

Globe-trotting diplomatic career took Albuquerque resident into some hot spots

By Rosalie Rayburn / Journal Staff Writer
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William Itoh at a teashop during a recent trip to Burma, also known as Myanmar.

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — Name half a dozen headline-grabbing moments from the late 1970s to the late 1990s and William Itoh was probably there.

The West Side Albuquerque resident spent nearly 30 years in a diplomatic career that took him to London, Western Australia and eventually Bangkok, as ambassador to Thailand. In between, he held critical positions in Washington, D.C., rubbing shoulders with congressional leaders, former presidents from Jimmy Carter to Bill Clinton, foreign heads of state like Queen Elizabeth II and household names in foreign policy like Henry Kissinger.

His recollections of those decades are full of colorful anecdotes and witty observations.

One of the most memorable events happened in September 1993. As executive secretary of the National Security Council, which advises and assists the president on national security and foreign policies, Itoh scripted the scenario that culminated with the historic handshake between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat on the White House South Lawn. The handshake followed the signing of an agreement between Israel and the PLO that stemmed from the Oslo Accord that attempted to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“We actually weren’t convinced that they were going to shake hands, you know,” Itoh said, in a recent interview.

Local ties

Itoh’s globe-trotting experience started early. Born in Japan in 1943, to a Japanese father and British mother, he moved to Canada then to several U.S. cities before arriving in Albuquerque in time to start fourth grade at Los Ranchos Elementary.

He credits teachers at Taft Junior High and Valley High School for fostering an interest in world affairs. After earning bachelor’s and master’s degrees at the University of New Mexico, teaching at Valley High then California State University, Humboldt, and a stint in the U.S. Air Force, Itoh took the Foreign Service exam and was accepted.

He and his wife, Melinda, a third-generation Albuquerque native, decided to “try it for a couple of years.”

In 1975, when they headed to Washington, D.C., Kissinger was Secretary of State. Itoh worked closely with senators and members of Congress, often escorting them to meetings with Kissinger. He recalls a long conversation with former presidential candidate Barry Goldwater when the secretary was late for an appointment.

The following year, Itoh took an assignment at the Embassy in London. He worked initially under Anne Armstrong, the first woman to be appointed as U.S. Ambassador to the Court of St. James’s, as the posting is formally known in the United Kingdom.

During his two-year assignment, Itoh joined in celebrations for the Queen’s Silver Jubilee in 1977 (she ascended the throne in 1952 and was formally crowned in 1953), and watched the late Margaret Thatcher make an impact on Parliament as the newly

chosen leader of the Conservative Party. Between Armstrong's departure and newly appointed Ambassador Kingman Brewster's arrival, Itoh house-sat at Winfield House, the ambassador's imposing mansion in Regent's Park. President Carter was an overnight guest.



During a state visit to Thailand in November 1996, President Bill Clinton applauds as Ambassador William Itoh shakes hands with Dr. Amnuay Viravan, Thailand's deputy prime minister and foreign minister, watched by Prime Minister Banharn Silpa-archa. (Courtesy of William Itoh)

China, Australia

Then it was back to Washington and the Bureau of Congressional Relations. Itoh traveled with a congressional delegation to China in 1979 shortly after the United States and China established official diplomatic relations.

"In 1979, China was fascinating. It was like going back in time. The airport in Beijing had few runway lights. People were wearing Mao suits. There were bicycles everywhere and few cars. The change over the years has been amazing," Itoh said.

In the early 1980s, he worked for Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Lawrence Eagleburger, as his special assistant for Asia. Then, in 1986, he was sent to the U.S. Consulate in Perth, as Consul General for Western Australia.

Itoh spoke fondly of his four years Down Under. He enjoyed Perth's 27 miles of uncrowded beaches. In 1987, Fremantle, the nearby port city, was the setting for the prestigious America's Cup yacht race. The next year was the Australian Bicentennial, celebrating 200 years since the arrival of the first British convict ships.

"It was a great time to be there," Itoh said. "I really liked the Australians. The people are very welcoming."

Back in Washington, Itoh spent a year at the National War College. He became deputy executive secretary, then acting executive secretary of the Department of State during the George H.W. Bush presidency.

Stint on NSC

After Bill Clinton became president, Itoh was offered a position with the White House National Security Council.

“My job was to make sure the trains ran on time and the president got briefed properly,” said Itoh.

He accompanied Clinton to Europe in 1994 where they visited the Cambridge American Cemetery in England, where there is a memorial to band leader Glenn Miller, who disappeared in a small plane over the English Channel in 1944.

“They flew a B-24 Liberator over our heads and they were playing Glenn Miller music in the background,” Itoh recalled.

The trip included a visit to Portsmouth where the Queen invited Clinton and others in the party to stay the night on the Royal Yacht Britannia. Itoh was included.

“The accommodations I had were not that great,” he commented, saying he was in a cabin with bunk beds.

In Portsmouth, the U.S. party boarded the USS George Washington aircraft carrier and sailed to Normandy where they visited famous D-Day invasion sites like Omaha Beach.



Russian President Boris Yeltsin, President Bill Clinton, and British Prime Minister John Major and aides, signing denuclearization agreement. (Courtesy of William Itoh)

Itoh said his years with the NSC were fascinating but also intense. “Everything was important. You had to worry about every piece of paper going for the president’s signature,” he said.

Ambassador to Thailand

Itoh’s third and final overseas diplomatic assignment began with his appointment in late 1995 as ambassador to Thailand. He presented his credentials in early 1996. At the time, the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok was the second largest in the world after Cairo, overseeing activities throughout much of southeast Asia, Itoh said.



William Itoh, during the time he was US ambassador to Thailand.

Highlights of his three years as ambassador included a state visit by Clinton, the first by a U.S. president since Nixon 27 years before. He also experienced celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the accession of King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

He left that post in 1999, returning to Washington where he worked on academic programs with the University of North Carolina. He retired from the State Department in 2003 and worked directly for the university. Although he still teaches there for a few weeks each spring, he and his wife left Washington and returned to Albuquerque in 2010.

He is active here as president of the World Affairs Council of Albuquerque, formerly the Albuquerque Committee on Foreign Relations, an organization that promotes discussion about foreign affairs.