translators—it worked extremely well. The students had a tremendous positive result out of it. They were fascinated by their interaction with real Maya.

Most of the students, when they came into the class, did not know the Maya existed any more. They certainly did not know there were Maya in their own neighborhoods. Secondly, the Maya themselves were so appreciative and so amazed that people knew who they were. Generally, the Maya that are here are thought of as Mexicans. If they're Maya, Spanish would be their second language. For many of them, mainly the women, their Spanish may be very poor, or they may not speak Spanish. So the Maya were amazed to know that people knew they were there and cared about them. So from that, I've developed a very strong relationship, and we've developed it to where campus faculty have been involved. We've created something called the Maya Heritage Community Project that has brought Maya on campus a number of times and has had nursing faculty doing health screenings in the [Maya] community.

I have obtained two grants now from the Governor's Office of Highway Safety to teach highway safety to Hispanics. This is no longer just for Maya; this is an open program for all Hispanics, most of them being the so-called new immigrants or illegal immigrants. The Governor's Office is very open in that regard thinking that highway safety is highway safety, period. If for whatever reason, someone is driving under the influence or driving in a car that's inadequate or without a license, it affects all of us. At any rate, the program has grown in a number of ways.

TS: There's a Web site for that, isn't there? Somebody put it on some campus literature, didn't they, for the Maya site?

AL: For the Maya site that we're doing here on campus?

TS: Yes.

AL: There is one that was set up as a blog and has been largely inactive for about a year. It's still up there, but it is currently being worked on and changed into a site. It's still got a lot of nice information out there. I get e-mail occasionally from people around the United States asking questions about it, but it's not on the campus site. The Maya now have a nonprofit organization called Maya Pastoral, Inc.; the Web site is www.pastoralmayausa.org. In another few weeks, the Web site itself is going to appear, but it will contain information about the Kennesaw program.

TS: I can't remember how many years back now, but I remember you asking something about historic houses or renovating houses. And then you ended up buying one in Holly Springs. That's gotten you involved in the community, too, in a very important way with regard to historic preservation. I wonder if you could talk about that a little bit.

AL: I found myself in this house built in the late 1800s in a small town, Holly Springs, an area that had very little else but had a few nice items in it. I bought it as a gamble, only in the sense that with it being on a potentially major intersection, it could go the way of Highway 92 and what happened to a lot of Woodstock—what happened to most small towns in the wake of Atlanta's development. Or, with some luck and hard work, it might be preserved as a small town, or at least the essence of a small town. So I became involved in the city of Holly Springs in a number of ways. I first became involved in the Downtown Development Authority as the first president when it was established.

One of the things that we managed to do out of the DDA was establish an historic commission with the power with an actual ordinance, not an historic society or historic club, but a commission that would have some ordinance power to protect older buildings and promote the style and placement of new ones to hopefully preserve a sense of community. This might be my yin-yang influence from my Asian philosophy: But while I'm very much concerned about the international world and interested in promoting world history, I do think that it is extremely important for us in the United States in our local areas to preserve our sense of community and to appreciate our community. I'm not one that says we need to feel pride about the history and forget everything else. I think as professional historians, shame or pride is not really in our bag; it's objectivity. But I think it's very important we as a people live with a sense of cohesiveness and a sense of community with our neighbors. Government has a lot to do with the success of that.

What we tried to do in Holly Springs was keep an area of town that could be identified as the historic heart and soul of Holly Springs. This would be where the heartbeat, or the history, had begun and where to find a few of the older buildings—like the train station, a few of the houses, the first and the oldest brick store, the old post office, and a very old gas station. Then the houses that built around it and the retail that built around it would still retain some of that old America feel. There would be a walking buildup that could allow people to go in there, to shop there, and live there. There would be churches close by and schools close by. And that people, when they lived in Holly Springs, would be able to find Holly Springs, and they would feel some sense of ownership to the city. I believe that if a citizen of a town—like many, many towns now in the United States—has no sense of connection to the town, that it's a bedroom community, say, and the only part of it might be a gas station and a bank, then they are very much less likely to know their neighbors; they're much less likely to be involved in city government; they're going to miss out on the feeling and the knowledge, and their children will miss out on all of that, of what a community is like. If the community is weak, the state is weak. If the state is weak, the nation is weak.

So I think that as historians, one of our duties is to help promote a sense of historical community, and our government is to maintain this community. I also think that it's at the same time very important for us to be international citizens—not to be nationalistic or to be ideologically hateful to other people. Therefore, I see the twin pillars of my work as domestic tranquility, human rights, the community, the protection of our history, but also acknowledge that we have to live in the international world and promote international knowledge of that world.

TS: Very eloquently presented. That's great. Now, you were on the city council briefly, and you're on the Historic Preservation Commission now, is that right?

AL: Yes. I've just gone off the Historic Preservation Commission as of a few days ago. I served as its president for the first four years. Our new president is actually someone I did not know until she showed up at a meeting, but she turned out to be a Kennesaw student.

TS: That's Erin Cochran.

AL: That's right. There's a new board, but I remained until just last week as an advisor to help it get going. I served twice on the council, but I was appointed (not elected) both times by city council to fill an empty space. I remain, however, on the Downtown Development Authority.

TS: And you all have a big project going now.

AL: Yes, our dream is coming very close to reality—that is, of having protected the downtown. We have a strong ordinance, and we're on our way to becoming a certified local government. We've renovated some of the buildings down there, but we also have done some major studies and major work on making it a living

center where it will be a regular town. It won't be just commercial, and it won't be just living; it will be a mixed-use. Of course, it takes a lot of forethought to do that in the year 2005—when people like to do their shopping at Wal-Mart or go to the mall—to make a living center have a sense of community and be economically viable at the same time. There are some successful examples of that here and there across the United States. We've been doing research, gambling on that. But, of course, not gambling like in Las Vegas, it takes a lot of work and some top-notch legal and professional help.

TS: Well, I think we've just hit the tip of the iceberg of your service. You're president of the Georgia Association of Historians now, for instance. What are you proudest of in regard to what you've accomplished at Kennesaw?

AL: On a personal level, I think the proudest thing is that I've successfully established myself here, which is to me, in many ways, a surprise. Looking back on my life, having grown up as I did—largely wild and uncontrolled, undirected, and then uneducated—to find myself in the second part of my life living [outside] the United States—by the time I got to Kennesaw, I had lived off and on, through travel and through study, some four years in Central America, some nine years in Asia, three years in England, and a year spent hiking in Europe. I'd come here in many ways as a foreigner, and yet I somehow established myself. I became a real part of the university; I became a real part of the community. In a large part, that's because of my lucky or clever choice of Kennesaw, because of the kind of faculty that are here.

TS: Well, I was going to ask you as kind of a concluding question, what's kept you here for these fifteen years?

AL: I felt a sense of acceptance and a sense of home from my job interview here, so I have felt that loyalty toward Kennesaw. But you asked me two things I was proud of. Maybe the second thing is, I think that I have contributed to—and I can't claim that I actually achieved any particular thing, but I know that I was involved in, and I'm glad that I was involved in—the internationalizing forces on campus.

TS: Did you say there was a third one that you were proudest of?

AL: No, I didn't say that.

TS: So the fact that you stayed here, survived here, came here as a “foreigner”—all the way from Boise, with many stops along the way—and then your role in internationalizing. I just stand in awe sometimes that we have students from over a hundred nations now on our campus. It hasn't always been that way. But it's certainly a challenge to incorporate them into the life of the campus.

AL: A challenge and an opportunity.

TS: Anything else that you want to add that you think needs to be on the record?

AL: Only, again, I'd like to stress that so much of the success that I've had has been because I like Kennesaw and because of the strength of the people that were here before I got here. I think we have a lot of great talent coming and a lot of people with great ambitions and wonderful plans for the university. It's going to take a very, very broadminded, a very—shall I say?—wise person to be our president if we are going to avoid unevenness and avoid conflict. And I think also maybe my last word would be this: We as a university must avoid this sense of hubris, or a sense of glee, that we are becoming a great institution in the state of Georgia. I'm all for hard work and achievement, but I think also we need to remain humble. We need to remember that our students need to be our goal.

TS: Well, thank you very much, Alan. It's been fun to do this interview. You've got an office right across from me, but I've learned a great deal about you today that I didn't know about before.

AL: Yes, I've got a complex past or an unusual one.

TS: But one that certainly prepared you to be a good teacher, I think. Thank you very much.

AL: Thank you.

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