

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR GLENN W. FERGUSON

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INTERVIEW

Q: Sir, I'd like to begin with a little bit about your background. Such as where you grew up, where you were educated, and what you studied.

FERGUSON: I was born in Syracuse, New York, January 28th, 1929; educated in the public school system in Syracuse; moved to the Washington, DC area--specifically, Bethesda, Maryland--in the fall of 1943; completed high school at Bethesda Chevy Chase High School, went to Cornell University (B.A. in economics and an MBA), and received a law degree from the University of Pittsburgh.

Q: And what chain of events led to your appointment as Ambassador to Kenya from 1966 to '69?

FERGUSON: In 1961, I responded to President Kennedy's call for people who might be interested in serving with the Federal government; helped to establish the Peace Corps, and recruited many of the first Peace Corps directors who were assigned overseas. I then went to Thailand to set up the Peace Corps program; returned to Washington as Associate Director of the Peace Corps responsible for training, volunteer support, and selection. In 1964, President Johnson asked me to set up VISTA. After working with VISTA for two years, I received a call from the Assistant Secretary of State for Africa informing me that there was interest in the potential of my appointment to Kenya. Bill Moyers, who had been with the Peace Corps and was then the principal assistant to President Johnson, subsequently informed me that the White House was involved. I went through the interviews, including an interview with the President, and was nominated for service and approved by the Senate in September of '66.

Q: Did you find that strange, or an odd change to go from the Peace Corps into diplomatic work, or where you essentially doing...

FERGUSON: I had been overseas previously. I had served in the military in Korea, had served in the Philippines and Thailand, and my field was international affairs. I had been Associate Dean to the Graduate School of International Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh and had taught Third World subjects. So my principal field was international affairs, but yes, I thought the appointment was unusual in the sense that I was not a political animal. I had not contributed to a political campaign; I was not identified with a political party, and I was working for government as a civil servant. The surprise was that I was tapped as a political appointee.

Q: That is interesting. When you were appointed, what was your mission as US Ambassador according to the State Department? What were you to do in Kenya?

FERGUSON: There was no specific detailed job description. I had the opportunity to meet with the President before departure. He questioned me (which I thought was intriguing) about Kenya. I had learned Swahili, and he was testing me as to whether I had made an effort to learn about Kenya. The subsequent guidelines from the Department of State included briefings with the Assistant Secretary for African Affairs. The guidelines dealt with specific political problems in the area, e.g., the status of the East African Treaty, and a variety of other issues which had little to do with the overall responsibility of an Ambassador. At that time, I thought, and I still think, that there was little time spent in Washington, prior to the assignment, delineating the role and relationships, for example, to what extent was I to have access to senior members of the Department of State. This was never stipulated, and in many cases colleagues who were ambassadors agreed that you serve by sufferance and indirection. As an issue emerges, you deal with that issue. There is no clear understanding of the normal procedures that should apply. We dealt with a desk officer in the Department of State who was responsible for Kenya.

That was clear. If there were policy questions beyond the desk level for a country, the instructions were not clear.

Q: So how did you personally feel about your mission? What did you feel that you were going there to do?

FERGUSON: That is an excellent question. Obviously, you are representing your country in the country to which you are accredited including the management of the American mission. The American mission in Kenya did not include a military component, but virtually everything else was represented including a Marine guard detachment. The panoply of agencies included AID, USIS, Commerce, Agriculture, and the Library of Congress.

Secondly, you serve as the eyes and ears of your country. I made certain that the mission for which I was responsible reported dutifully what was happening to the Department of State. Basically, the reporting relationship, and the running of a mission, were the principal assignments.

Q: At that time what were the main issues that you were going to have to deal with? And that you did deal with between the United States and Kenya specifically.

FERGUSON: It was clear that the specific issues with which I was trained to deal (for example, the future of the East African Treaty Organization which included the three countries of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania) would take a great deal of time. This was two years after the independence of Kenya. The initial euphoric feeling about the three countries cooperating had been dissipated. I knew that there would be issues regarding the US role. We were prepared for that, but the issue that arose very quickly after I arrived in Nairobi, I was not prepared to handle.

That issue was created by my predecessor, Bill Attwood, who was the former editor of Look magazine, and who was appointed by President Kennedy as Ambassador to Guinea. Subsequently, he was appointed to Kenya, and he arrived in '64 at the time of independence. He left shortly prior to my arrival in Kenya in October of '66. Within a few weeks, his book, called: The Reds and the Blacks, appeared in the book stores in Nairobi. As the first American ambassador to Kenya, he included personal conversations including those with Jomo Kenyatta, the president. Confidential information to which Ambassador Attwood was privy in his role as ambassador, was reflected in the book. It was explained that because he was a journalist, and was returning to journalism, there was no obligation to protect the government officials who were cited. On the contrary, at the time he was chosen as an ambassador, he signed a US Government statement that he would not write about, or talk about, things to which he was privy, in a confidential sense, for ten years after leaving his post.

I was ostracized by the Kenyan community. I had great difficulty presenting my credentials. There was talk about declaring me persona non grata, and this was shortly

after my arrival. I asked for advice from the Department of State, but I did not receive any. As a result, I called a press conference at the residency, and I took a voluntary oath that I would not write about, or talk about, anything to which I was privy in my role as ambassador for a period of five years after leaving Kenya. It worked. The Kenyans were willing to accept the good faith declaration, and within a period of months, we had rebuilt relationships.

To give you some idea of the significance of that action, as adjudged by the Department of State, I received subsequently the Arthur Flemming Award, as one of ten outstanding young men in the public service. It was the first such award for the Department of State, and it was based upon a nomination from the Department of State. The only reason that I mention the personal reference is that the Department of State endorsed the result; however, it was unwilling to provide guidance at the time of the emergency. That is responsive to your earlier question. There is no way that you can be fully prepared for your role as ambassador. How could we have predicted that my predecessor would release a book in Kenya, that would damage US interests, shortly after my arrival.

Q: So thereafter, how was your relationship with Jomo Kenyatta?

FERGUSON: Solid. He provided the opportunity to see him regularly, including the members of his personal staff and his cabinet. We met on a variety of important issues, and I felt that he was giving me the substance I needed to discharge my role as ambassador.

Q: And how did you see him personally as a leader? What were your personal feelings about him? Did you like the man?

FERGUSON: I liked him personally. He was a father figure. He was probably at the time 45 years older than I. He had a presence that was magnetic. His appearance was almost electrifying. He had mannerisms that were truly unique in enhancing that charisma, e.g., a fly whisk which he would wave as a symbol of tribal identification in Kenya.

Q: He was with the...

FERGUSON: ...Kikuyu tribe which was at the time the second largest, second to the Luo. The Kikuyu had the greatest commitment to education. He was an impressive figure, an articulate person, very committed to his country, and he discharged a remarkable role as what was then considered "the George Washington of Kenya."

Q: Did you hear a lot of criticisms from his enemies? I think one of the main ones was Odinga. He was the leader of the Luo tribe. Did you have any sort of relationship with him? And how did you view their relationship--Odinga's and Kenyatta's?

FERGUSON: They were political enemies. They had emerged from the Mau Mau period of insurrection with different political views. Odinga was identified with the far left.

Kenyatta was more moderate in all respects. In addition, they were enemies because Odinga represented the Luo in the western part of the country, and Kenyatta the Kikuyu in the central part including Nairobi. There were tribal differences and differences in style. Odinga was threatened with jail frequently. His efforts to organize politically were many times misunderstood. He did lead the opposition party during the period I was there, and Kenyatta and he gave no appearance of working together. Odinga was the leader of the Luo and of the KADU party, the counterpart of KANU. He is still a major political figure, he is probably 90, and a very active politician representing the left on the political spectrum.

Q: What was your relationship with Secretary of State John Foster Dulles? Was he the Secretary of State at the time?

FERGUSON: No, he had left in the Eisenhower administration. In 1966, the Secretary of State was Dean Rusk. I did not have the privilege of meeting him at the time of my appointment. I was sworn in by Ambassador Averell Harriman. Dean Rusk was Secretary of State, I believe, if my memory serves, until early '69. I worked under Nicholas Katzenbach who became acting Secretary of State.

Q: Was that a good relationship?

FERGUSON: I don't think I ever met Dean Rusk. At that time, from '66 to '69, Vietnam was the reality. Part of my responsibility was to talk with secondary school students, college students, and young politicians in Kenya about the meaning of US involvement in Vietnam. There was concern not only in the United States but in many countries of the world. Even in Kenya, the military presence of the United States in Vietnam during that critical period from '66 to '69 was relevant. The Secretary of State had little time for the Third World, and certainly not for Africa. Of equal importance, Kenya was a small country. In the absence of an emergency, when you represent the United States in a small country you deal with an assistant secretary, in this case the Assistant Secretary of State for Africa.

Q: Being rather new with the actual hands-on business of diplomacy, how were your relations with your embassy staff? And what was your method of operation within that embassy?

FERGUSON: I had been an executive officer in non-profit institutions previously, so that management was not the issue. I had lived overseas; therefore, adjustment to a cross-cultural situation was not the issue. The problem I had was not related to dealing with Kenyans, or with individual American personalities. The problem was relating disparate elements of United States interests in a country team or senior staff setting. For example, in dealing with the USAID Director in Kenya, I was working with a person appointed by the AID director in Washington, with a different portfolio, different policy guidelines, and a different reporting relationship. With agricultural or informational issues, I was

normally involved with a person who was accountable to the Department of Agriculture or USIA in Washington.

With each issue, we were attempting to articulate a US position in country. Even if you felt you had an agreement, there were independent transmission channels, so that members of the country team could return to Washington through their own channels and obtain advice, or state a position, that differed from the position that we had taken in the country team. There was a constant problem of making certain that in-country policy reflected a single US position or if differences were meaningful, that we could give the Kenyans the rationale for that disparity.

Q: Did you find this inefficient, or frustrating? Is that the best word to describe it?

FERGUSON: It represents a frustrating, debilitating, in many ways counterproductive, extension of the reality of bureaucratic interaction in Washington to the field. In a foreign country, the US Government cannot afford to speak with more than a single voice. I am not suggesting an autocratic approach. I am merely suggesting that if resources are limited, then the allocation of those resources, in lesser-developed countries, must be dependent upon a clear statement of principle. In country policy making was always exciting, and always a learning process; however, it was frustrating that the Ambassador was dealing with unclear lines of authority at the country team level.

Q: At the time what was the United States' stand on South Africa, and how did it affect our relations with Kenya, if at all?

FERGUSON: With the Administration of President Kennedy in 1961, the policy towards South Africa changed appreciably, and the US became very sensitive to black African concerns in South Africa. There was a deliberate change of policy, because of the preoccupation of the Johnson Administration with Vietnam, US policy towards Africa received limited attention. Because of the sustained interest of the Kennedy-Johnson era in civil rights, including South Africa, Sub-Sahara African countries, including Kenya, were more receptive to the Ambassador from the United States.

Having said that, the rigidity of the Kenyans with regard to travel to South Africa was remarkable. I could not travel to South Africa on my passport, even as a diplomat. If I had, there would have been a problem in returning to Kenya. Several Americans, at that time, were taking the precaution of having a second passport issued, and the second passport was used for travel to South Africa. I considered that duplicity; therefore, I did not go to South Africa. It would have been useful to have visited South Africa in representing the interests of my country in Kenya. In Kenya, on one hand there was more sensitivity in the 1960's to the United States and its representative. On the other hand, Kenya was demonstrating a rigidity that precluded visiting South Africa. Now, that has all changed. At the time, negative feelings toward South Africa were profound.

Q: What were our interests, if any, in the border frame, and the eventual diplomatic rift between Kenya and Somalia?

FERGUSON: At that time, the rift between Somalia and Kenya was restricted to a manifestation called the Shifta. The Shifta were renegades. It was difficult to determine whether they were led by Somalia, or whether they were an indigenous Somali ethnic group in Kenya. The Shifta were roving bands of armed intruders who stole cattle and occasionally raided settlements. I remember that a few missionaries were temporarily incarcerated or inconvenienced.

The Shifta menace represented a deeper problem. Somalia and Kenya did not have solid relationships. Kenya had public and private support from the developed world, including the UK, and the USA. Somalia, in contrast, no longer had meaningful support from Britain in the north or from Italy in the south, and the country was extremely poor. Kenya did not have much to gain from improved relations. What they tried to do was to contain the Shifta problem in the extreme northeastern part of the country which adjoins Somalia. The containment policy was successful, but the Shifta did not disappear. Today, Somalis are coming across the border into Kenya as a result of the current emergency. It has become a major international refugee problem.

Q: Did you have anything that you really had to do concerning this situation?

FERGUSON: When I arrived in Kenya, the first visit I made upcountry was to Peace Corps volunteers assigned to Turkana and Shifta famine regions. Peace Corps Volunteers, and a few USAID projects, were providing food, medical supplies, basic educational support, books for school children, and support mechanisms. Because the Kenyans did not perceive the Shifta as a major issue, limited aid was provided.

Q: As far as other major problems that you had to deal with, aside from your initial problem when you first came to the country, what other things did you have to deal with during your three years there?

FERGUSON: The East Africa community was falling apart. The United States' position was that even though politically the three countries might not work together effectively, functionally there were cooperative options: the postal system, tourism, customs, transportation, etc. Part of the assignment was devoted to working with counterparts from the United States in Uganda and in Tanzania in an effort to maintain a cooperative regional spark.

There were a number of visits of American ships to Mombasa. During the Vietnam war, Mombasa served as an excellent port, and there were sensitive problems when there were naval visits. I was accredited to the Seychelles, the islands which were 1500 miles off the coast of Kenya, and the Seychelles were in the middle of the routes to the Far East including Vietnam, and they were fairly close to sources of oil. They were also close to

Diego Garcia which had become a staging ground for bombing missions. We did have involvement with some aspects of the military effort as a result of the Vietnam War.

The principal responsibility was economic development in Kenya including USAID and the Peace Corps.

Q: My next question is, in January of 1968, Vice President Humphrey, along with his wife, and Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, made a visit to Kenya. Could you describe the nature of this visit, and how it went?

FERGUSON: I respond with a smile. It was a triumphant visit. Hubert Humphrey was a Pied Piper. He walked down the main streets of Nairobi "leading the band." Vice President Tom Mboya and hundreds of Kenyans joined the parade. I cite the parade as an indication of Humphrey's style, as well as what the style provoked, which was a heartfelt response. I introduced him at an open forum where there was an exceptionally large crowd. He did a remarkable job in conveying his commitment to civil rights, his commitment to Africa, and in turn, America's potential commitment. He believed in the Third World. He believed in the future of independent African countries. He believed that America cared about the Third World, and he was one of the few who was able to communicate, even during the Vietnam War, that sense of commitment. When he met with the Kenyan leadership, there was a very positive reaction to him as a person as well as to the Vice President of the United States.

Q: When visiting African countries--generally there is the President or Vice President, or perhaps a Congressman, but Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall was there. Was he a figurehead, or was he there because he was really interested in Africa? Why was he present at the time?

FERGUSON: It was a small delegation. I remember that the Humphrey staff was confined to one person. Thurgood Marshall, as the first black appointed to the Supreme Court, had a deep interest in Africa, and I think that he probably took the initiative in suggesting that he make the trip. He was an active participant. There were no problems resulting from his presence in the delegation.

Q: What was the purpose of the entire visit, basically to show African countries support from the United States? Or to show interest in Kenya?

FERGUSON: The Vietnam situation had not improved appreciably. As a result, very few senior people, other than a large number of Congressmen, had come to Kenya. It was Vice President Humphrey's mission to make certain that African countries recognized that the United States, in spite of its preoccupation with Vietnam, was also continuing to reflect interest in the developing world. I don't think there was anything more profound than that.

While he was in Kenya, he tried to articulate an aid program on a broader regional scale. Before his arrival, his office asked our mission to comment on what the United States ought to do with regard to aid to Africa. Our response was to try to broaden the concept of aid from a bilateral to a regional reality. Vice President Humphrey had some impact in talking about a regional program for Africa with US and other donor support. He also advocated greater donor country coordination.

Q: Pardon me for dwelling on this, but one last question about that visit. Did you have any administration problems as far as where to put them? Or just personal difficulties concerning the visit.

FERGUSON: I think it was the most difficult visit we had because of the popular enthusiasm which it generated. Humphrey was generally, and genuinely, liked. Every American in the mission wanted to meet him, and it was equally true of the Kenyans. The resources of the American mission were limited. Every official group of visitors presented logistical problems. Ostensibly, the missions were substantive. In reality, the flora and fauna intervened. Hubert Humphrey was a major exception. He was there to listen, to learn, and to talk (as you know from his reputation).

Q: Did you have any problems during your time as Ambassador protecting US citizens, or any sort of citizen problems?

FERGUSON: We had problems with regard to accidents, security issues, passports and visas, etc. In the absence of terrorism, there were not any major issues regarding American citizens.

Q: To go back to the beginning of your post when you first got there, and the book that the past ambassador had written and was on the shelves which was called The Reds and the Blacks. Did you see any sort of communist threat in Kenya?

FERGUSON: There was no internal communist threat in Kenya. The Communist Party was virtually nonexistent. We did not deal with representatives of the Communist Party, and it was outlawed specifically by Kenyatta's government. Communism was not a local factor. It was equally true of socialism because Kenyatta, in contrast to many other African leaders, did not have a political credo. He called his program African Socialism, but it was really a way of attracting private capital, of inducing American, British and European firms to invest in Kenya. He was not threatened politically by Odinga, or by anyone else. He wanted to create an economic miracle, and during the period I was there, he succeeded. There was no disaffected opposition that might have germinated a communist threat.

There was always the problem of an external communist threat, and we dealt every day with the question of Eastern Europe, the USSR, and China, being involved in a series of acts and schemes geared to undermine stability.

Q: What do you feel was your greatest achievement as the US Ambassador in Kenya?

FERGUSON: I have never really thought in those terms. I would be hard-pressed to cite a specific personal achievement. I am a manager. I choose to think that part of my leadership, wherever I am, is to attempt to work with others in a meaningful way. I suppose that I would be pleased if we conveyed a sense of mission, that we worked together effectively, and that the Kenyan government responded to our leadership. The rebuilding of effective US-Kenyan relations, after the book episode, would be high on the list. For my wife and me, our three years in Kenya provides a very positive memory. There were problems; we dealt with them, and we feel that we had made a contribution.

Q: And what do you feel was your greatest frustration while you were there?

FERGUSON: I would say there were several. First, the relative lack of interest of the United States in Kenya, in Black Africa, in the Third World, and in the developing world. Secondly, the absence of any policy to deal with the area I have just described. There is a tendency to leave the ambassador, and those working with him or her, in the position of coping with emergencies in a policy vacuum. During the 1966-1969 period, we did not have a US foreign policy with regard to Kenya, with regard to East Africa, or with regard to Sub-Saharan Africa. In contrast to Great Britain, and several other countries, the United States does not define self interest.

Thirdly, I would suggest the absence of adequate financial resources. We were always in the position of saying "no." We respond to a moral challenge, but there are never the requisite funds available to fulfill our promises.

Finally, I would cite the issue of continuity of ambassadorial service. It took almost three years to rebuild the relationships that had been nearly destroyed by a thoughtless act regarding the book. When President Nixon assumed office, as a political appointee, I was ordered to leave Kenya immediately. I understand the process. An Ambassador, who is not a member of the Foreign Service, upon the election of a new President, must submit his or her resignation. On the other hand, the timing of the removal of a political appointee must be evaluated in the context of US interests.

Eleven months elapsed before a person was assigned to Kenya to replace me. The interests of the United States, in any country, should not be affected by such bureaucratic accidents.

Q: A final question. In retrospect, is there anything that you would change about your time in Kenya?

FERGUSON: The changes in Kenya since 1969 have been profound. To provide an example, Daniel Arap Moi was then Vice President. He is a Kalenjin from a small tribe in the Rift Valley. As a teacher; a person with religious convictions; and a person who cared deeply about his family, he returned to the homestead at every opportunity. He was the

pacifier; mediator; the person who was willing to respond. He kept the Kenyatta cabinet focused on the human dimension. Today, Daniel Arap Moi is considered a tyrant. The United States has had great difficulty in dealing with him. He has become, according to media reports, venal and arbitrary. What effort has been made to evaluate systematically the changes in the behavior of a chief of state? Could not waves of US ambassadors to Kenya shed light on this critical issue?

I would not change anything with regard to my assignment in Kenya, but I would suggest that once leaving the country to which they are accredited, ambassadors should be asked formally to respond to critical in-country issues. For each country, a panel of former ambassadors could be appointed as a review mechanism. The panel could meet annually to discuss important issues. The results of these panel sessions might become a cornerstone for the formulation of US foreign policy for the country involved.

End of interview