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

AMBASSADOR OWEN W. ROBERTS

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INTERVIEW

Q: I might mention that Owen and I came into the Foreign Service at the same time. Owen, I wonder, just to get started on this, could you give me a bit of your background--where did you grow up, where were you educated, what did you do before you came into the Foreign Service.

ROBERTS: I was born in Ardmore, Oklahoma, but can't claim any Southwest background. My father moved up to Princeton, New Jersey, to take care of his mother and father when they were somewhat invalided in the early thirties. I grew up in Princeton, a lovely, quiet, small town, and went to the university there, started in engineering.

This was interrupted by World War II. I volunteered and ended up in the 14th Armored Division. Made the landing in Marseille, went up the Rhone Valley, and got embroiled in the real war, and went all the way through to Salzburg, Austria.

Only about ten out of the thirty-six in our reconnaissance platoon survived. That left a fairly strong impression. I learned that war was an absolute meat grinder; that despite everything I'd heard about Geneva Conventions and Red Cross rules, there weren't any when you were at the front. I think perhaps the rules applied as you got further and further back, but certainly not on the front.

Also, I was very much shaken to come back and find that most of the people I knew in Princeton, and various family relations, simply had no idea what the real war was like. Even though they'd conscientiously read about it in the newspapers, they still had a somewhat romantic, World War I approach to it.

Q: If I recall, going back to the time when we were junior officers together, didn't you get involved in the forced repatriation of Russian prisoners and all that?

ROBERTS: Yes, I had been a motorized scout. I was in the first or second vehicle going down the road every morning in front of the 14th Armored Division. In a way, it was high risk because you were simply the first one; in a way, it was low risk because we were such an insignificant target that lots of times the Germans would wait until we'd gone by, to shoot something better.

Immediately after the war, on the Austrian-German border, I was taken into the OSO (Office of Security Operation, I think it was) as a counterintelligence and border agent. I was given responsibility for the border stretching between Bad Reichenhall, just west of Salzburg, and Bertchesgaden. My job was screening the torrent of refugees and applying all the new military post-war regulations. Had to start from scratch, building up a local police force and dealing daily with all the thousands of people, displaced people of all types. They included German deserters and Nazi escapees, civilians of all nationalities, and Eastern European worker/slaves who were trying to get out of Germany and back home, who had been pretty much reduced to animals in terms of the repression they'd had. There was also a reverse flow of Germans from Eastern Europe and Austria who were trying to get back into Germany. Everybody was trying to sort themselves out. We constituted a large mesh sieve

at the frontier, trying to sort them out, direct them to the right places, and catch the ones that were criminals.

Q: Well, then, you did that for how long?

ROBERTS: Only for about six or eight months. After returning and being demobilized, I decided that engineering wasn't what really needed attention, it was foreign affairs. There had to be far more understanding of what wars and differences among people were about. I was interested in this. So I switched over into international affairs and graduated from Princeton. And after that, I went on to Columbia and got a doctorate in international affairs.

Q: Any particular focus for your doctorate?

ROBERTS: I was interested in how organizations worked. My thesis was on how the Socialist Party in France made up its mind to do things. You tended, in academic political science in those days, to study general fields, not operations. You looked at public opinion, and the influence of resources, and the influence of individuals, and detailed history. But nobody had a functional approach, except maybe on a huge historical level. I was interested in how things happened, in trying to put the various factors of public opinion, organization and leadership together and to see what came out. So my thesis was about decision making in the Socialist Party in France on the issue of Vietnam from about 1945 to 1955.

I went to Paris with my wife and two infants. It was original research and we really had a first-hand experience. The Socialist leadership was moderately friendly, but they didn't want anyone poking about their records. These were also, by law, deposited in the Bibliothéque Nationale. But also, by law, they were on very reserved access. I found, however, that if I took a public document, which I got from the Socialist Party, and turned it into the library, the clerks assumed that I had access to the files, so they would go and get me the next copy. Little by little, I worked my way into all the restricted files of the Socialist Party, and had very, very good material.

The only problem was, I wrote it up that way. I had an excellent old curmudgeon of a doctorate professor, called Lindsey Rogers, who was happy to give his students minimum guidance. But when I presented him a 400-page thesis, he soon handed it back and said, "There's no thesis here." Then we had quite a discussion as to what a thesis was really about. He said, "A thesis is a concept. It's a thought. I don't care whether you say the Socialist Party is Fascist or Socialist, or whether it's going to expand or wither up, you've got to have a thesis," and handed it back to me. So I did another eight-months' work rewriting the whole thing.

That really taught me something quite fundamental, which was very useful in the Foreign Service. I have spent a lot of time looking through FS material trying to find a thesis or a concept. When it's there, too often it's an abbreviated statement at the very end, like an afterthought.

Q: Or a concept...good God forbid.

ROBERTS: I guess I came into the Foreign Service with two strong concepts. One was that wars are far more destructive and uncontrolled than most people have any idea, and secondly that they came about partly through a lack of understanding of what was happening and how organizations really worked. So academically and professionally I've been interested in the people and organizational factors that go into international relations.

Q: Also, hadn't you done something in Yugoslavia for a while?

ROBERTS: Yes, that was interesting and formative. I went over to Europe in my junior year as Princeton's representative to the International Student Service. This was an organization of American students and overseas students trying to help each other in the post-war world. In the United States, we mainly collected money and books and materials. We then went to Europe and met a lot of students of all nationalities at the University of Aarhus, in Denmark. We discussed student problems, what students mainly needed, and what we in the United States could do. I think that we Americans had managed to raise in the United States about a million and a half dollars. But students everywhere, and especially in war-torn Europe, simply had overwhelming needs. It was a shock to find out that they didn't even have paper. I was invited by a group of the students from Eastern Europe to go and see what their new socialism was about. So I went off with a group of Hungarians and worked briefly in an apple orchard outside of Budapest, and then went south with a bunch of very lively Yugoslavs and worked on the youth railroad between Brod and Sarejevo. My U.S. passport wasn't valid for this, but it wasn't any problem traveling on the train with the Yugoslav students. Everybody needed things, traded around, and if the conductor raised any questions, three or four people from his own nationality would talk to him and arrange it. It was very much my end-of-the-war experience, where everything was chaotic and you managed as best you could and survived. It was very much that way in Yugoslavia. I worked for four weeks on the railroad, and was much impressed because I found very few Communists. By Communists, I mean people who are ideologically convinced, somewhat like zealots of any kind, whether it's a religious zealot or a political zealot. I found a lot of nationalists surviving under a new system, and I found people who were socialists, and I found people who simply thought the old system had to be changed and reformed. But very, very few Communists.

Back in the United States when I returned, I discovered that everybody in Yugoslavia was stamped "Communist," and there simply wasn't any differentiation or understanding of what was happening there. So I did my undergraduate thesis on the problem of nationalism and communism, the conflict in Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. It was much too big a topic, but at least I raised the issue. So that was another insight as to the lack of understanding in the United States as to what was happening overseas.

Q: Obviously, this was all poignant and it makes great sense for you to go into the Foreign Service, but was this the determining factor of going?

ROBERTS: It was the only institution which I knew of involved in foreign affairs involved in the relationships between states which cause trouble. So the Foreign Service seemed to me the only alternative, except for the Central Intelligence Agency.

When I got back from Yugoslavia, and I had talked in Princeton about nationalism and communism and there being a real conflict, one of my professors said, "You might want to get in touch, in Washington, with so and so," who turned out to be a CIA man. I talked to him about my experience, and had some rather fuddy duddy, clandestine meetings with people who asked me to meet them secretly (can you imagine, in Washington and New York!) Then they asked me to apply for the Agency. I went to the CIA headquarters, at that time in D.C., and the man who was interviewing me asked: "How did you find us without an escort?"

I said, "I looked you up in the phone book." He looked quite crestfallen. I really didn't think the CIA was going to be my kind of place, so I went into the Foreign Service.

But I had problems because of the McCarthy Act.

Q: I was going to ask about that.

ROBERTS: After passing the Foreign Service examination, everybody was informed that we had to wait some months. So I waited a year, two years, two and a half years. But I was doing my doctoral work at the time, so it didn't bother me too much.

Q: Why the delay? Were you put on the grill about why you went into Yugoslavia?

ROBERTS: Well, as a matter of fact, I thought that might be what the delay was, so I went down to the State Department and tried to find out. This didn't work. Nobody would talk. Finally, I found some people who knew something about the Foreign Service, in Princeton. Mr. Kennan was one of them. As a matter of fact, way back then, he advised me not to go in the Foreign Service. He felt that you could not have a career and also try to make an impact.

Q: This was George Kennan.

ROBERTS: Yes, but he said, "If you are trying to get in, and you can't find out what the problem is, go to Congress."

My family was distantly related to a man on the Appropriations Committee, and so we had him inquire. Within three days, I received a call to come down to Washington. At the Department, I was sent to an officer in the Personnel Section. After I was seated, and we had some preliminary conversation, he got up, went to his door, looked up and down the corridor, came back in, put his telephone in the drawer, and drew me way off in the corner. He then whispered that my security problem was not Yugoslavia or anything personal, it was my father's Princeton roommate. This was Julian Brian, who had been a lecturer, and had been in Poland when the war broke out, had taken some of the first terrible war movies

of Poland, and then had gone into UNRA (the UN's relief program). He worked for UNRA in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union, and had then been a lecturer. He was a very open-minded man, liberal, and garrulous. His name had gotten on a list and as he was my father's roommate, my security clearance had been held up. Now that a congressman had questioned whether or not this was really merited, the issue had been reviewed and I was accepted.

I must say that during those waiting years, though, when I was trying to find out what the problem was, there were a lot of people who looked at me and said, "You know, where there's smoke, there's fire." My father, who felt that my being a democrat was bad enough, was shocked when my problem was his roommate. But it's very hard to remember back to that McCarthy period and realize how obsessed people were, and how very frightened people in the Foreign Service were. It's the kind of thing, I'm sure, that happens when any zealots get loose. When the witch-burning in Salem took place, it was probably that kind of atmosphere.

Q: Well, I can recall at the time (because we both came in the same day) sort of walking through the security wing of what passed for the State Department in those days and noticing all the Irish names on the doors: it was Francis X. So and So, and all this. It gave a flavor to the time, because in those days policemen were Irish, mostly. I sort of had the feeling that one was up against a very right-wing, rigid, Catholic (which in those days was very conservative) organization, and that they didn't speak the same language really as many of the people coming into the Foreign Service. They came from a completely different background.

ROBERTS: Well, I was very organizationally innocent. I didn't notice the same things that you did. Our family has always been independent, going back five generations, and I was the first person in our family ever to work for the government, and was considered a black sheep. Our family had been business people, engineers, inventors, frontiers people, and never had anything to do with any organization or institutions.

Q: Well, I can remember when we came in (we came in, I think, on the 5th of July, 1955), that of our class of twenty, you stood out as having had probably more real war experience than most of us, although almost all of us, with maybe with one or two exceptions, were veterans, but also that you had...ideology isn't the right term, but you had a certain fire, that America really should do something. We all felt this, but you really felt this.

ROBERTS: Yes, as I'd been shot up because of the breakdown in international relations. I was wounded three times, and had shot people myself, and all this happened because we didn't know when to get involved and how to get involved.

Q: So you impressed me at that time. I wonder if you could talk a little about the group you came in with, how they struck you, because I think this is important to get a feel for the Foreign Service as it was. We were the first "Class" in many years. It was the first time after the McCarthy period that the Department had been able to sort of cobble together a

regular class, rather than feeding in people individually, sort of as infantry replacement types. During much of that time they had been doing little recruiting or hiring.

ROBERTS: I remember the experience more than the class. I don't know to what extent I remember the individuals from that time, or simply think of them through later contact in the Foreign Service. But, as a class, I found it very congenial. It was very much like graduate school: we had lecturers and listed subject matter. We discussed things, argued, and to some extent reached decisions among ourselves. I was misled by that for some time, thinking it was how foreign policy was made. On returning from my first overseas assignments, I was assigned to INR and looked around for the kind of policy meetings and discussions that we'd had in FSI and that one has in graduate school. Couldn't find any. I couldn't find foreign policy being made. Occasionally, I could sit in on senior officers' meetings. But it was like a lecture: somebody generally spoke, there might be a question or two, but there was no real debate, and there was no real summing up and stating the consensus. Everyone just returned to their offices. It wasn't until someone called me up once, when I had put forward an idea, and said, "Well, what are you doing? I mean, aren't you drafting something?"

And I said, "What?"

He replied, "Yeah."

So I said, "Well, why don't I come over and see you." We drafted something and I suddenly realized that policy was made by somebody who wanted to see something go one way, went around and collected the support necessary, and argued for it one way or another--in the dining room, hall, office, wherever it was--and that that was how things got done. You really didn't make policy in meetings and you didn't organize one until you more or less knew what was going to happen. Meetings mostly put the general seal on policy and informed the larger audience. It was a much more private kind of decision making than in the classroom and academia.

Q: We'll obviously be coming back to this, but your first assignment you went to Cairo, is that right?

ROBERTS: That's right.

Q: You served there from '55 to '58. Of course, it was sort of luck of the draw. Had you asked for the Middle East or anything?

ROBERTS: No.

Q: What were you doing there, and what was your impression of the Foreign Service and your work when you first got there?

ROBERTS: Well, I went out there, fresh from having spent all of my post-war time in the university--first at Princeton, and then at Columbia--and I was totally unprepared for a working job. The Foreign Service Institute had provided background but no job specifics. I was assigned as a vice consul for citizenship matters, --welfare, whereabouts, passport. I was well grounded in the history of consular affairs and in the various consular laws, but I had never seen a single form. When I walked into the office, there were great stacks of forms, and I was supposed to verify them, sign them, and I didn't know what forms went with what activities, nor did I know what you should check for. It took me a while to learn.

The consul general, Larry Roeder, was a professional consular officer. He looked a little askance at political officers (I was not a political officer, but a Ph.D. in foreign affairs and international law) and was a little doubtful about my usefulness. He gave the other vice consul, for visa affairs, and myself very little guidance. We could always go in and see him, and he'd always give us a good opinion, and he was experienced, but in no way did he show you anything. You had to learn, and he felt that was part of whether or not you were going to be any good.

I soon found that I got most help from some very nice Egyptian and Armenian staff. I learned most of my real practical work from the staff, which was a very good lesson.

Q: Well, here you were, you came from an academic place, what was your impression of Egypt at the time? Obviously, you were not involved in the depths and the bowels of the policy formulation process, but at least you were looking at Egypt and the United States there.

ROBERTS: Well, I still tingle about that, because we were encouraged in the Foreign Service Institute to take a great interest in the country and the people and in the policy, and to participate as we could, and to consider as many of the issues as possible. But I found that vice consuls in the consular section weren't considered as "need-to-know" people. I spent two years in Cairo at a very interesting time, from '55 through the Suez crisis and the war with Israel, never being permitted to go to a staff meeting, and never permitted to read a reading file, and never permitted to have any access whatsoever to what the embassy produced or received.

That was kind of a shock, but I soon found that it was like finding out how policy was made in the State Department. You simply visited around, saw people, and talked to them, and you very soon found out what the issues were and could keep abreast of things. But it wasn't a very satisfactory way of learning how the United States was approaching Egypt and vice versa during that period.

To answer the question more broadly, Egypt was a very interesting place to be because it was just leaving the pasha period of strong British influence. Nasser had come in and was asserting new Egyptian nationalism and pride, but there was overall still a very strong element of the Alexandrian quartet.

Q: You're talking about a book by Lawrence Durell, which was not only very popular but an excellent study of that very exquisite little society there.

ROBERTS: The society of Cairo-Alexandria. For me it was a totally new atmosphere, one in which there was still a lot of freedom and openness, and you could do almost anything and go almost anywhere. My wife and I joined things and did a lot of archeological exploration. The embassy had asked the Archeological Institute, which usually had two or three people on a dig, if they wouldn't lead interested members of the American community on historic area picnic rambles. We would go anywhere from the Gisa pyramids to maybe sixty miles south up the river. Janet and I spent much time in Egypt out in the desert. We took care of the archeological group's jeep when they weren't there, and we used that to get further out in the desert. I really liked exploring, and I found that almost anywhere in Egypt, if you had a little bit of language, there was a receptiveness, openness. You could be anywhere; at no time did you ever have to feel that you were in the least threatened. It was a marvelous place.

Q: When you were doing your sort of unofficial sounding and talking about things, what did the embassy and the senior officers feel about Nasser? Nasser was considered to have horns by the British and the French, but what were you getting from the people on the spot who were dealing with him?

ROBERTS: Well, Holsey Handyside, one of our classmates, was vice consul, political affairs, and so I did get some perceptions from him. He was a brand-new officer and not necessarily a Middle East buff, but a very practical, very realistic guy, and he felt it was clear that Egypt had changed and that Nasser was going to be a strong figure, and that we should accept that Egypt was going to be a different place and work with it.

His boss was a man called Peter Chase, who was one of the more idiosyncratic, East Coast old-fashioned, far out Foreign Service officers, who was really an academician working in the Foreign Service. He understood and appreciated Arab affairs, and thought not just of Nasser, but of Egypt as part of a whole relationship: the Arab community, the Muslim community, the history. He was extremely well grounded. His approach, however, was not totally the embassy one. He was always putting up drafts for cables, and having many of them bounce back. He was the pushing wedge to get changes in what was going on. He was just the opposite of a bureaucrat: he didn't care whether or not people agreed with him. He was interested in whether or not it was the right analysis, whether or not this was fundamentally the most sound long-term approach, what really was right. He would focus on the finest of gray and light gray distinctions, which is a fascinating concern. But he didn't really care about the policy bureaucracy and the State Department's kind of immediate interest approach or public opinion back in the United States. It seemed to me that the United States overall was somewhat reluctant to deal with Nasser and with Egypt in a newly independent, assertive state.

Q: What was behind this? After all, we're a revolutionary country and threw off British rule, and here is somebody doing the same thing.

ROBERTS: Well, it goes back; lots of international relations are affected by your partners and by your broader political interests. The U.S. wasn't isolationist then, but it was still not much world involved. The British were still one of our closest allies, and we'd sort of left Egypt to them. And then, we were sensitive to the real defeat they suffered over the Suez in the '56 War. The United States had really stepped in there and undercut them. I have no idea what we knew of British war plans or policy process. Most everyone was surprised, so I don't think we had too much knowledge. But afterwards, we didn't want to make things hard for them.

Q: From all knowledge, all the lines of communications were absolutely shut down.

ROBERTS: Well, on the day the war broke out, I had been sent off to take care of a woman...

Q: This was around October '56.

ROBERTS: Yes, who had died in her apartment. The Egyptian police had been called to the scene and would not let me close up the rooms or remove her body. They felt she'd been murdered. Well, it was a very hot, long afternoon that I spent there. She had been an alcoholic, and there were bottles and upchucks everywhere. All of a sudden, there were bangs and explosions. The three Egyptian officers and I rushed to the balcony. We could see a few planes (it was just getting dusk) and flashes. The Egyptians handed everything over to me, said "Take care of it," and scrammed. So I sealed up the woman's belongings, got hold of an undertaker, and got her body out. It took me about four more hours. Also sealed up the apartment, as you do with isolated death cases.

Then I went to find out what was happening, because you could still hear the bangs and the booms and feel the ground shaking. I got to the most open available lookout area, which was the Gazira Club on Az-Zamalik Island, and went up on its flat roof. Lots of club members were there, everybody asking each other who was involved. They didn't know whether it was the Israelis, or the Russians, or the British, or the French. Nobody had any idea what had happened.

I don't think our embassy was much more in touch, because we'd gotten word to start evacuation procedures about 24 hours before the bombs actually fell. When I went out on the death case, I passed my wife and three children in a convoy, which had been assembled that very afternoon and went down to Alexandria. They actually faced much more danger than the rest of us in Cairo because they had to pass near several airports and were out in the open and exposed. They were not bombed on the road, but there was bombing in various places as they went along.

Q: Was there any feeling in the embassy, particularly when Eisenhower really said this is enough, and stopped the British, French, and Israelis in their tracks by saying we wouldn't

give them support and all that? Were you getting a feeling from the embassy that we should let them go, or that this was a good thing?

ROBERTS: I don't recall well enough, and I can't contribute to the record on that. The only impression I have is that the embassy had minimum time for input and that Secretary Dulles decided on our reaction very quickly. It was all handled in Washington, and through the Embassies in London, Paris, and Tel Aviv.

My first knowledge came when all staff were convoked and we were told that there was going to be an evacuation. We weren't informed there was going to be a war, just that there was a considerable threat of conflict and that nonessential people, in all the Middle East, had to get out.

As vice consul for citizenship affairs, I was responsible for the emergency warden system and for helping organize all possible forms of transport convoys, boats up the Nile, or planes. We were absolutely frantic for two or three days getting maybe 1,500 people out of Cairo and the Sudan.

Q: Well, how about both before and after this war, what was the feeling of the Foreign Service embassy people you talked to towards Israel at that time?

ROBERTS: They were neutral. Israel was part of the bigger Near East problem but was not considered an active threat. Our main Embassy concern was England. We thought the British had simply acted in a last, imperialistic, knee-jerk way. There was considerable resentment because most of the officers I knew in the embassy felt we had not been consulted and they had knowingly dumped us in this stew. As far as Israel goes, it was felt they had gone along, out of their own interests, but had not necessarily been a sponsor. They had taken advantage of the situation, but it was really a British initiative.

Q: How about afterwards? We had been responsible for stopping this war. Did the Egyptians think we'd done a good job, or were they just plain unhappy with Westerners?

ROBERTS: Well, as a matter of fact, the Egyptians were feeling rather triumphant. The first real surge of Egyptian pride had come when Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal. It was conventional wisdom that the Egyptians couldn't run it and that they would need seasoned international ships pilots for twenty years to run it. Then the war both came and ended quickly, without too much damage or build up of hate. We got some credit, but the Egyptians felt they had largely won it themselves.

Q: Oh, I remember that. Oh, I remember that.

ROBERTS: For about six or seven months before the war, the Egyptians managed the canal beautifully. There weren't any sinkings or collisions, Egypt collected the revenue, and there was a great deal of pride about that. I think the Egyptians were very surprised, as certainly surprised as we were, at the combined attack. But it was such a brief affair. You remember

that the troops largely landed in the Suez, and got only about 20 miles up the canal before the war was called off. There had been casualties but no lost battle. Egyptian pride wasn't hurt. While they'd been attacked, it was as though somebody who was kind of your friend had flared up in anger and cuffed you, but you were separated and it was all over. The Egyptians felt that they were right and that they had emerged from this small conflict credibly. There was as much pride as anger at the British.

Q: Well, you left this, already having gone through one war, and off you went to Leopoldville. You were there from '58 to '60. Was this just an assignment, or had you decided Africa was the place to be in? How did this assignment come about?

ROBERTS: Well, that's a nice event to remember. Pete Hart was DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission) at the Cairo embassy.

Q: Parker T. Hart, I think.

ROBERTS: Who later on became ambassador to Saudi Arabia and Turkey and was also Assistant Secretary for NEA (Near Eastern Affairs). He called me into his office (the first time I'd ever been there), about two months before I was due to leave Cairo. I thought, "My goodness, what have I done?" I reviewed my past: where I'd been recently, whether or not I'd strictly obeyed all the embassy rules and regulations or whatnot.

Instead of some transgression, it turned out that he was being a very genial senior officer and invited me to have some Turkish coffee with him. Sitting there in the sunlight in his large, pleasant office he said kindly that he'd heard I had been performing well as a junior officer, and he'd like to know what my plans were for the future, and if he could be of any help.

Well, that was a very different kind of approach than my boss Larry Roeder's, who was a hard taskmaster who remembered your mistakes more than the accomplishments. I said, well, I really didn't know that much about the Foreign Service and what were good things to do, but that I had a political background and an interest in analysis.

He replied: "Well, a frontier is a good place to be. If you're a young officer, you have more opportunity at the frontiers. You will get more responsibility and you'll have more chance to do analysis than if you go to a big place where there are a lot of people and where a lot of the ground has been fairly carefully reviewed. Africa is a frontier, why don't you go to Africa?"

And I said, "Fine. I don't know anything about it, I'd be happy if you'd make such a recommendation." He did, and after the Cairo tour the Department sent me to three months of language training at Nice. While there, I received a cable assigning me as political officer in Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia. Well, that was just exactly what I thought would be the first nice step in a policy career. But that got changed before I got back to the Department.

Q: By the way, the Foreign Service Institute in Nice was giving French.

ROBERTS: French, right. In Washington, I found that the assignment had been canceled. The Personnel Office refused to acknowledge the cable. Instead, I was going off to the Belgian Congo as consular officer and economic/commercial assistant. I complained strongly but was told that if I persisted I would earn a reputation for bad attitude and would stay around Washington in limbo. Friendly treatment.

So I went off to the Belgian Congo. It turned out that sometimes you can't manage your own career as well as fate. The Belgian Congo became diplomatically quite a growth stock. While I was there, we went from five officers in a consulate general to the post-independence period of an embassy with about 35 people and at least 80 more in other agencies. The Congo developed into a major Washington concern, and it ultimately involved a 24,000-man United Nations peacekeeping force, even, from time to time, some direct Secretary-of-State attention, and general White House interest.

Q: What was your job like when you got there and the situation that you were dealing with right at the beginning?

ROBERTS: Well, the Congo was strictly a Belgian colony. The U.S. consulate general there, you might say, was a colony of our embassy in Brussels. As a CG, we were expected to do citizenship affairs, promote a little trade, travel, and live very much within the Belgian framework. All analysis and real reporting would be done by the embassy in Brussels. We had a consul general, an economic consul, myself, an administrative officer, and a secretary.

Q: That was it?

ROBERTS: Yes; a small post in a backwater with no expectations of any change.

Q: Oh, boy.

ROBERTS: If we did a cable, it took several of us to put it on the one-time pad. Then usually when we said anything, Embassy Brussels commented about five times more than we had. It cost us hours deciphering all the messages that Brussels sent reviewing our obstreperous remarks. This didn't make much difference for the first year, because it was a very backward, controlled colony and nothing was yet happening of any great interest.

But as independence got closer, there got to be more and more violence. Belgian control began slipping and the future got uncertain rapidly. The Congolese were really totally unprepared. I think that it's generally acknowledged there were fifteen Congolese college graduates at that time, and maybe only one or two of them actually back in the Congo doing any kind of work in the civil service. No Congolese in the military was higher than a sergeant-major. Nobody in private employment did more than run heavy equipment like

bulldozers. Nobody was in any kind of private business outside the native areas. There was no one with any kind of organizational or managerial experience. There was the MNC political party (Mouvement National Congolais), but it was really put together by Belgians, largely academicians out at the Lovanium University, who were meeting with Congolese.

Once Belgium announced that they were going to grant independence and hold elections, we Americans started to make a few contacts. This had been and still was forbidden. I remember that our consul general invited Kasavubu, who was then one of the leading candidates for local ward office in Leopoldville, and who later became the first President, in to see him. It was unimaginable that you would meet a Congolese in an office, so he was invited to the residence. The consul general's cook arranged for Kasavubu to come in through the kitchen to meet the consul general.

Q: Was this because of Belgian sensitivities?

ROBERTS: Indeed. We had not been allowed to have any contact with any Congolese up to that time. This was Belgian policy, accepted by Embassy Brussels and Washington.

In those six months before independence, I tried to branch out. Coming back on an airplane from a trip around the interior, I talked with a Congolese, who was being invited by the Administration to a meeting of chieftains who were going to become part of an honorary senate. I asked him to visit the office, but he said he didn't think he could do that, but maybe I could meet him downtown. I did, and only learned much later that the Belgian government had asked that I be declared persona non grata. I don't think even our consul general knew anything about it; this was done by a Belgian channel directly to Brussels, and it was sent then to the Department. The Department handled it, and I never learned anything more about it than that it had happened.

It was a completely U.S. hands-off situation. But then when violence and rioting started, it escalated rapidly and on quite a large scale. Things got more and more tense just the way the front lines that I knew in World War II had been. You drove your car very carefully, you looked around corners, because there might be logs in the road. You watched people on the edge of the road closely, because they would suddenly scoop up a rock and heave it at you. Any white person was an enemy. It was one of my first frustrations, learning that when there's a class war situation, it doesn't make any difference if you're a good American and or a bad Belgian, as whites you're all in the same boat. It was a difficult situation.

On one of those occasions, I tried to skirt along the African sections of town where there had been about 85 people killed, to follow up on what was happening. I came across a manned roadblock; some Congolese jumped out from the roadside bushes and began beating on the car with clubs and big iron rods. I only just got out of there--the windows were broken and they were jamming the rods through the windows--by driving through the bamboo compounds, and rejoined the road at a later point.

It was a dangerous, difficult period. In a matter of two years, the Congo went from an absolute calm, controlled, Belgian atmosphere you could have been in Brussels, for all you knew, except for the palm trees and heat to where you were in a primal, savage situation and could be killed anywhere outside the all white areas.

Q: We just took a break, and you were telling me, Owen, about an assistant secretary for international organizations, whose name I'll try to look up here.

ROBERTS: I'll give you some background while you're doing that.

Q: Was it Francis Wilcox, or Harlan Cleveland?

ROBERTS: It would have probably been Wilcox. He came, I think, in April or May of '60, after there had been several violent demonstrations. It was pretty clear that the situation was out of control. When one of these outbreaks occurred, the Belgians simply deserted their offices. They rushed home, collected their families, went to a hotel, got onto the highest possible floor, and stayed there. They were really the most chicken bunch of people that could be imagined.

On the other hand, they had a very good general in charge of the military force, who assured everybody that things were under control and there'd be no problem. But there continued to be outbreaks. When Wilcox came, we eagerly poured out our analyses and frustrations with lack of Washington response. He then explained that he had undertaken this around-the-world trip so that he could better appreciate the problems with which he might have to deal at the United Nations. After his first 30 posts, he had learned far more than he could handle. He'd come to realize that he was more stirring up expectations than he was helping, and that he now knew what to tell us, which was: "Gentlemen, I'm very sensitive to the problems you have here. I'm glad to hear that you're so much on top of them. I encourage you to keep informed about them and to keep Washington informed on them. But really don't expect us to do anything about them. Washington can only handle five or so issues at a time. You people in the field will have to manage most of these things yourselves."

Well, about six or eight months after that, the Congo was more than front-page news. President Kennedy was personally interested and had set up a cabinet-level task force which in retrospect was undue and an example of the new administration’s inexperience with the ongoing outer world. When I happened to meet the Assistant Secretary, I said happily, "Hey, hey, we made it to the top!" He looked at me hard and replied, "Don't get uppity. I want you to remember what I told you, and that is that Washington can only handle about five or so real issues. The Congo is an exception, and probably shouldn't be among them."

The longer I stayed in the Foreign Service, the more often I remembered it.

Q: During this time, was there almost a sigh of relief within the consulate general when you became an embassy and just sort of dropped our embassy-in-Belgium connection, because you felt that they either weren't with it or they weren't helpful or something?

ROBERTS: Well, organizationally, the State Department was well behind the Africa curve. When I went out to the Congo in 1958, there was one officer for all of Africa, and he was in NEA. African events developed all over, with the independence movements in the late '50s and grants of self-government in 1960. Most of the reporting done on African problems in the field was hashed over by our embassies in European capitals. Whenever we Africanists reported difficult or dangerous developments, our colleagues would rush off to see the Foreign Office or even somebody in the prime minister's office. They would also verify such views with the military establishment. Then they would report that Brussels, for example, was confident all was in control. In the meanwhile, our African communications were still based on the one-time pad. We could only afford, in terms of staffing, to send out a couple of original cables a week as we then had to decode replies and respond to points made.

I was due to leave the middle of June in 1960, but because it was so interesting, I'd put in for an extension, asking for six months or a year, and the Department had said no. The times had gotten more exciting, and I'd slowly become the CG's outside contact man.

Q: What was your job?

ROBERTS: I was still commercial affairs and consular officer. But I liked reporting, and I'd actually met a good number of people. I had developed some acquaintance with Kasavubu. I'd actually met Lumumba and had lunch with him at the Leopoldville zoo, where there was a small out-of-the-way restaurant . Embassy Brussels had no such first hand sources, so we had a primary reporting situation. But we didn't have the staff, or the equipment, or the voice to convince anybody. And in retrospect, perhaps not the self-confidence to make a fuss.

Q: You were still a consulate general at that point.

ROBERTS: It was still just a consulate general. I remember that our Ambassador from Brussels came down, I think it might have been in December of '59 or January of '60, with political counselor Stan Cleveland. It was a revelation. They had tape recorders and secretaries, extensive appointments made from Brussels and they proceeded to analyze the whole situation in a few days. They were a big operation.

Returning to my extension request. We had sold our car, we had packed all our furniture, and we were in the hotel, waiting to leave the next morning at 8 o'clock, when the consul general knocked on the door. He had a cable from Washington, extending us. So he said, "I'll retire for ten minutes while you and Janet decide what you're going to do." Well, at that point, we really couldn't get back into it. So I went out and told the consul general with some regret that we had, for all intents and purposes, already left.

We stopped in Europe for about a week, getting tear gassed in an underground movie with our three children during a Fascist riot in Naples. Finally got on a boat in Nice and started peacefully back to the United States. Then in early July, while we were still on board, the fighting broke out in Leopoldville. I heard the news, and I knew those people, knew what was happening, and there I was locked up on a boat. Couldn't get involved!

As soon as we docked, I rushed to Washington and, sure enough, they wanted me immediately. I didn't even see my family, I just unpacked the suitcase and began working immediately as INR (Bureau of Intelligence and Research) analyst for the Congo and Rwanda/Burundi.

Q: Well, this was a very interesting time. I might add that I came slightly thereafter, in about August or so, into INR, into the African affairs, but I was dealing with the Horn of Africa. But I would listen to you, and I think your experience in INR is something I've always remembered, about trying to put everything into perspective for some of the people in the administration on both sides, both the Kennedy and the forerunner of it, the Eisenhower administration, to understand what the Congo was about. Could you describe how INR worked and how you worked to explain the Congo to those that really didn't understand it?

ROBERTS: Well, INR, I think, has always struggled with several fundamental operational issues: should it be just information and analysis, or make some policy suggestions; just cover foreign developments or also consider U.S. aspects; and have long term or short term approaches.

Basically, I think INR should keep the regional bureaus and the functional bureaus honest, providing a separate voice within the State Department on whatever is important. INR can't be as independent as an outside voice, but they can be a separate voice. Within that basic situation, you also have to decide to what extent are you going to take chances and be forcefully analytical or take a wait-and-see approach, accommodating current thinking. It's rather a hard line. If your analysis says that they're going to drop the atomic bomb on us tomorrow, the policy implications are immediate and you hardly need to pause or add a line saying ring the alarms. But mostly your analysis doesn't deal with clear developments or evident solutions. As the operational bureaus are usually proceeding carefully, I think INR can afford to be the quicker at assessing new outlooks or possibilities.

At the time I joined it, however, we were very much on the side of being strictly analysts and not getting involved in policy. In fact, my major assigned job in INR was to do an encyclopedia on the Belgian Congo for a background series for the CIA. The Agency had given the State Department money to pay for INR analysts who would provide these great data books, a bit like those Army country studies, which were comprehensive but really unused.

Q: The national security estimates, or something like that, an NSC estimate.

ROBERTS: They were NIE's (National Intelligence Estimates). INR agreed to do them as it was a way of paying for their analysts. So I was supposed to be working on that, but at the same time there were continual front page developments: what was happening to American missionaries; what was happening to businesses; how serious was the rioting taking place; what were the colonial administrators likely to do; and what would the Belgian forces do. Later, we covered the creating of a UN peacekeeping operation; its mandate and functioning; the relationship between that force and the Congolese; and the UN funding, organizational problems, operations, and politicking.

It was a tremendous scene, and a stimulating moment to be one of the few technicians available for senior people to call upon. I had had no real policy or Department experience--remember I went from three months with you in the Foreign Service Institute directly into a vice consul job in an embassy where I was not on a need-to-know basis, transferred to the small Congo office, and then back to Washington--I hadn't even worked in a big institution. As I mentioned earlier, I had no idea how policy was made, or how Washington Departments were involved, and it took me quite a while to find out.

In the meantime, I was also being used as Department liaison with all the various Congolese groups that came up to the United Nations and to Washington. I was escort officer for President Kasavubu and for Prime Minister Lumumba on his State visit. I even lived at Blair House while Lumumba was in Washington and was the one liaison officer for the eighteen ministers who accompanied him. That was a scene. I learned a lot about what New York can provide for visitors and how to get it on short notice. For example, when the Congolese wanted women, I called the Chief of Police and shortly there were lots of harlots stalking the Hotel Pierre corridors.

Q: Well, just from a personnel point of view, looking at it, we'd had this very small consulate general there, so you were probably the only person really with the field experience back from the immediate time, which had not been under the purely sort of Belgian connection.

ROBERTS: I was the first Foreign Service officer to know many of the Congolese leadership personally. Kasavubu had called on the consulate general maybe twice; Lumumba never had, nor had Gizenga, nor had some of the other leaders.

Q: Tshombe, was he...

ROBERTS: Tshombe, of course, was a big element in the internal political splits. But I had not met him; he always stayed safely on the other side of the country in Katanga. The CIA had had one agent in the Congo, and he also had firsthand contacts. But the CIA couldn't use him in the U.S. and at the United Nations. So at first I was the main U.S. contact with Congolese visitors, and it was a very active role for somebody who was, strictly speaking, an INR analyst. Then, everyone became knowledgeable about the Congo, as always with an important development.

As order was being re-established, it occurred to me that we needed to put together and legitimize a Congolese leadership. So I started suggesting to my INR bosses, and even at inter-office meetings, that we assemble a kind of a constitutional committee meeting in Leopoldville, which would also elect a leadership.

This was my first introduction to the fact that INR generally doesn't directly put up policy ideas like that. What you do is go around and talk to other people about your ideas. You try to sell the regional bureau on them, and IO (International Organization Affairs), and Policy Planning; then outside offices: DOD/ISA, CIA/analysis, and NSC staff. But you do not put them into a paper until positions take shape. INR doesn't do much of this, but there are exceptions. My bosses were marvelous people--there was Bill Edmondson, who was my immediate supervisor, plus two civil servants who had been in INR for a long time in the African field, and an innovative political appointee office director, Robert Good. Policy Planning didn't get involved in the Congo, a sort of upstart activity, so we filled that void. There really were many more important events and issues at the time.

Q: How did you find the Assistant Secretary, for INR? Roger Hilsman came in with the Kennedy administration. I'm not sure who was head of INR prior to that. What was your contact with these people?

ROBERTS: Well, Roger Hilsman liked to deal directly with people as well as through the hierarchy, and so I actually saw him several times. As junior INR analysts, we were expected to cover the front office on weekends, and go over daily intelligence materials, and do little briefing papers. He was glad to see all the younger analysts, and I think he got to know a great many of his staff. It was satisfying to have a chance to talk with bosses, and so I didn't really mind that there wasn't a major INR paper that went forward, because there was so much opportunity in the State Department to make policy if you had an idea and if you were in an area where there was some real interest and action needed. You could walk in almost anywhere and discuss matters you didn't always have to work within the strict organizational framework.

Q: I can only recall one instance when you sort of briefed me before I briefed Roger Hilsman early in the morning when we used to have that duty, and you were being very careful to have me explain that he should not be misled by the news reports, because there are always news reports coming out of the Congo: there are columns of armed troops going here and there. And you were saying, be sure to get it across that these columns of troops probably don't mean anything. They may be going in a truck, but they just may disappear into the woodwork or into the jungle or something.

ROBERTS: It was very hard to convey the Congo, because it was so different from everybody else's experience in the State Department. People were used to working with the bigger embassies and the bigger states around the world. If you went in to see a leader or the foreign minister, he spoke for his country; and if he said this and this would happen, you had reasonable hope that it was going to happen. The tendency at first in the Department

was to contact "the leadership" and expect to influence developments. But the Congo was chaos. Everything was episodic.

My own experience with the upheaval had been that...better go back to the fact that the Congo is a very tribal place. I think there are some 370 recognized tribes. If you want to think of it in more international terms, you could say ethnic sub-states. They were just as diverse as if you took all the countries from Tokyo to London and pushed them all together and made a state which you called the Congo_you'd have about that many cultural, language, and cosmological differences. There was no overall leadership, there was no overall structure. The Belgians had provided all that, and when they collapsed, there was nothing.

I can remember particularly Harriman coming into a meeting on the Congo and saying, "I've just been asked to get involved in this, and I'd like to go and meet the leadership. I think I can help you all." Everybody was kind of quiet; Harriman was a very respected figure.

As briefer, I suggested to him that there was somebody called a prime minister, and there was somebody called a president, but they didn't handle anything. He couldn't accept this. So I told him, for instance, that as our Ambassador was meeting privately with Lumumba, then the prime minister, the door broke open and six soldiers rushed in insisting they get paid on the spot. Lumumba scrabbled around in his desk and found a little money. The soldiers were dissatisfied, banged on the desk, said they wanted more, and began looking in the drawers. One of them threatened him a bit, and the prime minister got up, ran down the hall, went around the corner, and disappeared. The soldiers looked around the room, stole a few things, and walked out. It turned out later that Lumumba had hidden in a broom closet. The Ambassador reported it matter of factly, rightly.

Well, it was difficult to impossible to convince somebody like Mr. Harriman, who had dealt with majesties, prime ministers, and dictators who were in charge of things, that you couldn't fix the Congo through authority figures. There were titles but no authority. It was a very, very amorphous kind of situation. Someone later summarized the situation as "like nailing jello to the wall." That finally encapsulized it.

Q: How did you find, looking at this from this angle, having been there and all, the media reports? We sent all our journalists, a lot of the same group that later went to Vietnam and I guess are now in the Gulf area, including Richard Halberstam and all. But how did you find the media reports? Were they sort of up in the air? Were they still reporting things that...

ROBERTS: Well, the media were really excellent. You learn a lot from the media, because they are just so many more eyes, ears, and smart, observant minds. They send back all kinds of fresh detail which we didn't get, necessarily, from the embassy. It had only a limited number of officers who could get out, and suddenly there was a press corps of 80. They fanned out and came up with a whole lot more stories. But most of them had very little

background on the area upon which to evaluate their material. There were wild pronouncements. They picked up each others' conclusions and that became it. They didn't have any database at least in those days they didn't. When I was sent to Leopoldville, I went to the Princeton University library looking for books on the Congo, and there were three: two of them by missionaries on their activities, and one by Arthur Conan Doyle, who reported on Belgian atrocities in the pre-World Ward I period.

Q: Oh, yes, he was later executed by the British as a German spy.

ROBERTS: This was the Sherlock Holmes Doyle. But then no one had much database. I remember, for instance, that I was asked to testify on the Hill to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee about the Congo. One of the hot issues was: Just who is Lumumba and what is he politically?

All the journalists labeled him a Communist. I went through every single piece of paper we had in the State Department, everything in INR files, everything in the Africa Bureau files, everything in the historical files. I went over to the CIA and went through everything they had. I don't think there were more than 25 items at that time about six months after independence about Lumumba. References, I mean, just even mentions. No such thing as any biographical data.

And no wonder, because he was a real nouveau arrivé; he'd been a postal clerk up in Stanleyville. But he was angry, anti-Belgian, and nationalistic. He came down to Leopoldville and attached himself to the MNC Party, where he found that his colleagues were largely being controlled by Belgian academics at the new Lovanium University. The other wouldn't give him a leadership role, so he publicly declared himself president of the MNC. The other Congolese didn't want an open dispute about their party, so they never issued a formal denial. Lumumba never bothered to work with any MNC members, he just used the title. He was the first voice really to shout for independence. He was a charismatic, loud leader, like Sekou Touré in Guinea and Nkrumah in Ghana. But he had had no benefit of any kind of organizational experience, absolutely no administrative or management experience, and he had never been out of the country.

And yet the U.S. press said he was a Communist. Yes, he was radical, but he could hardly be a communist because there weren't any Communist materials in the Belgian Congo. Or any Communists, Marxists, or even Socialists. The Belgians wouldn't dream of allowing any such in their colonial preserve. Some journalist used the term "communist" as shorthand for a loud, pushy, radical leader, and others just picked up the label as gospel.

So I went up on the Hill and testified that Lumumba was a radical, that we had looked through all the material and it appeared that he had never been out of the Congo, or associated with any communist group, or even been in contact with any Communists. A certain amount of international news and political views of other African leaders certainly filtered into the Congo, and he was talking African nationalism and radicalism. He wasn't a communist.

Well, I can remember several senators saying, "But it says in the newspaper that he's a Communist. So and So says he's a Communist." My response was, "Well, what does So and So know? He's been only two weeks in the Congo. Does his paper have any files? No. We've called up and asked the New York Times what they had on Lumumba. Nothing: only what their man had filed." Not surprising, considering there hadn't been any non-transient newspaper reporters in the Belgian Congo until independence and the troubles.

So I find that journalists are very quick to pick up stories and write summarizations that provide a convenient approximation for understanding, but don't necessarily represent a complex reality. Also, they are frequently starting from scratch. Good analysis, independent analysis, comes only with time--as in Vietnam. The Congo was somewhat special; and as noted, we in the State Department were having a hard time ourselves understanding it.

Q: You were in INR until 1962, during the whole height of this. From your point of view, how did you find working with the desk? Was the desk using you, which would have been really a new desk, because before that it had been part of the Belgian Desk, I guess?

ROBERTS: Well, it was absorbing. Everyone "used" each other; and I learned this was normal. It was my first experience with what I would now call "operations" in the State Department. This is when a group decides to make something happen. It begins with mobilizing opinion within and without the Department, developing an action group (a committee, a Task Force involving other Agency personnel), and finding funding. It brings out the best in people, but at the same time it's kind of dangerous.

Soapy Williams was Assistant Secretary at that time, and he was determined to "win" the Congo war. He did not want to hear the slightest disagreement or doubt about that policy and its underlying evaluations. Anything like that hurt, because it tended to undercut his efforts to get more personnel assigned, or to find more money, or to win other Bureaus' agreement on an initiative that he might be interested in, or get more support for the United Nations. Such efforts were much assisted by two successive, very operational, if not downright manipulative, ambassadors in the Congo during those times.

Q: Who were they?

ROBERTS: Ed Gullion and Mac Godley. They were real front-line leaders. They understood the press, they understood the bureaucracy, they understood Congress, and they really acted almost like military commanders. Godley in particular would call up the press and take them out in his car, day or night. They'd get stopped at roadblocks and talk with the Congolese irregulars, they'd have escapades, and at the same time Godley would be "briefing" them, selling them his policies. Then he would submit formal evaluations through the embassy channel. He also established a private radio network, through somebody in Long Island, so he could privately tell the AF Bureau leadership what he was doing and his own assessment of the odds. Most others, including senior State Department

people, were generally comforted by finding that the embassy's reports and views largely matched those in their morning papers.

I learned something very fundamental about operations and about analysis. If we in the INR Bureau sat back and said, "The chances of putting together a group of Congolese who will choose a leader and then write a constitution are about 55-45 and it's going to take a lot of effort, about two million dollars, and maybe some luck," you're not very likely to get the senior support and the money to do it. But if you say, "It's 70-30," it's quite likely that the senior people will decide to do it, and then you, as operator, are free to try to make it happen. The real difference between the Department's analysts and outside ones, press or academic, is that you can help make history that analytically shouldn't happen.

Soapy Williams, Gullion, Godley, and Vance and Charlie Whitehouse (directors of AF's Congo Office, and, later on, Frank Carlucci as assistant, were all involved in winning a diplomatic/military war. It was much like the situation that you can feel today in Washington as President Bush starts organizing for war in the Persian Gulf. You can see that there are really various options, but you can also sense that the situation is going only one way as there isn't too much insider disagreement. Not very much surfaces, but you recognize decisions have been made and that the bureaucratic glacier is moving.

I've come to have mixed feelings about this, because to considerable extent I think the Foreign Service is where you try to make history happen in the United States' favor, and it takes a lot of initiative and organizational push to do that. But at the same time, this gets you into beginning to shade the analytical odds and say something is 70-30 when really it may be only 51-49. That's very dangerous. So I believe that you need to have the organizational freedom to have and encourage operators in your system. But at the same time, you have to build in protections such as a separate INR voice, and outside agencies like the CIA. Of course, we have the benefit of the press, which serves that function also, but they aren't an independent voice within the system.

Q: At the time, was INR sort of going in one direction and the desk going in another?

ROBERTS: No, AF regularly asked us for studies, and wanted to co-opt us. The heads of both Bureaus were activist and operation oriented. AF was just shorthanded. The Department, as you probably know, rarely shifts office personnel about even when a Bureau or an Office gets into a big issue. AF got along with just one or two full-time Congo officers for a year or more and only created a Task Force when the Congo remained big time. AF did occasionally ignore INR ideas, but they never openly challenged our making policy suggestions. The problem was less between INR and AF than between these two and EUR (Bureau of European Affairs), which was supportive of the ex-colonial powers. The other split was with the seventh floor, which felt that the Congo wasn't worth so much Department attention.

I personally believed that the United Nations and the United States should be involved in the Congo and acted more as a desk officer than an ivory tower analyst. I was frequently

sent TDY to the UN for important votes and assigned as liaison officer for many of the major Congolese visitors. The problem was less analysis than trying to make the unusually amorphous Congo situation understandable to those not regularly involved, like the seventh floor. I was once called to report immediately to Secretary Rusk. I found him worriedly pouring over an ethno-graphic map of the Congo's 370 ± tribes. I tried to comfort him by saying he did not need to know more than that there that many as it was more a case of creating reality than understanding it. You couldn't, as Harriman thought, "speak to the boss," or chiefs, and get results. You really had to create your own organizations within the Congo which you could rely on -- ultimately the UN force -- in order to get something done.

Q: Do you recall, were there sort of voices that "We should disengage from there," or not? Why did we see this as being important? I'm trying to put it in the context -- was it because of the "Soviet menace?" Why was a tribal dispute in the heart of Africa a problem to us?

ROBERTS: Well, I have to admit that I didn't then have much detached perspective. These were people I knew, a situation I knew, and I felt personally involved.

After about a year, when the situation had escalated and the United Nations was quite involved, I got a call in INR saying that George Ball, who was deputy secretary for political affairs, wanted to see me. So I reported to his office, and was told, "Oh, no, he's home. He wants to meet you there." So I went to his house, which was in Cleveland Park, just north of the big cathedral, and there on the doorstep I found Frank Carlucci, who was the AF desk officer for the Congo. We knew each other very well; he had followed me in the Congo and had had a lot of firsthand experiences himself, and was a very operationally oriented, very capable guy. George Ball came to the door in his slippers and a dressing gown (he was a bachelor), invited us into his living room, and gave us drinks. Then he said, "All right, gentlemen..." We waited, because both of us, knowing we were going to see him, had mentally organized lots of facts. But all he asked was: "Gentlemen, why are we involved there?" Frank and I had both repeatedly presented justifications for our Congo operations, but hadn't fundamentally considered if it was worth the cost. When we left, Ball was not really convinced that we should be in it. But I think that we were so far involved that he didn't think that we could back out, and that there was enough justification to follow through.

The justification we gave him was not that there was any overall Soviet menace. Lumumba, for instance, was no Communist, and there was no Communist Party in the Congo, and the Soviets couldn't run it any more than any other outsider. There were all kinds of self-declared parties, all kinds of tribal variety, and no national structure, and no military or police that an authoritarian group could have gotten in and manipulated. The real problem was that it was a totally chaotic place which might fall into all kinds of parts. This would affect Angola, which was just to the south and still a Portuguese colony. It would affect the British areas over in the Rhodesias. It would affect independence developments in Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda. And it would affect the French areas. If Lumumba gained control, and the United Nations left things to him, he would certainly invite in outside helpers. These would include radical Africans -- Sékou Touré and Nkrumah -- and probably a lot of

Soviets. There would be a mess. Also, as he was mainly a populist orator and a completely disorganized man, there would be much damage to a country which had all kinds of resources and long-term possibilities and had an impact on a lot of countries around the periphery.

This was the best explanation that we could give Ball, but I think he only bought it in part. The key factor for him was probably the extent of the UN involvement and of our existing commitment.

President Kennedy was interested in the Congo. He was concerned about independence for colonized peoples. He also favored a strong UN -- I won't say peacekeeping role -- but as a means of the U.S. indirectly promoting democracy and freedom overseas. And so, with White House support, we built up the UN Congo presence to 24,000 troops. This provided the presence through which we could organize the Congolese leadership, bring them into Leopoldville to form a constitution, create a parliament, elect a leader, end the secessionist Katanga regime, and, finally, rebuild the country. And this we did by remote control, over a period of three years.

Let me tell you another story about INR analysis and presidential involvement.

Q: Please do.

ROBERTS: One of the other African issues of the time was helping finance the Volta Dam in Ghana -- a contribution of about $125 million, or maybe more. The moment had come to make a decision one way or another: the White House had sent INR a request for a recommendation (the AF Bureau had already weighed in for the dam).

Bob Good, a Kennedy appointee, was still head of INR/Africa. He was an excellent analyst and an independent spirit with friends on the NSC staff, which helped distribution of output. He decided to introduce some management type analysis on this decision. We would develop all the factors -- the political elements, the economic, the social, the long-term historical, the short-term -- and we'd put them on a sheet of paper in columns and assign weights to them, and see whether the weights indicated we should fund or not fund.

Well, as we debated this back and forth, it quickly became clear that though this was a nice intellectual framework, what made all the difference was how much weight you gave to the factors. This in turn was just as subjective or intuitive as deciding without the benefit of all the boxes, though the boxes did help by putting all the factors in front of you.

One of the factors was that President Kennedy had talked to Nkrumah at the United Nations and had said, "I certainly want to help you with this, Mr. Nkrumah," to the best that we could tell from the sketchy memos of conversation. This was a semi-commitment, to which we gave high value. Then, just as we were about to send out our paper in favor, Kennedy's brother Robert, who was then attorney general, came out against it. So we were faced with adding and weighting a Robert factor. While logical, it wasn't wise. We resolved the

problem by going out to a good Italian dinner and deciding yes. Our INR Director, Roger Hilsman, didn't even try to be scientifically analytical: he just tore off our involved factor annex and sent the White House the brief covering memo in favor. Sometimes the best analysis is simple good sense.

I might add that the President decided to do it. But it was because Kennedy was an involved, people oriented president. I think, if you go back and read his Schlesinger biography, you will find that it starts with a wonderful depiction of the organization of the inauguration and the celebration parties. And then, about page 88, if I remember, he's standing in the Oval Room, his first day in office, and he has a lot of maps spread out, and he looks at his biographer and says, "The problem for my government in this next year or two is going to be Cambodia and the East." Here he was, with all kind of Russian problems, disarmament problems, NATO problems, China, and all kinds of domestic problems and issues. But there he was, saying that a small part of the international area was going to be his major concern. To some extent, his concern for emerging people led to an interest in Africa, and particularly the Congo.

Q: Did you ever experience one of those famous telephone calls? The president once in a while would call up people within the State Department to ask about things.

ROBERTS: Not personally. I think he called the Ghana INR analyst, and he had called the Ghana desk officer on the Volta dam.

Q: Well, you left INR in 1962. You were still within the Department; you went where?

ROBERTS: I went over to IO. The International Organization Affairs Bureau wanted an experienced Congo hand because the issue was continuing to be a major one and appeared long term.

Q: Who was the head of IO at that time?

ROBERTS: I think it was Harlan Cleveland.

Q: It probably was. Well, how did IO fit into the bureaucratic framework of the State Department?

ROBERTS: IO, I think, under Harlan Cleveland, had considerable influence. Furthermore, Stevenson was our Ambassador at the UN. These were two very high-powered men. Harlan Cleveland was not a particularly analytical or bureaucratic personality. He was much more an operator and sensitive to U.S. politics and White House concerns. He and Joe Sisco, director for UN Political Affairs, exercised considerable leadership because other senior people outside AF in the Department were less interested in the Congo. Secretary Rusk and George Ball managed the real big issues, and didn't want this thing to take up their time. For Harlan Cleveland, however, it was something that the president was interested in, something that the United Nations might be able to carry off, and the UN might fulfill its

role of becoming an international peacekeeper. Cleveland was all for the UN being our agent in the Congo, and the UN developing as an institution on the world stage. While Soapy Williams wanted to beat Tshombe and see that there was a nonradical government in Leopoldville, Harlan Cleveland's interest was in the United Nations as an organization, and in the Congo operation as an undertaking in which it could build a stake in the future. Actually, we encouraged the UN to over-reach itself, politically and financially, and we accidentally seriously weakened its peacekeeping capability for many years.

Q: How did he use you?

ROBERTS: I was just a junior resource who still had personal contacts with many of the Congolese and African delegations. I went up to New York City and met with them whenever there were major General Assembly Congo issues, as votes on funding the UN forces. When Kasavubu came to the UN to insist on recognition as President, I was our liaison officer.

I lived next door to him in the hotel, handled his living problems, was go-between with his FBI security detail, translated and explained TV programs, summarized the news, and commented on Assembly tactics, his drafts to the Secretary General and to the Department.

While I was sort of private staff aide, Kasavubu made appointments and handled all direct contacts with other delegations. But the Africans generally knew I was there and I had some bitter times with the Ghanaian and Guinean representatives. So I was IO's Congo-Africa hand, a lobbyist at the UNGA, and also kept in touch with what the AF Bureau, INR, and others were doing. I was the junior gear in the machine, but there was a role.

Q: You were mentioning the representatives from Ghana and Guinea; they were the radicals of Africa at that time.

ROBERTS: They were. Ghana had a contingent in the UN Congo forces, which was under Accra's direct operational control rather than UN New York's. It provided shelter to Lumumba once when he was chased out of his prime minister's offices. Both Nkrumah and Sekou Touré were fiercely opposed to the UN proceedings because mostly we had the votes. They were particularly bitter when we won a very close vote in the General Assembly on who was Head of State, Kasavubu or Lumumba, and thus to whom the UN was responsive.

This was the beginning of Lumumba's decline. He was slowly maneuvered out of his prime-ministership office and out of any kind of prominence. Finally he was seized by non-UN persons, taken from Leopoldville to Thysville, put on the only four-engine plane in the Congo, which was owned by Belgium, and flown to the Katanga. He was off-loaded there much beat up and never seen again.

The Ghanaians and Guineans strongly supported Lumumba because he was an African nationalist--loud and clear. Kasavubu was equally African but was a slow, deliberate tribal

chief. He was more amenable to institutional, gradual approaches, and had basic human, political values in common with much of the internationalized world. Lumumba was wild, unprincipled, dishonest--but a spell-binder. As the Congo's first Prime Minister, he arrived at the UN in the fall of 1960 with 17 Ministers and immediately met with 70 or more worldly UN journalists. With no public relations experience, but with supreme confidence and eloquence, he won them all over to his simplistic proposition that all problems would be solved if only the Belgians were wholly removed. He also arrived with no schedule, contacts, or papers, but with the Congo's only flag. He did not use his ministers, control them, or organize the delegation. He worked mainly one-on-one and treated meetings as opportunities to solicit both for the Congo and himself. On one of his shopping trips, he came up $150 short for some leather luggage. Rather than put an item back on the shelf, he asked me to help him out. I had some traveler's checks and did so. Later, in the limousine going back to the hotel, he pulled out his handkerchief and three $100 bills tumbled to the floor. He nonchalantly scooped them up and never looked at me. Cute guy.

Q: Did they try to undercut you because you were talking to Kasavubu?

ROBERTS: Oh, absolutely. I had some very difficult times with them. They misrepresented their positions and outright lied to me, and misrepresented or lied about anything I said or did. I have never encountered anybody who was quite so willing to cut my throat. On a diplomatic basis, it was the absolutely untrammeled warfare that I'd known in the front in World War II. A very sobering experience. There were no threats, and little personal confrontation, just totally devious personal/parliamentary maneuvering. I would try to make some agreement or arrangement, and they would see to it that it wasn't handled or that other Africans weren't told, that meetings didn't happen, their chiefs were told the wrong things. It was a very manipulative situation.

On the other hand, we were doing just as much manipulation as we could to win the votes when they came up.

IO's main Congo honchos were Joe Sisco and Bill Buffum, director and deputy director of IO/UN/P. Sisco was as manipulative as the African radicals; he was an operator in the sense of Ambassadors Gullion and Godley. He was also one of those people with whom you have to be careful. A wonderful salesman with a hearty, open manner, he was also a con man, a consummate bureaucrat, and artful to the extent of occasional outright dishonesty. But he certainly could move the issue. It was a real experience working for somebody who had as much operational ability as he did. Many of the Congo initiatives and a lot of the Department push came out of Joe Sisco and Bill Buffum in UN/P.

Q: Again, were we seeing this moving more and more into the East-West, Soviet-American relationship, as other problems in Africa?

ROBERTS: Well, in broad terms of competing for prestige and denying the Soviets a "win" in the Congo, there was a real East-West struggle. The more important the Congo as an issue became, the more important was the U.S.-Soviet aspect. The real problem was

quelling the Katanga session, putting the Congo together politically, and administratively rebuilding it. We were doing this through the United Nations. In that framework, we were coping less with the Soviets than with the radical Africans. They needed no guidance from Moscow on the Congo, and were probably better manipulative parliamentarians in the UNGA. There were about 40 African members at that time, representing a significant vote within the UN. There were two African blocs, do you remember? There was the Nkrumah-Touré radical bloc, and then the Casablanca group, which consisted mainly of the ex-French African states, and a few moderates as Sierra Leone and Liberia. A few were also on the fence, like the Sudan and Cameroon. These were all neither collectively nor individually of great US interest. But they did have a lot of votes in the UNGA, where there were important issues for the U.S. In particular, the UNGA voted the Congo budget and administrative measures. The Security Council was less operationally important to us because the Soviets had a veto there. The Council's main contribution was the original authorization of the UN forces, and that succeeded only because the Soviets happened to be boycotting its meetings at that moment. After that, it was a matter of carrying out the Congo operation through the Secretary General's office and the funding of the United Nations force, which was a General Assembly matter. And in that arena, it was not the Soviets but the radical Africans who mattered.

Q: Well, how did we deal with this? Was this a matter of payoffs? I'm not using it in the derogatory form, but, you know, you want another road there, we'll give you one if you vote for us. Were you running around with the equivalent of a satchel full of aid promises or something like that?

ROBERTS: No, it did not work that way. The CIA made some payoffs, I know, to Congolese delegations, and maybe to some others. They are not supposed to operate in the US and I believe their UN NY involvement in African affairs was small. As for development projects, AID funding, this was never directly involved in our UN NY lobbying. It may have been of some concern in African capitals when issues were referred back there for instructions. Or generally when our Ambassadors in Africa brought up UN issues. But direct barter, no.

Basically, if we were going to try to win a GA position, the USUN mission would do some preliminary work, get a nose count, tell IO back in Washington what the varying concerns were, and suggest the kind of demarches might be made where. The African diplomats at the UN tended to follow the "Third World" approach and many voted in blocs, often without much reference to home ministries. Our tactic was to get specific instructions sent out by Foreign Ministries to their UNGA delegations. IO would draft such demarches for our Embassies to local capitals, get clearances in the Department, coordinate with allies, and cable them out. As a lobbyist, I tried to contact as many delegates as possible, sometimes numbering ten to even twenty per country. I would argue our case and try to confirm their positions and especially their instructions. If necessary, we would suggest IO send out follow up demarches. Occasionally, we put on a full press and the seniors like Stevenson would call up Washington and say, you know, it is of primary importance that we get this instruction out. Once, I was ordered to get six African foreign ministers out of

their hotel beds for a 1:30 AM vote. After getting the Togolese up, with great objections, I realized that for the rest it would be counter-productive. So I hid out at the General Assembly bar with the Canadian Ambassador and talked trout fishing.

I was aware that the CIA to some extent was also contacting people, because I knew one or two of the CIA agents. Once in a while I would see them, and occasionally an African would be confused as to whether I was a satchel carrier or not. So we were doing some of that, but mainly it was straightforward diplomatic lobbying and maneuvering. We did not condition the Volta dam issue on Accra's UN votes. It wouldn't have done any good anyway. On a matter like the Congo, Nkrumah was going to be an African radical first and always.

Q: Were we able to make any inroads in that we were for African nationalism, too? Because in a way our skirts were pretty clean on pushing for independence. Was it just that we were a handy target, or did they feel that we were too much in the colonial pocket of the Europeans, or what?

ROBERTS: I think that even the radical Africans differentiated us from the ex-colonial group. But they focused on us as opponents more than on the ex-colonial countries because we were the organizing power behind the United Nations. For instance, when we couldn't round up the contributions to finance those 24,000 UN troops, it was USUN which proposed that the UN sell $200 million worth of bonds to continue the Congo operation. The ex-colonial powers were in no position to do this; they no longer had the power. Also, we had people in Washington who were really committed to making a success of the Congo. Our standing among Africans depended, however, on many factors other than the Congo: our bilateral relations, our stance on Southern Africa/apartheid, and of course on the remaining decolonization in Africa.

Q: Did you find that our growing involvement in Vietnam was becoming a problem as far as Africa went? Or was Africa, particularly the Congo, enough on center stage that you really didn't have to worry about getting people's attention?

ROBERTS: There were lots of issues going on at the same time. The USUN mission was, and I think is still, very good at being able to handle those five to seven major issues on which Washington really focuses, that get White House support. They were able to carry on with several major issues simultaneously in the General Assembly and the Security Council. The USUN officers specialize not only in issues and areas, but in UN arenas. They in turn deal with other delegations for whom issues are their the country's life blood to other groups that know nothing about it whatever. It is all contact. Lobbying works. That's why during GA sessions, when the normal, small delegation staffs are supplemented by many more from home, the Department sends extra specialists to USUN on TDY. The USUN mission, however, is no place for long term outlooks and solutions. It handles the UN aspect of whatever the problem is. Generally, this is a vote, or series of votes on action where the main developments are elsewhere. For example, when Tshombe had been chased out of the Katanga, Lumumba had been killed, and Kasavubu had become an active

president presiding over the formation of a government, the Secretary General wanted to pack up and go home. The U.S. didn't agree. Soapy Williams realized all too well, as did Godley in the field, that there simply wasn't much structure left in the Congo and what there was could collapse momentarily. If the UN withdrew, it would leave a very new Congolese government with no real background, no organization, no party structure, no national infrastructure, no anything. So the Embassy and the AF Bureau very strongly supported keeping the UN there. While agreeing as an Africanist, I remember thinking that this might be a mistake because the UN couldn't afford to pay for it, and sooner or later the Article 19 issue on contributions/voting rights would come up.

The Soviets and the radical Africans who opposed us in principle, also began refusing to pay for peacekeeping operations. The French, while supporting us generally on the Congo, were opposed to the UN becoming too effective militarily/politically, and they stopped paying for international peacekeeping. So to some extent we were breaking the UN's institutional back by getting it so involved.

I put this up to Joe Sisco, and he said, "Well, that's possible, but it's not today's problem. Today's problem is that we've got this and this happening in the Congo, and the Ambassador says that we need the UN for such and such. Your point is a problem for tomorrow."

So I went back to work and didn't push it any more. But after I'd been up at the UN for a while, I felt more and more that this was an issue. Thus I brought it up with the senior USUN Africa man, Ambassador Charlie Yost. He was a very decent, intelligent, thoughtful, respected officer who would have been influential. I told him frankly that I'd already raised it with Joe Sisco, and that Joe had turned it down. He said, "You know, I think that you've got a point, but I know how Joe Sisco and Harlan Cleveland feel about this. But I just might try writing a personal letter to the Embassy, because I know Godley well."

A month later he phoned me to say that Godley had replied, "Well, this is a consideration, but please look at my situation. I'm in a place which is falling apart from day to day. Washington thinks we've won the war. We've won a skirmish, but it's going to happen all over again if we don't also win the peace. And the only way to have that is to keep the UN here." Yost concluded that without support from the Embassy and IO the idea was dead.

This is another example of how, when the Department is in an operational mode, dissident ideas don't get raised up to where the senior people can look at them. If I had been a real operator, I think, in hindsight, the thing to have done was to go to someone like Under Secretary George Ball responsible for the big picture of what the U.S. interests were, and suggest weighing the long term advantages of saving the UN's peacekeeping ability against propping up the Congo. At that time, there was no DISSENT channel for putting up unconventional ideas to senior officers.

Q: Then you left IO in 1964 and went to Lagos, where you served for just about a year and a half as the political officer.

ROBERTS: As second of three political officers in the Embassy, responsible mainly for Nigeria's role in international affairs.

Q: What was the situation in Nigeria at the time you went there?

ROBERTS: Well, that was interesting and instructive. Nigeria was the new giant of Africa. The British had done a good job in setting up parliamentary institutions. They had done a wonderful job in setting up education. They had educated maybe as many as 8,000 to 10,000 Nigerians through the university level. Had brought them into the civil service. There were senior Nigerians, people who could perfectly well be assistant secretaries of state, in a lot of different fields. Big political groups had formed, based on the main ethnic groups--the Ibos, the Yoruba, the Hausa, and some subgroups. It was, to all intents and purposes, a real functioning country.

At the same time, tribalism was such a strong factor that politics became so bitter as to threaten the parliamentary/administrative framework. Political relations became a continuous, all out struggle. We realized this and had made holding Nigeria together the Embassy's main objective. Our AID, USIA, Defense, CIA, Peace Corps people were all to promote a national framework so that the tribal outlooks and the tribal-based politics and, to some extent, violence wouldn't break it apart. The difficulty in doing this, in organizing an Embassy with many different Agency parts, was demonstrated by the Department instituting one of our first management schemes. It was called PPBS (Planning, Programming, Budgeting System). In essence it said shape your budget and programs according to your policy priorities.

Q: This was also made a management technique within the Department of State?

ROBERTS: Yes, and it was promulgated worldwide to Embassies. There were detailed instructions and an Embassy officer was to be assigned at each post to organize it. I got the job. The plans/priorities part was, in our case, quite simple. We had a clear policy of promoting the federal system and integrating the regions.

The next step was cataloguing our existing activities and costs. So I went around to all the agencies and put together an agreed outline of programs and budgets. Then I put these up against our policies.

The result was extremely disturbing. It turned out that 85 percent of our resources were going directly to the provinces, to local activities. At the very most, if you stretched the imagination, most programs and budgets had minimal federalizing impact.

That's not really surprising. If we were going to promote education, we helped the university expand in Ibadan, in the Yoruba area; and to be even handed we helped

education in the Ibo east, in Enugu, and in the Hausa north, in Kano. This was good, sensible long-term preparation of people for leadership in all fields. But, at the same time, as we were doing it within a provincial framework, we were increasing the capability of all concerned to play tribal politics. We hadn't really appreciated this.

I presented this to the country team meeting and said, "Only 15 percent of our resources are going for our first and second priorities; the rest is for lower order technical activities." This was so unarguably evident that it stopped our PPBS effort in its tracks. The other agencies, with most of the local program budget, had organized their activities according to their agencies' various interests. They were not as Agencies committed to State's PPBS. We were, as an Embassy, not one management, but a collection of them. This too should have been obvious.

Meanwhile, Nigeria, like our PPBS effort, was coming apart. For much the same reasons. The Government divided on increasingly hard tribal lines, both politically and within administrative departments. There were riots, then violence. Politicians hired private guards. The Embassy should have said fairly early on: "Whoa, things are going really badly here." Well, we were kind of reluctant to give up our basic objectives and what we were doing, so we tended to put a more hopeful outlook on this. It was the independent voice of the CIA that began saying, "Things are falling apart out there." Then, suddenly, Balewa was assassinated. The collapse into civil war had started.

Q: He had been the prime minister.

ROBERTS: Yes. Several other ministers were killed; others managed to escape. The government limped along for a while, but the country had started splitting into its three major ethnic pieces. The embassy, I'm afraid, was surprised by this. It was because of our operational outlook; we were trying to make something happen. I now recognize, in retrospect, that we had nowhere near the means, even if we had gotten all of Washington behind us, even if we had directed all the other agencies' activities on PPBS lines. Nigeria was simply too big a place. The major tribal units were large, well organized, and powerful_functioning sub-states. And there were even more ethnic groups (about 460) than in the Congo. We really had no hope of holding this together.

After Balewa's assassination, several governments were put together for a while, but the parliamentary effort failed because there was no consensus that federal government was more important than the factional elements. So it broke down into civil war.

Q: Did you or any of the people with whom you were working ever question our policy? Our policy had been quite firm, really, and quite consistent, that the boundaries, which were highly artificial, drawn up during the European times, would hold true, and we would do everything we could to try to keep these entities--Nigeria, the Congo, or what have you--within these boundaries rather than let the whole tribal thing sort itself out after a period of time. Was there any questioning of this?

ROBERTS: There was really very little, because the policy--keeping the inherited boundaries--was overall a correct one. Respecting each ethnic group would create wholly unviable states. The problem was that we couldn't enforce such a policy and we had to really sit on the sidelines. I feel that, as an analyst, I was delinquent in not recognizing soon enough that the tribal divisions -- their strength and the capability of their leadership -- would almost inevitably drive this brand-new federal structure into the ground. I was caught up in the operational effort as in the Congo. All of us in the embassy reported fully what was happening, but we did not pointedly make the analytical conclusion. While it was a general Embassy failing, I feel it was a major personal mistake. It did make me more cautious thereafter about operational situations.

Q: Well, sort of looking at it from the overall picture, did it make any difference where the embassy came down anyway? Were we just sort of a chip on a stormy sea, and we could be reporting what was happening, but really would have little effect on keeping Nigeria together?

ROBERTS: That's correct. But not something a diplomat wishes to admit. I don't think there was anything that the AF Bureau could have done if it had seen this, or the Department. In no way was the United States going to try to put together a UN operation big enough to save Nigeria from itself. Also, remember that the UN had just broken its back over the Congo peacekeeping; it was left with that $200 million bond debt, which it still has, and with members who had decided they were not going to finance peacekeeping. A lot of other countries were delinquent in paying for their peacekeeping; the UN simply had no capability at that time. In this case, as an internal domestic matter, it would have been very difficult for the UN to get involved unless the federal government had asked for help--which was politically impossible.

Q: How did you find dealing with the Nigerian government, both at the regional and at the central level? Were they easy to talk to?

ROBERTS: The Nigerians, whatever their tribe, are a very strong, very assertive group. Foreign Minister Wachuku was a surprise for many American diplomats because he considered himself as having a status equivalent to the British, French, German, or Russian ministers. He demanded that much attention and respect. U.S. representatives weren't always that ready to give it to him. This caused some hard feelings, and Wachuku could be pretty bitter. The Nigerians were, and have been, very independent. Senior US echelons weren't used to dealing with Africans as assertive and as strong-minded as the Nigerians were. I found this nice, because the Nigerians were absolutely always open with you, and would hit you over the head with whatever the problem was. But it was always aboveboard. They were entitled to respect and helped gain it for Africans.

They themselves had very little diplomatic experience. For instance, they invited an Algerian delegation to Lagos, assumed the visitors spoke English, and had to search frantically for interpreters at the last moment. A Tunisian and I were invited to serve, which

the Algerians found extremely strange. It would never happen again; it could only occur in the very early phase of independence.

I remember also telling the Nigerian in charge of American affairs that I was reassigned to Upper Volta. And he said, "Oh, yes, the Volga River is one of the most famous rivers in the world, and the Volga is a tremendous part of Russia, and I've always wanted to go there. You'll be very happy in Moscow."

I explained, "No, I'm going to Upper Volta; it's an African country, just one over from you." "Oh," he responded, clearly thinking it a second-class appointment. It's unbelievable now how provincial the English-educated Africans and the French-educated Africans were about each other. They had had very little contact.

Q: Did you find that one group, like the Ibos or the Yorubas, could monopolize the diplomatic corps just by the fact that they spoke better English or were better educated, and so this gave them an edge as far as the reporting goes? Were you co-opted?

ROBERTS: No. Remember that all the Nigerian leadership were very well educated and all spoke excellent English. They were all assertive. Also, the ethnic groups were well scattered through all the ministries. The Embassy had excellent access, largely because the Nigerians wanted it. Our ambassador could see the prime minister anytime he wished, and we could see any one of the ministers. As second political officer, I had open access at the office director level. It was as open as working in Washington.

We also traveled freely all around the country. I made a trip of over five weeks with my family throughout much of Nigeria, and was always well received. Governors and administrators who hadn't previously seen Embassy people were generous with their time. And patient. I learned a lot -- especially how completely different the north was. We knew it intellectually, but not so as fully to appreciate it. I found that Nigeria was really divided by the "Y" of the Niger River; there was a northern half and a southern half, with the southern half being below the two bars of the "Y" of the Niger River. There were only two ways that you could get from north to south except by air. One in the west, was over a railroad bridge where there were continuous ties so that when the train didn't run, cars and cattle and people went back and forth over the railroad trestle. The other was a little ferry in the southeast. It was a little bit as though you were assigned to Washington as a British diplomat, somewhere in the 1960s and went west to find there was only one bridge across the Mississippi. You might have wondered whether this was going to be one place or two.

Q: Today is April 18, 1991, this is a continuing interview with Owen Roberts. Owen, we left you in the middle of Nigeria the last time. I wonder if you could talk a bit about Elbert Matthews, your ambassador. What was his style of operation and how effective was he?

ROBERTS: I really didn't have enough to do with the overall running of the embassy to say how effective he was. But personally he was a very kind, thoughtful, laid-back, ambassador. He'd had a lot of experience and a very quiet manner. He was certainly

respected and decisive in his leadership of the country team. I felt he was kind of presiding over a board, listening to everything that went on, making decisions when they needed to be made, encouraging people to do what they were already working on.

For me, it was epitomized when I went to see him at the end of my tour. I asked him, "Mr. Ambassador, you've hardly changed any of my reporting cables. My boss changes a lot of them, but you've approved them all." He replied, "Well, I've always thought that you knew what you were doing, and that you had interesting ideas. Maybe I didn't necessarily agree with them, but there's no reason why they shouldn't be expressed, so I authorized them to go out." I thought that was taking a pretty big chance, but he replied that he was interested in diversity of opinion. A nice person for whom to work.

Q: In reporting on Nigeria at that time, was there any diversity in how you and others were looking at whither Nigeria? We're talking about the '64, '65 period.

ROBERTS: Generally not. Nigeria was considered important but was not a Washington issue. We were largely agreed, in Washington and the field, on our objective of encouraging Nigeria's unity. This operational aspect, as previously discussed, makes for unity.

Q: Did you feel a damper on your reporting of schisms in the country? Not necessarily somebody from above saying this, but just from wishful thinking or not wanting to give ammunition to those in Washington who might have thought, well, this is a hopeless matter.

ROBERTS: I think that there was wishful thinking, but it was largely unconscious. Our mistake was not appreciating how difficult the problem was. Africa was a very new situation for most of us--all the issues of newly independent states suddenly running themselves. After the years of relative stability in the colonial African states, it was difficult to appreciate how little statehood had really been implanted. I remember the DCM, Scott, making a confession upon leaving for reassignment. He stood up at his last staff meeting in the Ambassador's office and said: "You know, I really don't think I should leave without saying the situation is getting bad, and I'm nervous about it, more nervous than I've let on."

Q: Somebody looking at foreign policy and at reporting should remember that there often is a certain amount of pulling punches by the post, anywhere. Not overreporting on corruption, for example, if you have other fish to fry.

ROBERTS: True. Sometimes too, a situation can be embarrassing.

Q: How about dealing with the Nigerian government, was there a problem there? Were they easy to deal with?

ROBERTS: We had very good access. And I liked all the Nigerians. They were very strong minded, independent people, who in no way wanted to be thought of as "Africans in a Western world." They were Nigerians and as good as any Europeans. I remember Ambassador Matthews called me one evening about eight o'clock to say that he'd gotten a telephone call from IBM's Watson, who had arrived in his own jet, because he was going to meet with the minister of finance the next morning. The airport wasn't letting him in because of some "visa problems" and would I kindly solve the situation. I rushed out to the airport and found that they didn't have any visas at all, in fact they just hadn't bothered (Nigeria being an undeveloped country). The immigration officer was saying that no, they couldn't come in if they didn't have any visas. I pointed out that they were going to see the finance minister and that it was important for Nigeria to have business with IBM. The official replied: "I'm sorry. You don't let people into your country without visas; we don't let people into our country without visas. If IBM doesn't respect us enough to come in with visas, I don't think our finance minister will want to meet with him. But you can take it to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and see how they feel about it."

So, about eight-thirty at night, I started calling up the diplomatic chain of command, and got turned down by the head of the America Division. But he agreed to call his boss. The answer came down very clearly: "If Watson doesn't think that we're important enough so that he's going to follow our visa requirements, he can just damn well go home and we'll deal with somebody else. We can deal with Germans, Japanese." Watson got back in his plane and left. I thought the Nigerians had a point, but I'm doubtful many in the Department would have. We didn't report it.

Q: Did the embassy have much contact with the Nigerian military?

ROBERTS: The embassy probably had good contacts, but the military were not yet important politically. A good many Nigerians had been in the US on military training programs, and we had at least a five or six man military mission at the time. But I don't recall that we had any particular inside channel. It was the civilians, the tribal groups, who were involved in the violence and assassinations. The military fragmented later.

Q: The Peace Corps was there at the time, wasn't it, in its earlier years?

ROBERTS: Yes.

Q: What was the impression at the embassy as far as its effect?

ROBERTS: Well, the Peace Corps was still very new at this time. Its original focus was largely people-to-people contact. The volunteers were supposed to help in schools and at the village level. There were as yet no small-scale development activities as wells, truck gardens, co-ops, and fishponds. Also, Nigeria was even then huge in terms of population: about a hundred and fifty million people. Our 300 volunteers disappeared into the overall mass of Nigeria. It was different than in a smaller country, we'll say in West Africa or Central Africa, where there are five million people and 100 Peace Corps volunteers would

have a greater impact. But at the village level, the volunteers established excellent personal relationships from the first.

Q: Well, back to Nigerian sensitivity, their wish to be treated for what they were, a major nation. Was there a problem for us to have a policy goal of trying to keep the nation together, a kind of United States? It's sort of patronizing in a way. Was this a difficult thing for you all in the embassy to live with?

ROBERTS: Our objective was publicly stated in general terms as supporting Nigerian federalism, and corresponded with the Nigerians' own concepts. Our Embassy plans were confidential and few if any Nigerians realized the extent to which we thought we were involved. Also, as demonstrated with our PPBS management attempt, it would have been hard to guess it given our diverse aid efforts spread over the whole country. It was a nice concept, but we weren't pushing it that hard that it created difficulties with us for the Nigerians. AID, USIA, DOD, and Peace Corps people were all carrying on their particular projects with the various ministries and working in all the regions. There wasn't any apparent conflict between our concern for the federal unity and the relationships that we had with various peoples. I agree, it could have been a patronizing policy had we been patronizing. But it was hard to be superior to a Nigerian, particularly when they were as capable as we, or more so, in most fields.

Ambassador Matthews was not the kind of person to go in and tell Balewa or Jaja Wachuku how to do things. He would explain how a particular issue might affect things that they were interested in, and what the reaction would be in the United States. Standard diplomacy. But they were touchy. Do you recall that a Peace Corps volunteer wrote home on a postcard about her first impressions of Lagos, including that men were peeing all over the place? All very true. But the Nigerians blew up: demonstrations, university protests, radio and press diatribes, ministry of Foreign Affairs notes, demarches in Washington. Reverberated for months. A hullabaloo.

Q: You left Lagos on a direct transfer, then, after a relatively short time there.

ROBERTS: Well, we were there about a year and a half. I was sent on short notice to Ouagadougou in Upper Volta as DCM.

Q: Which is now Burkina Faso. Was this a welcome assignment? How did you feel about it?

ROBERTS: Well, it was very difficult; more difficult than I realized at the time. I learned only en route that the Ambassador in Upper Volta had had a falling out with his DCM, largely because the two wives didn't get along. When the DCM went to South Africa for a month's vacation, the ambassador, Tom Estes, proceeded to get the Department to recall the DCM to Washington and pushed for an immediate replacement. The personnel system offered me the job promotion of DCM if I would go there on direct transfer. The ambassador reportedly wanted to leave shortly on consultation to Washington.

So, on about three day's notice, my wife and I packed up our house and our children, got aboard a U.S. DC-3 that delivered supplies around West Africa, and flew into Ouagadougou. However, when we climbed on the plane at Lagos airport, who should be getting into the plane but the vacationing DCM. We didn't know who he was; Estes hadn't mentioned anything either. The four of us sorted it out as we bumped along in this old DC-3. I repeated what I'd been told, that the ambassador had emphasized that the Department was asking for him on a special, urgent basis, that he had acceded to the Department's wish, and that I was coming up on very short notice.

Q: Oh, boy.

ROBERTS: It turned out that Tom Estes was really an agreeable person to work with, but it was only briefly. After we'd been there about two weeks, he went off on consultation/Christmas holiday back to the United States. While he was gone, there was a popular revolt against the Voltan President, Maurice Yaméogo. This was one of the first traditional uprisings against a one-man authoritarian government. It was exceptional as other governmental turnovers had been military, such as Eyadema assassinating Olympio in Togo and taking over.

In this case, Yaméogo had simply affronted his people too much. He'd had affairs with various senior men's wives. Then his own wife, while visiting in Paris, had a well publicized affair with the chauffeur. Most embarrassing, it was being widely carried in the French newspapers. So Yaméogo called her back and banished her. The chauffeur was beaten up and disappeared for good. This was also publicized. The Voltans felt humiliated. It was the last straw.

With no public notice, or apparent organization, they overthrew him as some tribes had always "de-stooled" an unsatisfactory chief. People left their offices, their homes, their businesses, their fields. They plucked green tree branches and walked the streets. There were the Ministry of Foreign Affairs people; there were the Interior Affairs people. The numbers grew and grew during the day and into the night. Yaméogo was isolated in his mansion. Even his staff walked out. Everyone had the word, including the Ministers who had at first been holed up with him in his palace.

Q: So this wasn't the sort of coup where you're holed up in the embassy.

ROBERTS: Not in the least.

Q: So where were you, out on the balcony, watching?

ROBERTS: Not at all. The mood was restrained and serious. There were occasional shouts, but mostly just the low gabble of a moving crowd. We watched from the curb, shaking hands with those we knew, and they reached out to us. It was a brand-new experience and kind of difficult to assess. The French ambassador, who had been there several years, met

with the Voltan government, labor, and school officials and became a political broker. About ten o'clock that night, in the central square, it was announced that Yaméogo was resigning and that Colonel Lamizana, who was head of the army, would be taking over the government.

But in no way was it a military coup. Lamizana was very reluctant to do this. He was a thoroughly professional soldier; I think he had been the secondmost senior African in the French military. He'd served twice in Vietnam and had been a major during World War II, serving at the end in Alsace-Lorraine near my armored division in the Seventh Army. Our reconnaissance unit had had some liaison with the French army, and I had driven up and down the same roads along which Lamizana had been leading his black troops. That became a professional tie. Lamizana later explained to me that the French talked him into doing it because he was the only existing authority. There were no opposition political parties, the labor unions were very small, there was no university, there was no alternative leadership. And so, quite reluctantly, Lamizana became president of Upper Volta.

Q: Well, what were American interests in Upper Volta at the time?

ROBERTS: We had no special interests, just the standard ones for small posts: representation, humanitarian aid, reporting, and a small amount of consular and commercial work. Probably the most important representational function is simply being there, acknowledging a small country's existence. What in turn is most important to us is getting support for our positions on international issues, particularly at the United Nations.

A great many things happen at the United Nations other than meetings of the Security Council. All the regulatory agencies are involved there. If Washington is interested in radio wavelengths, because at some particular meeting the U.S. wants to keep its large share of broadcast wavelengths, we must get world votes. And there are a lot of small states with votes, particularly at the United Nations. If you're going to have Geneva Conventions on warfare, if you're going to have major votes on disarmament, if you're going to discuss airline regulations and international flights, if you're going to discuss the plimsoll line on ships, and rights of passage around the world, all these things come up for votes in technical commissions. The small states all vote on these issues, without having much knowledge or interest in many of them. If the US does not have some presence, particularly immediate friendly access to the most senior people, it is not possible to get active support (i.e., instructions sent) by the Foreign Minister or President. The main job of a small Embassy is delivering votes on a very wide range of international activities in which the U.S. in involved.

Q: I had one interview with someone who was in Mali trying to get support for our Save-the-Whales resolution in the United Nations, and having to explain what a whale was to somebody in that landlocked place. The Mali official assured him that if a whale ever appeared in the Niger River up that way, he'd do something about it. When you were dealing with these United Nations things, such as the plimsoll line on a ship (I mean, after

all, Upper Volta is also landlocked), would they look more to the French, or would they really be interested in what we had to say on these things?

ROBERTS: It depended greatly on whether we had a presence there. If we were interested enough to have an ambassador, and to recognize them and to accept their ambassador in Washington, they were willing to listen seriously to us. I have been given far more time and support by the leadership of small African states than the Department was able to reciprocate in Washington. It didn't matter how big our Embassy was as long as it was there. You lost much of your influence if you tried to represent the U.S. from a regional Embassy with a visiting officer of whatever rank.

A second factor is being involved even on a small scale with their problems. It made a difference if there was a small AID mission. You would regularly be talking with the government about something that interested them: an agricultural activity, or research into new seed systems, or hopefully arranging to bring in eight or ten really good mechanics on TDY to repair heavy road equipment their Ministry of Transport couldn't fix. Then when you wanted something -- whales, Antarctic rules -- it was not a one-sided relationship. Having a million dollars of AID activities does help create a friendly attitude that opens the doors of top officials.

I also learned that there was an even more fundamental means of effective contact. In a small African country, senior officials are under the strongest ethnic pressure to provide jobs for family and fellow tribesman. Any job -- chauffeur or house guard at American pay and benefit levels -- might mean as much to a Foreign Minister as a US project. We also used rental housing for establishing contacts. Instead of leaving rentals to the administrative section, who generally did business with Greeks or Lebanese for commercial leverage, our front office reviewed available leases in terms of political influence with ministries and officials that mattered to us. We used every small bit of advantage we had, such as jobs and houses, as well as diplomatic presence.

Q: You had two ambassadors while you were there: first was Tom Estes and then Elliott Skinner. How did these two ambassadors work, both in running the embassy and dealing with the Upper Voltans?

ROBERTS: They were totally different people. Tom Estes was a straight Midwestern American boy with lots of ability. He rose through the State Department administrative area, managed the contract for the building of the new State Department, did a fine job, and was sent out to Ouagadougou. There wasn't much to do for an active person, so he focused on improving embassy facilities, including wangling a motorboat for the tiny city reservoir/pond. (This is one reason why small embassies tend to get larger: active, capable men often get their first Chief of Mission posting there.) Estes was straight forward, friendly and eager, but with no finesse. At the airport, with the diplomats lined up to greet the arriving/departing President, Estes would step out of formation, take out his Polaroid camera, focus on the president shaking hands three people up, snap a shot, crank his camera, step back in line, and then when the president came up, hand him a picture. Now

that's marvelous Americana. But from an African point of view, their president is as august on formal occasions as ours. In the United States, an ambassador wouldn't step out of the diplomatic line and take a picture of our president as he's coming along to shake hands. So, in a way, Tom Estes was very much himself, but at the same time he didn't appreciate the sensitivities and structure that really exist in an African society. He worked very happily, bouncing back and forth, in and out, and across problem areas. Because he was transparently honest, he was accepted. The Voltans learned something about Americans.

After Yaméogo was overthrown, I served as chargé for several months until the new ambassador, Elliott Skinner arrived. He seemed an excellent choice as he was an anthropologist and had done a very good study on the Mossi people. They were one of the major tribes in Upper Volta and had an oral history going back 1,100 years with a culture that emphasized order, procedure, and seriousness. Skinner was very sensitive to that. He was just the reverse of Tom Estes; in fact, he was more attuned to the Upper Voltans than to Embassy personnel. He was also an American black who had suffered much discrimination, had not lived with whites, and was uncomfortable among them. As, with one exception, the mission was all white, this created problems. He also deeply distrusted women, suspecting them of trying to manage their men's offices from the home front. Finally, he was handicapped by never having had a position of managerial power before. He was just the reverse of Estes.

Q: Where had he been, at a university?

ROBERTS: He'd been a professor at Columbia University and had no Washington or general political experience. One of the very first issues that Skinner handled was an AFL/CIO project for a regional public relations/press office in Ouagadougou. The AFL/CIO had chosen Upper Volta as it was central to their West African programs and was relatively cheap. The State Department had approved it and Estes had gotten general Voltan approval. We then got instructions to formalize the agreement to build a small, four-room labor library/public relations place. Skinner asked me if we had questioned the government about their preferences in labor projects or just informed them of the AFL/CIO's proposal. When I replied the latter, he noted that it wasn't a particularly productive or helpful activity for Upper Volta and went to ask the Minister of Labor what he wanted.

The Minister wanted a paramedical clinic for workers. I agreed with Skinner that this was much more suitable than a public relations center, but argued that the AFL/CIO, wanting a propaganda center, had deliberately decided on it for Ouagadougou instead of a practical project, and we had instructions to arrange it for them. Also, the Department regarded the AFL/CIO as a significant political organization group with which it didn't argue much. We, the Embassy, and the Voltans were in comparison minor concerns. Skinner didn't appreciate this, and wanted to know if I supported him or the AFL/CIO. I assured him of my support, and agreed that a clinic was a better project, but that in an argument the Department would back the AFL/CIO rather than a little African Embassy. Skinner was unconvinced and wrote a cable presenting Voltan wishes and his recommendation.

We had an immediate answer. Wham! "The center has been carefully considered and approved. It is in the broader US interest. Please proceed with previous instructions forthwith." Skinner was dumbfounded. "But I talked with President Johnson; he told me that I represented him, that as Ambassador I was the US spokesman for my post!" It was a real shock to him. It was hard to explain that Ambassadors simultaneously have great power and none at all. It depended on the circumstances.

Q: Well, this seems typical of problems when an Ambassador has "localitis." It may happen particularly in cases of academicians.

ROBERTS: Well, I had to respect Skinner's general approach. He made me much more sensitive to the local culture and to the strength of its institutions. A lot of our American colleagues operated blithely in Africa without much appreciation, as Tom Estes had done. Because we had so much power, and because we were bringing in some aid, we often were not chided by our hosts. Skinner went too far the other way, however. He later ended up among the leaders of a black minority group in the African-American Association who held you had to be black to understand Africa and to work there. He was a black racist; it took me a while to appreciate this, and made for difficult working relations.

Q: Local resentments may have been building up.

ROBERTS: Over time. But I think the Africans also had to learn that there were countries like the United States and the Soviet Union, for whom Africa was of minor interest and its countries generally of small concern. Under international law all states are equal, and at the UN they all have one vote in the GA, but reality is very different elsewhere.

I remember the Foreign Minister in Upper Volta mentioned once to me that he was on his way to New York, and that President Lamizana had given him a letter to present to President Johnson. I thought to myself, "You know, there is no chance of Upper Volta's Minister getting in to see President Johnson to give him such a letter. Maybe the Secretary of State would see him up at the UN and accept the letter." So I cabled back, suggesting this, and the Department approved. Problem solved. But when I informed the Foreign Minister, he replied: "Oh, but that's not my instructions. Lamizana has given me the letter to give to President Johnson. If you received a letter from your government to give to my President, I would immediately make an interview available for you, as I frequently have, and you would deliver the letter."

I tried to persuade him to accept the compromise, but ultimately had to advise the Department that he was determined on a personal presentation. Secretary Rusk kindly met with him at the UN and offered to deliver the letter to Johnson. But the Minister refused, saying he had asked his Ambassador in Washington to arrange the appointment and it "was in process." So he was going to Washington.

The "process" continued for several days to no avail. Secretary Rusk met with him a second time, but the Minister preferred to return with an undelivered letter rather than not upholding his President's expectation of communicating directly with our President.

When I commiserated with him in Ouagadougou, he said, "Well, I now understand what the relationship between our two countries is. After I met your Secretary of State, I visited the Office of Upper Voltan-American Affairs. As they took me through the building, and I saw all those office doors, and I asked, 'How many doors are there in the State Department?' And they said, 'There are about 6,000.' Then I realized that the Office of Upper Voltan-American Affairs was one of 6,000 offices in your State Department, and, furthermore, there were five other countries listed on the door of that one office." He came back a more experienced man, and our relationship was never the same.

Q: Well, it was a learning process, particularly as this was in the mid-60s, still the first decade of the real independence movement in Africa.

ROBERTS: It was particularly difficult with the French speaking Africans. Because of France's continuing "special relationship" with its ex-African colonies, their presidents were given meetings with the French President, and there were frequent African-French meetings at the presidential level. The French Africans expected it would be much the same with us. It wasn't and still isn't.

Q: Other than the peaceful change of government that happened when you first arrived, were there any other major events in dealing with Upper Volta while you were there?

ROBERTS: No. There were various droughts but no political or bilateral issues. Perhaps the main development for me was slowly realizing that our main AID project, a demonstration cattle ranch, was being successfully completed but would be a white elephant. I had helped AID with staff and other support problems, but hadn't at first felt responsible for the soundness of the activities. That was AID's business. But I came to see much too late that the ranch was not self-sustaining, that we had misspent about two million tax payer dollars, plus the Voltan contribution, and that State officers had to assume part of the responsibility for others agencies' projects.

The ranch was a range grass/cattle program. This seemed sensible as two thirds of Upper Volta was grazing area and cattle raising was both a major source of livelihood and the biggest export activity. The concept was that we would put a ranch up near the desert in a typical area, fence off pasturable land, and stock it with the right amount of cattle so that they didn't overgraze. This would demonstrate proper range management. Our AID backstoppers in Washington were relatively sure, though not positive, that if the indigenous grass were left alone and wasn't overgrazed it would come back and take care of itself. The demonstration ranch was to prove that special grass seed, fertilizer, and technical inputs weren't necessary if overgrazing was controlled.

So we built the ranch, had two AID people living up there, and fenced off about two thousand acres. We found, slowly, that we had to use bigger and bigger fence posts and more and more wire, because the hungry native animals would come right through ordinary fencing in order to get at the better grass behind it. Ultimately, we were importing nine-foot posts from Ghana, stringing six strands of wire, and it was costing us several hundred dollars an acre just in fencing.

A year after the ranch had been finished, I arranged a visit by the Minister of Agriculture. As we approached from the air, we could see, in the midst of the vast, dusty, dry, sub-Sahara area, one lovely rectangular patch of gray-brown, which was the ranch with its stand of grass. The Minister was much impressed. Then we visited the ranch. Nothing elaborate or technical: just two small houses, some stockyards, and three wells. There were also some cattle and sheep dipping basins and a vaccination program for all interested herders. The main attraction was a windmill, the only one in Upper Volta, pumping water for the cattle. Then we got in a Jeep and drove around inside these fencings, which were subdivided so that you could move cattle from one to another and not overgraze. Everybody could see that the number of cattle and the grass were evenly balanced, and that the cattle were fat and the grass was holding up.

The minister immediately said, "How many cattle have you got here?" And we said, proudly, "About 150." He replied, "But we have four and a half million cattle. How are we going to get areas like this for all of them?" I realized then that we had done proved a point, but in no way was it a solution for Upper Volta. As the minister said, they had too many cattle for their fenceable areas and even for a reduced area the fencing was prohibitively expensive.

I'm afraid that happened to a lot of our AID projects. We have spent a lot of money, with the best of intentions, and asked the local countries to participate about ten to fifteen percent of costs, and their money as well as ours has often been wasted.

Q: Owen, we were talking about AID programs. I think this is a major theme that one should explore in dealing with our efforts to play a role in Africa. AID was always one of the major activities of American missions there. I take it that although that ranch was a small undertaking, for Upper Volta it was a major project.

ROBERTS: Yes, for both the Embassy and the Voltans it was a major project.

Q: Wasn't somebody reviewing it? You have experts and all these program evaluators. Wasn't somebody looking beyond the fence posts and saying, yeah, but there are four million cows and bulls out there, what do we do about that?

ROBERTS: That was the weak part. The concept was that we would show the Upper Voltan government that range management was the best way to handle their cattle problem, that you had to balance the amount of grass as against the number of animals. The Upper Voltans would then realize that they would have to find some technique, such as our

combining fencing with government range management of public land. Of course, the Voltan nomads had always moved flocks around in complicated annual patterns to follow rainfall. This was an effective form of range management but it had been interrupted by the creation of national boundaries. It was thought that the ranch would serve as a stimulating example to the government while helping the herders by vaccinating the cattle. A very reasonable-sounding project.

The project planners didn't imagine that we would have to put fence posts four feet deep, have six strands of wire, and that the costs would go up so much. But once you're launched on something like this, and your two technicians have come all the way from Oklahoma, and you've got the government to agree to give you the thousands of acres, you've built two little houses and the windmill is going, it seems reasonable to finish off the fencing in spite of the increase in cost.

Even without the extra fence cost, it was not a self-sustaining project. Back at inception, we should have considered what would happen once we had proved our point. By defining it as a demonstration ranch, we made it reasonably feasible for us; but it wasn't duplicateable by the Voltans. And that was the fault of everyone from Washington down the line.

Next door in Niger, for instance, AID attacked the problem of the cattle a little differently. One of the sub-Sahara problems is that there isn't enough water. The nomads traditionally move their herds around from low spot to low spot where sporadic winter rains create some grass and shallow ponds. By late spring it is all gone and the nomads must retreat south and to the fringes of major rivers like the Niger. At this point, they compete with the village farmers, and then there's trouble. So AID's idea was to dig wells widely throughout the sub-Sahara so herders could disperse their cattle over large areas and avoid overgrazing or infringing on farmers. This also only expanded on local practice. The villagers, and in some places the herders, had hand dug their own wells. These went down 80 to 90 feet through hard desert laterite. The nomads and others hauled the water up with a rope, dumped the water into big gourds, and the people and cattle would drink from them. The was very slow and labor intensive, but it worked. However, with the water sloshing back and forth in the bottom, the wells would cave in and have to be dug out after six to eight months. This could be done only a few times because the cavity at the bottom would have been greatly enlarged and was likely to collapse if further disturbed. So the well would have to be given up, which was a big loss as it took three men three months to dig a well 90-feet deep. When you look down one you realize it is an incredible undertaking. AID's idea was to replace these short-term wells with permanent drilled ones. Very sensible.

The next problem is how do you get the water up? An American thinks of windmills, either mechanically pumping or generating electric power to pump. But this would be expensive and not maintainable. AID reasonably decided to have hand pumps.

It turns out, however, that it's even hard to have hand pumps made reliable. There may well be 2,000 strokes a day, and sooner or later pump parts wear out. Then, way out in the middle of scrub desert, what can be done about it? Mostly it means donor or government

servicing, and the wells do not become a self-perpetuating institution. But this is something that everybody who puts in wells knows about.

The crippling problem, however, was that it worked too well. The nomads learned about it very rapidly and brought all their cattle as expected. Then they proceeded to stay in the area, bringing their cattle to the water point as needed. They were able to range more cows than before and did. But they overgrazed the water points. After two years, you could fly over Niger and see these great white bare blotches on the landscape, absolutely round. They were about 20 miles in diameter and in the center of each was one of the American wells. We had over 50 of these wells scattered around that could no longer be used -- another idea which was inherently sensible but in practice didn't work out.

I think that often our ambassadors know the broad purposes and budget dimensions of other Agencies' activities, but do not go into their details sufficiently to judge their merits. Like a manager of a big, multi-conglomerate, you should get into the profitability of each subsection. One of the more important Ambassadorial/managerial oversight responsibilities in Africa should be assuring that the USAID projects become self-sufficient.

Later, in Togo when I was ambassador, there was minimal US political interest so I spent most of my time on our AID-Peace Corps-USIA projects trying to see that they were in fact viable. This was plenty challenging.

Q: At this time, during the sixties, some excuse could be made, because this was still a time of experimentation. But weren't there any people either from AID or the General Accounting Office asking hard questions about the megapicture in the countries and saying, "What does this really mean?"

ROBERTS: Yes and not exactly. Much of the criteria for a program's success is built in at the beginning. There are also a lot of other general or Congressionally mandated criteria, such as no component of possible Bloc origin, so much percent US materials, host country participation, and minority participation. AID program managers and its auditors/evaluators certainly visit projects widely. But they use the original criteria laid down, particular or general, which often do not include self-sustainability and practicality. Both the range and Niger well projects would have passed most evaluations--up to final bitter experience. It is surprisingly frequent that basic assumptions are wrong and take time to appear.

The World Bank has also been trying to promote development, with about the same results as AID. I remember talking, in Ethiopia, with a World Bank man who had spent 30 years working on cattle projects in Africa. He had ultimately decided that the nomadic system, if unimpeded, was the best possible balance of forage and animals. Most Western efforts in this area had been either less effective or outright failures. It was probably better to put funding into other fields. He was probably right.

Q: Well, you left Upper Volta in 1968 and came back to Washington. What were you doing then?

ROBERTS: I was assigned to the Board of Examiners (BEX), the Foreign Service recruiting and hiring branch of the Personnel Office. John Stutesman had just been made director of the Office of Recruitment, which combined BEX and Civil Service recruitment. He had been given a new mandate, particularly on the Foreign Service side, to recruit not just "the best" people but also according to the functional needs of the Department. For the Foreign Service, this meant selecting candidates for the less popular consular, economic and administrative fields.

BEX, after administering the Foreign Service examination, had traditionally held oral interviews with candidates to select officers for such qualities (indeed needed) as intelligence, capability, flexibility, and character. These were fairly subjective determinations. The track record showed that most--maybe eighty percent--of candidates chosen wanted to be, or become, political officers. It was truly revolutionary to interview deliberately for administrative people, consular officers, labor officers, and economists--about eighty percent of the Service's real needs.

It was, and still is, a very sensible idea. Stutesman and I represented new brooms on the recruitment side. I was responsible for the BEX, and he was overall boss. He immediately said to me, "Owen, we have the mandate, now you devise a system to recruit according to Department needs." I then nosed about the State Department asking what types of staff we needed. The Personnel Office and various Bureaus told me that we clearly wanted more consular officers, more administrative people, and certainly some more economists; we didn't need as many political people. That was nice, but hardly specific enough for recruitment/examination guidelines.

I turned next to planners and data specialists. One real guru worked in the depths of Personnel managing the Department's first computer staffing program. He turned out a beautiful printout saying we needed 562 new officers yearly and that we should recruit more in every field, including more political officers. There were nice breakouts by the categories I wanted. But they were way over our intake quota of 150 to 200 officers. It occurred to me to ask: "Well, how many people have you got in this model of yours?" It turned out that the model he had, which somebody had passed on to him as a concept of what we really needed, was about 2,000 more people than the Foreign Service had. So whatever type of people you asked the computer about, it enthusiastically said we needed more of them.

I went back and told John Stutesman that I'd had a very interesting couple of days finding out what the State Department needed, and that nobody really had a good answer.
He came down on me hard. He said, "Owen, how could you be so dumb? You went around asking people what to do?" "No," I replied, "I asked them what the needs of the Service were." "That's a quibble," he responded, "Never ask anybody what to do. Develop a program, and present it, and then you're in control of the situation. What you've done is to

bring up questions in people's minds. Now, when we present our program, everybody's going to have their own preconceived ideas. You go into your office and decide what it is that the Foreign Service needs and how many we're going to recruit into each of our major four fields. We're going to have political, economic, consular, and administrative officers. You come out in ten minutes and tell me."

I went into my office regretfully acknowledging he was largely right. The fundamental fact I had learned was that nobody knew what we needed. It was also clear that we needed more of everybody except political officers. So I came out and said, "John, the two elemental truths are this..." "Fine," he interrupted, being that kind of boss, "What are you recommending?" I suggested that we recruit an equal number in each field, because nobody knew any better and nobody could complain that we were being unfair. We would be implementing our mandate more than we had in the past, and so it would be a real step forward. He agreed on the spot. He wrote a memo, fixed some presentation charts (modern technique in those days) and got top management approval in three days. With no more analytical basis than this, the examination guidelines/quotas remained about the same for the next twenty years.

Q: I was in charge of the consular branch of recruitment with the Board of Examiners sometime later, in '75, and we never really came up with a clear answer of what made a good consular officer. It appeared that a good political officer was usually a good consular officer, the same type of person, for the most part. How did you determine what made various types of good officers?

ROBERTS: That is interesting. We did not recruit and examine so much for clearly different characteristics as for work interest and expectations. We recruited basically for the Foreign Service as a career, with explanations of the various fields. The real selection process came after the written exam. We tried to develop a functional written test but the Educational Testing Service, and others, couldn't do it. So we tested for general knowledge and intellectual ability, like the graduate record exam. It was a rough sieving that reduced about 20,000 applicants a year to about a thousand whom we could interview for about 150 jobs. The exam was reasonably fair and the only practical way to reduce the number of applicants to a group we could actually see personally.

The exam was not definitive. A lot of those who did the very best on it would make tremendous academicians, but they weren't necessarily good diplomatic officers. The latter really need to like other people, reach compromises, think of staff, and become good managers. That's not your average academic. Those who passed between the 70 and the 85 level were probably almost equally good intellectually and succeeded in the service. What counted most was character, experience, and areas of interest/ability. We recruited generally and selected during the oral interviews.

The selection precepts for the interviewers were fairly general, such as the qualities listed for rating officer performance. General though they were, the problem lay less with the instructions than with the examiners themselves. The service had been using both regularly

assigned and temporary examiners. Most of these, as for the Service as a whole, were political officers, or would be political officers. They tended strongly to select people like themselves. Our selection process was really a co-option system. Stutesman astutely recognized that, as we couldn't establish clear defining criteria for our four fields, we shouldn't fight the natural co-option process, but adapt it to our purposes. We would provide examiners in each field for those applicants indicating such interests. This, however, was not easily done.

We found it was difficult to get good people assigned over into the Board of Examiners. It was hardly a policy or fast track job. Stutesman nonetheless felt we had to have good people from all fields do interviewing if we were to get good candidates. So, short on permanent examiners, he decided to use ad hoc ones. This made it much easier to get examiners from the non-political Bureaus, where staff was in short supply. The Personnel Office doubted the Bureaus would give up staff for such work. But John talked to their senior officers, saying: "You are always rightfully complaining that the system does not provide enough officers in your fields. So here's an opportunity. Just send some of your best people over to BEX for short periods and take your pick." They did just that.

The ad hoc officers were hardly trained examiners, but they knew what they wanted. For instance, asked about relevant training and experience, a candidate might mention graduate work in political science, a major paper on history subject, and work teaching or in the media. Not a likely consular candidate, or administrative one, or a future economic/commercial officer. But a candidate might reply: "I was assistant manager for the football team, worked in the cooperative hot shoppe, spent a summer with urban kids, and am thinking of applying for a chain saw franchise." A political officer examiner would probably rate such a candidate lowly; but TDY examiners from the other fields would be most interested. So we did get good examiners and did change the selection process. Candidates did try to beat the system by applying in one field and then asking to change to another once on the job, but overall we came nearer to meeting the Department's needs than before.

Q: I wonder if you could give me your impression of John Stutesman. He was a man who never rose to the top in his field of the State Department, yet I think he was effective and had a considerable influence. Many people think of him; his is a name that keeps coming up again and again.

ROBERTS: He was, like the Congo Ambassadors Gullion and Godley, a bureaucratic operator, but in the administrative area rather than the political arena. He was a manager before there really were topflight managers in the State Department. He had lots of ability and was shrewd -- it was unusual in those days to find somebody like that in the administrative field. If given a mandate, he would produce. When told to "recruit for the needs of the service," he worked out a wholly new means of operations, made the best use of available resources, overhauled staff, and in a month had changed what had been going on for years. I learned a lot from him.

He once told me, "Owen, I'm glad to have you here, but as a political officer, you should know that you're a dinosaur. Your kind are going to be dying on the beaches. Modern management is going to take over this building." I responded that, according to our own management of BEX, about a quarter of the place would still consist of political officers. His response was: "Doing what? The problem with you guys is you sit back and analyze all the time. You're so busy trying to decide what should be done that you never get around to do doing it. Now I'm the other way around. I'm a third-generation military family. When you point me," he said, and he stuck out his finger and cocked up his thumb, "and give me an instruction, I make a hole," and he went "Click," as in firing a gun.

I thought about that and shivered a little bit, because that was the way he was. I responded next day that he was partly right about political analysts and no hole, but on the other hand his problem was that when pointed he had no safety catch. But he had lots of pluses. For instance, we had an argument about the usefulness of five old civil service women we had as over complement staff help. They were variously thirty to fifty percent effective. I contended some help was better than none. He countered that they created all kinds of office drag. When I argued some more, he said: "You have them all out by Monday morning, start of business." It was late Wednesday. I spent all Thursday trying to find other jobs for them, or just anywhere to put them. No dice. I spent all Friday trying to get them to move. No dice. I knew I had received a job determining order. At 4:45 Friday afternoon, I made one phone call that solved the problem. Monday, the five weren't there. I had called the general service office and had arranged for the removal of their desks over the weekend, and followed up by phoning them at home. I got a nod from John and he didn't mention dinosaurs again.

On the other hand, a year or two previously, he'd been given another special assignment, which was to look at the time-in-grade. As often, the Service then had many more senior officers than good jobs. They could stay in-grade without dismissal for many years. The upward promotion channel was constricted. John was told to restructure the time-in-grade system and to institute reform. He did, promptly. People started being caught in shorter time-in-grade and being dismissed.

One of those dismissed was a very nice guy, Charles Thomas. He was a good, intelligent officer, maybe one of John's "dinosaurs." He was Ivy League, well dressed, horn-rimmed glasses, smart, intellectual, even dapper. He was a lawyer; he'd passed the D.C. bar examinations. But nonetheless, he got time-in-graded. Perhaps he was not assertive enough, a bit too academic for the Foreign Service. Anyway, about a month after being fired, he put the end of a shotgun barrel in his mouth and killed himself. His widow blamed the Department. She went to the Seventh Floor, to Congress, to the media. It became her cause.

To a small extent, she was right. The Foreign Service was the one thing that he wanted to do. It was his identity. And it had been taken away. I had served with him once up at the United Nations and knew how totally involved he was. But I couldn't agree with her,

because he was a lawyer, from a top school, had passed the D.C. Bar Examination, and there was no way he couldn't have found other employment and provided for his family.

Well, in the process of raising so much fuss, it became known that John Stutesman was responsible for the changes that indirectly led to Charlie Thomas's death, and his widow began blaming him personally. Mind you, John had only set up the system; other offices and panels had decided who should be dropped. But the Director General's office wouldn't put him up for an Ambassadorship, and the Seventh Floor agreed there would be questions if his name went to the Senate for any senior job. So he languished, and ultimately was sent as Consul General to Calgary, Canada. True to his standards, he never made the slightest public protest.

Q: Cynthia Thomas' protest crusade was during the time of the Vietnam War activism. And if I recall, she was even given a job in the Department of State because of...

ROBERTS: The Department's sensitivity to any public criticism.

Q: Sensitivity. But at the same time, she used her time while being paid by the Department of State to attack everything that it did. This was not one of the better times.

ROBERTS: No.

Q: Well, you then left Personnel?

ROBERTS: And shifted to Cultural Affairs, which was a very good experience.

Q: You were in Cultural Affairs from when to when, about?

ROBERTS: 1971-1973. I worked as Deputy for Bill Edmondson, who was Director of the African Office of the Cultural Bureau (CU). It was really a very wonderful place to be, although by no means a front-line assignment. We had several million dollars' worth of grants for Africans to visit the United States and for people in the United States to visit Africa. It was almost wholly up to us determine the balance between Africans coming and Americans going, and to define the categories of people that we wanted to encourage making such visits for better mutual understanding. This was done, of course, in coordination with the embassies, which had the major role in choosing people, as well as approving the types of Fulbright candidates back here. It was program management; we actually had discretionary money.

While we allotted embassies funds for such and such categories of people, they would often say, "Oh, but we want Mr. X who works in the Ministry of Finance. He's got a lot to do with whether or not money is appropriated to our AID project." Well, we would accommodate that and provide money for what you could call simply contacts. But then we tried to fund for the long term by inviting university people, businessmen, media, and if possible, lenders generally. There was nowhere else in the State Department that you really had that

much room to design programs, commit money for them, and run the system. It was a very creative, satisfying, operative kind of job.

Q: You were dealing on the African side, which was probably useful as many of your invitees would not normally have been exposed to America. In Europe and other places, there has been a traditional flow back and forth, and in Latin America and Asia. What was your impression of its effectiveness over the time you were there, and looking at it later on?

ROBERTS: Well, CU kept suggestive statistics to present to Congress for funding. These showed a large number of ministers, senior officials, and even presidents who had participated in these exchanges. Most had positive experiences. The great majority were provided US escorts, who wrote up evaluations. There were frequently home visits. As far as possible, the tours were tailored to the invitees' interest. Mostly, the visits were very favorable. But there were some poor to bad racial experiences. Occasionally, a visitor would just be negative. The same was true with academic exchanges. We would get letters back from the embassies when they debriefed people, and almost everybody had had a good experience. There were also inherent problems. Sometimes the people who came had big ideas about how important they were. Sometimes they had problems with their escorts, or accommodations, or appointments. Many were not accustomed to being scheduled, or having real fixed time appointments. But overall, we did manage to expose maybe 300 to 500 Africans every year to the United States and possibly 50 to 100 Americans to Africa--everything from students to teachers to seminar participants to American black leadership groups.

Overall, I think you could fairly say most participants were well chosen, learned a lot, and had a positive experience. Certainly, there were always many, many more people wishing to be included than we could accommodate. This was in the early seventies, when we were just getting over some of our biggest racial hang-ups.

Q: After you left CU, where did you go?

ROBERTS: After CU, I was interested in program work. The Secretary's Policy Planning Office (S/P), of all places, at that time had a small budget-planning branch that tried to relate the Department's budget to U.S. policy goals. It was making an early effort at Management by Objective (MBO). There were three positions for this -- a chief and two Indians. I was accepted as one of the latter; Bill De Pree was the other. While in theory the Department's objectives were supposed to guide the budget, we in fact mostly took the budget and subdivided it to fit as best possible the objectives developed by S/P with input from the Bureaus. The budget itself was really driven by the Bureaus' own traditional practice of submitting last year's requirements plus extra for the next. This didn't encourage initiatives or reductions. It was fairly practical, but the main problem was that it was out of fashion. MBO was "in," though hard to adapt to foreign policy, and we did what we could to make Bureaus conscious of overall objectives and justifying budgets by them.

Q: Did you have the feeling, after the first months, that this was interesting but it really wasn't going anywhere?

ROBERTS: Well, MBO didn't belong in Policy Planning; it belonged in Management. But I think senior Seventh Floor substantive people didn't want to give Management a bigger role in running the Department, so they passed it to S/P. The S/P staff were excellent policy officers, with much experience in the Department's various fields, but they had no interest in management or budget.

Q: And there's no power there.

ROBERTS: Well, there was potential power, because S/P was basically policy staff for the four top Department officers. But S/P didn't have any influence over what the Management and Administrative areas were doing. And our tiny MBO section of S/P had no power at all. Our main functions in practice were to rationalize the Department's budget in MBO terms and to critique the Bureaus' budget presentations to M from an MBO perspective. So there was a certain role.

After six months, however, the administration changed. Kissinger came in (the Nixon election), said Policy Planning should not be involved in MBO, and wiped out the section. He also wiped out most of the officers and put his own people in. Winston Lord was the new director. While a very capable person, he was totally policy oriented and had no interest in management and budgeting.

I was picked up by the Inspection Corps and served there for two years as a staff officer for the administration of the overseas and domestic inspections. My job was to set up the schedules and team assignments, send out materials, and process the reports. I sat in on the review of reports and wrote up guidelines and administrative practices. There was a small staff and some room for improving a complex process. It was an administrative or, to some extent, an operational office.

Q: That's interesting. You were going along the usual course of the political officer, with an African bent, and all of a sudden you ended up with John Stutesman, which put you off more on the management side.

ROBERTS: Yes, I was getting management training without realizing it. Actually, I think it fit in with my basic bent. Whereas I did get a doctorate and had always been interested in policy, I became really concerned in making things work, in getting results. I think of John Stutesman who said, "When somebody points me, I make a hole." That reverberated in my mind, that we all needed to be more effective. It was wonderful working at CU where you could design something, apply budgets, and make things happen. To some extent running the mechanics for the inspection system was a bit that way. Its system was largely well established, but there was an awful lot of administrative effort in seeing that it worked well.

Q: What was your impression about the role of the Inspection Service? At one time the inspector was a major figure, and then the system became almost peripheral, and now it seems to be more a matter of catching fraud. Where did you feel that the inspectors stood at this time?

ROBERTS: The Foreign Service inspection system, I think, still had a clear mandate to check very generally how things were going both abroad and in the Department. But it operated under two broad restraints. One was variable Seventh Floor oversight. This varied from occasional active interference to resistance to sometimes support to benign neglect. When Kissinger was Secretary, he wasn't interested in management and he tolerated no independent activities. The inspection system could function and handle routine problems, but in no way was it to turn up any embarrassments. This kind of Seventh Floor oversight reduced inspection independence and integrity. During Nixon's campaign for re-election, for example, Kissinger had Eagleburger (then M) review and order rewritten any inspection reports suggesting mistakes or big problems. A second restraint was just inadequate staffing. To provide any meaningful review and control over Department operations, you need to visit domestic offices and overseas posts at least every two years. There were some 250 posts--consular offices and embassies. We had about 70 inspectors, grouped in small teams, to cover 120 posts a year, plus the Department. They were sent out on three overseas trips a year and had exhaustingly long schedules. They could stay only a few days at a small post and only a few weeks at a big embassy. Much inspection was a fairly quick check for major problems generally or in any of the main embassy functions. Inspections mainly provided the Department a private, user-friendly check on its operations and an opportunity for those in it to say something privately about problems. It was geared to self-correction, not audit and strict compliance. There was no investigatory capability and very little financial audit.

We sent out a detailed questionnaire in advance, asking missions and Bureaus if they were complying with some 380 significant procedures and regulations. If they had not, and immediately instituted corrections, fine and good. Part of the inspection system was to allow offices to pull up their socks. Because this was an "inside" system, with Foreign Service officers inspecting Foreign Service people, it was largely non-confrontational and much was accomplished on an advisory, old-boy basis.

There wasn't much fraud. The State Department didn't have all that much loose money. The larger part was tied up in salaries, travel and 250 overseas posts. Most of the existing fraud turned up in the administrative areas and visa offices, generally small scale -- in the thousands of dollars. If found, our Inspector General would consult with the Ambassador or Bureau head and the Director General on appropriate administrative/personnel actions. Anything punitive legally had to be referred for action to the Justice Department. They found it not cost effective to get involved in anything under $700,000 -- way above most of our fraud. So there was hardly any legal action or real enforcement in our IG system.

The strength of our operations depended a lot upon the status of the inspector general. If top management was interested in having a strong IG, and they had chosen somebody whom

they respected and was competent, then our advice and recommendations were taken more seriously. Compliance was based largely on desire to avoid poor performance coming to the attention of those who could effect assignments and careers. Our IG had no follow-up authority. All recommendations and oral suggestions went to the top officers at the overseas posts and in the Bureaus. They tended to be far more policy and operationally oriented than interested in management and procedures. So many IG recommendations withered on the vine if there were no easy solutions. A further weakness was lack of any audit capacity. Our inspectors, while including some administrative officers, had no financial audit capability. We did later add about five auditors, but this was wholly inadequate.

I thought at the time that it was a very acceptable system. Years later, I went back a second time and worked under the first independent IG, Mr. Funk. It was a revelation. He commanded adequate staffing and budgets. He reported not just to top Department officers but also directly to interested Congressional offices. He had his own legal staff, an office of FBI trained investigators, and enough auditors. As an example of the difference, I recall an early inspection/audit team finding that an Ambassador had misused part of his representation allowance by making a large year-end purchase of liquor, which would have to be used in the next fiscal year. The inspection team held that this was a misuse of funds given for current year activities. The Ambassador replied to Funk that the Department's legal office had informed him that his actions were not illegal. Funk cabled back, "I make such decisions," and the Ambassador repaid the amount. It may not have been illegal, but it was administratively improper.

Having an independent investigative staff also made a big difference. If fraud at any level of magnitude were found by inspectors or auditors, the investigators were called in. They did not remonstrate with offenders, or recommend administrative/personnel measures to the Department. They read offenders their Miranda rights and continued according to criminal procedures.

In his first year, Funk assigned three investigative agents and one of his three lawyers to seeing that a case of visa fraud at a Consulate in Mexico was proved and prosecuted. It involved only a few thousand dollars and took months of staff time. But fraud in the Department was punished. The new IG system had teeth.

The new audit capability -- over a hundred staff -- also made a huge difference. They knew what to look for and how to do it. They could handle financial/administrative operators on their own turf. This capability was urgently needed as the Department was becoming a big business with hundreds of millions in security, anti-terrorism and communications programs, and billions in property. The new IG system saved the old one from foundering. The Foreign Service may still dispute this, but then many of our officers are still not management oriented.

Q: We'll come back to that later, but was this when you went to Sinai?

ROBERTS: Yes, after the two years with the IG office, I went off to be deputy director of the Sinai Field Mission (SFM).

Q: This was when?

ROBERTS: This was in June of '76. Kissinger had managed to stop the Israelis before they completely crushed the Egyptians around the city of Isma'iliya on the Canal. With a great deal of difficulty, he also got United Nations troops inserted to make the Israelis respect the cease fire and initiated a very intelligent peace-monitoring system for the Sinai desert. It basically set up a north to south empty zone about five miles wide and 85 miles long, with five more miles of limited-force zones on either side of it. This grid, as peace developed, would then slowly be shifted eastward across the Sinai until it reached the 1967 frontier between Egypt and Israel. The first of those demarcations, in which the U.S. Sinai Field Mission (SFM) was located, divided the Sinai north-south about 30 miles east of the Canal. The SFM was set in the empty zone north east of Isma'iliya in a strategic, rocky, mesa-like area through which ran the two main cross Sinai routes.

The particular arrangements for the U.S. managed SFM were accepted by both sides, who insisted that the United Nations alone wasn't competent enough to provide good peacekeeping. They wanted the United States to be responsible within the UN zone for the most critical area. This was the Mitla and Giddi passes, through which all significant traffic passed, whether they were caravans as in the old days, or whether they were the tank columns from Israel and Egypt that variously attacked each other. The SFM was given the job of monitoring the peacekeeping program in a 15 by 20 mile area of mesas, wadis, and rolling sand dunes.

Given that the UN was to have about 6,000 men in the peacekeeping zone, I wondered at first how significant our role, with 150 people, would be. I didn't have to be in the field very long to find out that 6,000 UN troops, spread along 15 by 85 miles of desert, did not actually amount to very much surveillance of the actual territory. The UN was supposed to assure that absolutely no one was in the neutral zone and that in the limited-force zones on either side there were only the agreed, limited number of tanks, artillery pieces, and military personnel. The UN established widely scattered outposts of five to ten men, mostly out of sight of each other. A very loose network indeed, particularly as they seldom patrolled. During nighttime, about ten hours of every day, these outposts could not see and were wholly ineffective. Then, during the day, there were sand storms and heat that limited visibility. While parts of this Sinai area consisted of open flat stretches that you could see over clearly with binoculars, other parts included a lot of gullies, big mesas, semi-mountains, and rolling sand dunes, that made monitoring very difficult. The UN would have needed maybe ten times as many people to watch over their area even adequately with its traditional outpost system. The Egyptians and Israelis were right: the UN system as designed could not assure the two parties that arrangements were fully respected. Finally, UN execution, given its political-bureaucratic operations, has always been inherently very fallible.

So I've come to think that the UN is a marvelous institution to discuss international issues and to authorize peacekeeping activities. This mandate is the first essential step. But a UN mission, by its multi-national composition, is inept at the next stage, the operations of peacekeeping. For instance, in the Sinai, the UN mission consisted of five different national military units as monitors: Swedes, Indonesians, Ghanaians, Nepalese and Finns. There was also a Canadian administrative support group and a Polish road repair unit.

Q: Any Irish?

ROBERTS: No. The Irish occasionally send units, but mostly they send individuals, often for staff functions.

These five national military units varied tremendously in capability. In some, all the enlisted staff and officers were college or high school graduates. In others, the average educational level might have been fourth grade. Some had all necessary equipment, including vehicles and communications. Others had only sidearms, if that. Some units could communicate with their outposts by radio; others only visited them to bring a daily ration. None of these military units could communicate with each other. Often, most of them could not reach their local UN headquarters near Isma'iliya by phone line or radio. This abysmal level of competence was and is still common for UN operations. It does not represent serious operations but rather a costly farce. UN "peacekeeping" in the Sinai was reduced largely to being a "presence." That was and is totally unacceptable for serious situations. The UN's technical capability needs major overhaul.

The Sinai Field Mission (SFM) thus indeed had a serious assignment in supplementing the UN in monitoring effectively the terms of the demilitarized zone agreement. "Effectively" meant in fact to a level satisfying mutual Israeli-Egyptian suspicions. As such suspicions of outright flouting, cheating, or manipulation were very intense, the monitoring standard had to be extremely high. Even after two years of steadily improving our capability, and strong assertion of our role, I don't believe we earned their full trust, but we did establish ourselves as a serious element in the situation and helped move the system on to its final multi-national non-UN, monitoring stage at the 1967 frontier.

The Sinai agreement fortunately was conceptually very sound. It did not make the UN or the SFM responsible for such a sensitive role as providing the two antagonists warning of military threats or maneuvers. Rather, it set up an elaborate system whereby both Israel and Egypt could watch for themselves what the other was doing in the monitored zones and beyond. The UN and US roles were rather to monitor the two countries' activities to assure they were in compliance with the agreement. If not, a violation was reported to all parties. Warning of a military threat is much too vital a concern to entrust to any third party. Even our monitoring of the terms of the agreement was barely acceptable to both parties.

In order to watch each other, both were authorized to fly up and down the neutral and demilitarized zones on alternate days and take any pictures they wished. They could only come down to, we'll say, 5,000 feet altitude, and they could choose to fly or not, but they

had to stick to their chosen schedules. To supplement the two sides' aerial monitoring, the US had the right to over-fly the same area. We did this about once a week with a Blackbird SR-71 from Cyprus. The US photographs were then promptly distributed to the UN, and to both sides, so that they could check their results on emptiness of the neutral zone and the number of tents or pieces of equipment or what evidence there might be of activities in the two limited force zones.

Then, on the ground, both sides had combination observation/intercept stations overlooking the other's territory neighboring the zones.

Q: Intercept means a radio intercept.

ROBERTS: Yes, a radio intercept and passive radar station. The Israelis already had one on the Giddi Hills, overlooking the 30 miles of flat sand desert to the Suez Canal. They were allowed to keep it. But the Egyptians didn't have any such post, so the US helped them build one, overlooking the Israeli central Sinai positions. These arrangements gave both sides a fairly good ability to reassure themselves continually that nothing too dangerous was going on in the Sinai.

Our job was simply to see that the rules were followed: that airplanes maintained their height and scheduled days; that no airplanes other than the scheduled ones flew over the demilitarized zones; that the two intelligence stations contained only intercept and observation capabilities; and that no unauthorized persons or vehicles of any type were in our section of the empty neutral zone. The job essentially was that of a referee. We watched for violations and blew the whistle, when justified, by reporting any breach immediately to the Defense Departments of both parties, to the UN Sinai Headquarters in Jerusalem, and to Washington. We also watched for anything that might be preparations for a major violation, as a military buildup, but we would only report actual violations of the agreement.

What became increasingly obvious was that we had to be a good enough referee to convince two very dubious parties that we in fact could detect all types of infractions. That is something that cannot be mandated; it must be earned in the field.

Monitoring - refereeing -- the over-flight arrangements of the agreement had not been considered in much detail by the drafters. It was technically difficult and there was little guidance. Capability and procedures had to be built up. This was particularly hard for the UN, given its operational weakness. The five UN military units never agreed on what had happened in the air. Quite often, the units weren't notified that an Israeli or an Egyptian flight was due, and they would report an infraction when in fact it was the scheduled flight. Then an airplane, or several, might come that should not have been in the area and represented violations. The Swedes would report that the plane was an Israeli-made copy of a French Mirage flying at such an altitude and time. The Indonesians would report that, no, it was actually a fixed-wing aircraft, but they agreed on the direction it was going. Then the Ghanaians would report, a day later after their ration run to their outposts, that they had

been looking very carefully and nothing had crossed their area. The next unit would say, oh, yes, they'd seen planes but they had not been over the prohibited zones. The Finns might largely agree with the Swedes, but introduce significant variations.

The poor UN commander would get all these conflicting observations, received 24 hours or more after an event, and be hard pressed for what to report. He couldn't take the first data to arrive, despite the need for urgent reporting, without affronting the other national units; he couldn't accept one report as probably more accurate than another without exhibiting bias among nationalities; and he could hardly average them out. In practice, the UN commander had to wait until all his units reported in, so it might be two or three days before he would have the materials to comment on an airplane infraction. From the Egyptian and the Israeli point of view, this was wholly unacceptable. Plane infractions could be terribly serious, because military jets could get back from the Sinai to either capital in just a few minutes. They needed to know immediately whether or not something unauthorized was flying over the demilitarized zone and if it were dangerous.

Peacekeeping missions frequently require really efficient, high-tech kind of monitoring. Just as war is an extremely tense, technically executed process, so peacekeeping has to be equally fierce and efficient if it's going to handle relations between terribly suspicious people.

To implement the good basic mandate and operational arrangements in the Sinai agreement, the SFM brought in much technical equipment not previously used for peacekeeping. This included several hundred seismic ground sensors, each with a radio reporting unit, that were buried along likely travel routes; infrared sensors set up in wadis and stony areas where seismic sensors could not easily be used; and strain-sensitive cable sensors buried across roads or tracks. These sensors were much like a home security system that detects fiddling with doors or windows and movement within a house. The seismic sensors had been developed for use in Vietnam. They were adaptations of regular earthquake sensors and were highly reliable. They could detect a tank or heavy vehicle at a mile or more distance, a person within fifty meters, or a rabbit nearby. Their sensitivity could be increased, but then very slight tremors, as created by windblown desert plants tugging at their roots, would activate them.

The sensors were laid out somewhat like a minefield to cover strategic areas. Their layout was plotted on a large map in SFM's operation room with red lights that lit when a sensor was activated. The appearance and advance through the layout of an intruding entity could be immediately spotted and tracked. The sensor fields were also watched over by three SFM outposts, manned to both spot and identify violations 24 hours a day. This system worked as planned, largely because of effective adaptations and fine tuning by Washington and by the contractor personnel (from E-Systems of Dallas, Texas) who handled field administration and technical services. The State Department provided Mission management, international communications, and monitors at the Egyptian and Israeli observation/intercept stations.

Our first major capability problem was augmenting the sensor alarm system with means to identify the cause. The planners had assumed large-scale violations by easily identifiable tanks, attack aircraft, and lots of soldiers. The reality was intrusions by one or more light vehicles, a few persons on foot, or camels moving about with or without riders. We could not report a violation but fail to identify the cause without raising much more alarm than we settled. So we had to check out any alarm with our own staff. Considering what or who might be out there triggering our system, especially at night, was scary and actually dangerous.

To increase our identification capacity, we used the highest power binoculars and the most sensitive night vision scopes available. This helped but was still inadequate. So Washington approved a major technical improvement. We put up towers with remote controlled TV cameras that could scan most sensor layouts. The towers also had big searchlights. The TV cameras worked on both infrared and white light. This not only improved our identification ability but provided a graphic record that could be shown to doubters or to those denying involvement. This steady increase in SFM's monitoring capacity was one of the major reasons for its success.

In military terms, there were no major violations in our area. Both sides wanted the agreement to work. But there were lots of violations of varying seriousness. Even minor ones really counted because as the number of "gotchas" mounted they proved the effectiveness of our peacekeeping system. When I left after two plus years of SFM operations, there had been 71 Israeli violations and two Egyptian ones. The big spread is because the Egyptians and Israelis are such fundamentally different types of people. It shows up particularly at the individual level when ordinary people are in contact with a system. Israelis will hop in a jeep and poke about the desert, disregarding their own instructions, barriers, keep out signs, or even warnings tendered in person. They may be just picnicking or exploring, or deliberately testing the system. The Egyptians don't go walkabout, are not so assertive in the face of restrictions, and are system abiding. If caught out, the Israelis, like good lawyers, deny everything down the line. The Egyptians are more inclined to accept the violation but plead circumstances.

We almost never got the Israelis to admit to a violation. The individuals involved, military staff of various ranks, would report their version to senior local officers. These were loyal first to their own men and to an international agreement hardly at all. The senior officers' report would go up the Israeli chain of command and disappear into their Defense Ministry. We tried to end-run this process by also reporting through a liaison channel to the Prime Minister's office. While we seldom won an acknowledgment of our violations calls, I believe we built up some credibility within both parties' action offices.

This credibility was evidenced mainly by increasing cooperation among all those out in the desert living with the demilitarized system. First we got to know each other by repeated visits to each others' installations, and eyeballing the equipment on hand. Then we began cooperating a little.

For instance, after about a year of operations, an Israeli major phoned us about nine p.m. An aggressive type from a nearby military unit, he said, " Why haven't you reported, as you should have, the Egyptian intrusion in such and such a place? There are three helicopters right in the empty zone, where they have no right to be. I've already reported to Tel Aviv. We're going to shoot them down if you guys don't get them out of there."

We said, "What?!"

He yelled, "Yes, they are very clearly visible. We checked and they're at such and such a place."

We checked our sensor layout and not a sign was showing of any intrusion. This was particularly significant as a helicopter puts a tremendous pressure on the ground with the beating of its rotors. Much of our sensor board would have been lit. We cross-checked with our outposts. One of them reported, "Oh, yeah, there are some winking red lights way west about where the Suez Canal is, maybe 30 miles from here. The lights go on and off, and they're moving too slow to be fixed-wing. We think they're probably helicopters."

So we called back the major and told him that there were helicopters, all right, but they were 30 miles away, over the Suez Canal, way the hell out of even the Egyptian demilitarized zone. He said, "You're absolutely wrong, and I have asked for further instructions." Now, with further experience and contacts, we phoned J-1, the Israeli intelligence intercept station, which was looking out over the Egyptian demilitarized zone and the Canal. We asked, "Do you guys see some red lights out over the Suez Canal at such and such a place?" They replied, "Yes, we've been watching them for some time."

We then asked: "Would you kindly call Tel Aviv and tell them what you see, because your military camp has reported back that the helicopters are in fact right here in the Sinai demilitarized zone, and they're asking for orders as to what to do about them." J-1 agreed, and a matter that could have led to greater excitement was settled.

Incidentally, the Israeli major was not all that misguided. A light can be seen on a clear night in the desert a very long way. We once got stirred up by a light that appeared to be right at our perimeter fence. After careful triangulation over two days, we finally found it was a light bulb inside a tent at a Ghanaian outpost eight miles away. It "blinked" at us whenever the tent flap was opened.

Q: Was either side really trying to do anything, outside of individual officers or soldiers who were playing games, particularly on the Israeli side? Was there a "testing" problem really?

ROBERTS: There was no effort by either side to upset the overall system, but various situations that arose suggested they would try manipulate it. With many Israelis, if you drew a little line on the sand and said, "Now don't go over this," they'd shake your hand while pushing out a foot to see where exactly a call would be made. Done in a friendly way,

but it was testing the system. Equally, there were accidental violations. And once we had deliberate cover-up. We reversed this by stringent enforcement of our violation call. It was perhaps our best handled peacekeeping incident.

We had one SFM State Department officer in a little monitor shack at the entrance for each of the two intelligence stations. An officer from each station was also assigned at each monitor shack to work with the American to coordinate with the intelligence command and its personnel. The two worked together screening everything going in and out to assure that no prohibited, offensive-type weapons went in and that the personnel level remained within the 150 allowed.

Our officers worked rotating shifts at these stations. After weeks and months of living with their counterparts, handling routine matters most of the time, everyone got well acquainted if not downright friendly. At the entrance to the Israeli station, J-1, there was also an Israeli guard post of eight soldiers. Their meals were brought out from the administrative buildings by pickup truck. One morning, our officer walked over to say hello to the driver and he noticed that in the back of the truck, along with some pots of hot food, was a bazooka. This was outlawed. So he said, "Hey, you got a bazooka in there!"

"No, I haven't," said the driver.

"Oh, yes," said our guy, "look at it right there."

"My God," said the Israeli, and he jumped in his truck and drove off.

So our officer phoned in the presence of a bazooka, a clear violation of the Agreement. But the evidence was gone. I was in charge then, as the SFM director, Nick Thorne, was in Jerusalem. I sent our operations director, Jim Shill, over to J-1 to review the matter with our officer and with Col. Dani, the head of J-1. This was not a time sensitive issue and we could carefully verify the facts before issuing a significant violation. Col. Dani met with Shill and said: "Yes, there was something in the truck, all right, but it wasn't a bazooka. It was a mock-up thing that we practice with, and it's rather realistic looking." He promised to produce it, which he did in about 20 more minutes. He showed Jim a piece of tubing as large as a bazooka with a plastic guard shield and a handle on it. He added: "Anyone could easily have mistaken it. You know we wouldn't have a bazooka on this place. We all understand that's not allowed."

Jim asked our officer, "Is this what you saw?"

He said, "No, I saw a bazooka. It was in the back of the pickup truck. I had my hand on the side of the truck; I wasn't four feet away. I know I saw it."

So Jim told the colonel, "I'm sorry. Where is it? You've got to send it back."

And Dani said, "No, this is it."

So we had a standoff. Jim and I reviewed the situation. On the Israeli side was that the mock-up was very realistic; also, had there been a bazooka they'd only had at most 30 minutes to make the mock-up, and we knew Col. Dani to be a very dedicated, straight officer. On the other hand, Jim knew Dani well and felt Dani had been uncomfortable in presenting the mock-up story. Furthermore, which we had not mentioned to Dani, our man at the J-1 gate was an ex-Marine who had been in Vietnam. There was no way that he wasn't going to know, four feet away, what was a bazooka and what was a mock-up. This was more serious than just the infraction decision. We were also calling the senior Israeli officer a liar which would leave no room for compromise. But it was a violation, so we informed all parties of the bazooka finding (but not the of background discussions). Thorne was informed by phone. He approved and noted we now had to get J-1 to cough up the bazooka as its presence was an ongoing violation and we needed to enforce our call.

I went back to Dani and argued the matter. He said, "That's fine, but you're mistaken. Your guy, I'm very sad to say, is mistaken." When I reported this to Thorne, he said, "All right. One of the things we can do is to cut them off. You close down the station; don't let anyone in or out." This was daring. Under the Agreement, we had authority to assure that the flow of arrivals and departures never resulted in more than the permitted 150 personnel at the station. We had no written authority to stop arrivals and departures per se, but there was nothing saying we could not. Furthermore, there was a practical problem. It was by now noon on a Friday. The Israelis always sent out about 100 staff on eight or more trucks for their Shabbat at home; and an equal number were on their way across the desert to J-1.

But either we took the risk or we let the Israelis get away with flaunting the Agreement and undercutting the US monitoring role. So I phoned Dani and told him we were closing entry and departure at J-1 until he produced the bazooka. We told our officer at the gate to inform the Israeli guards and to stand in the road if necessary. We sent some extra officers as help and witnesses. Then I went to the UN checkpoint on the road entering the Israeli side of the neutral zone and persuaded them to stop the Israeli relief convoy. I pointed out that we had closed J-1 and that if the Israeli military vehicles and personnel stayed in the neutral zone, that would be a violation. They protested that they had no authority to do this. Ultimately, to avoid being responsible for a violation in their area, they agreed to hold up the Israeli convoy pending instructions from H.Q. Jerusalem. As that was likely to be some time coming, we were spared potential Israeli pressure immediately outside J-1.

This worked out in part because we had good relations with all the UN units and personnel. We visited them regularly and they had standing invitations to visit and eat at the SFM. We had excellent food and the most reliable air-conditioning and plumbing for hundreds of miles. We were a much visited oasis. One of the UN checkpoint officers later explained to me that they were sympathetic with our move, and were suspicious of the Israelis in this instance, but as UN officials they could only follow their own rules. As there was nothing clearly applicable, it had been possible to cooperate while seeking instructions.

The Israelis were hopping mad. The excitable major at the neighboring Israeli army base phoned to say we would open J-1 or he would send out armor and overrun our Mission Headquarters and our J-1 outpost. He did indeed send vehicles as far as the UN checkpoint. But he did not cross the line into the neutral zone. That would have been a blatant violation. We discounted his threat to overrun SFM, but he might well have broken down our flimsy barrier at J-1. It was a dicey moment. As the major was volatile and unpredictable, we took initial steps to execute a frequently practiced hasty evacuation.

Meanwhile we began getting excited calls from further and further up the Israeli military chain of command, up to the HQ of their Southern Command, and finally the Ministry of Defense. Nick Thorne, whom we fortunately could contact frequently, told us to stand fast and to pass any proposals to him to negotiate. He was enjoying it. Originally, he'd sounded a bit doubtful about our violations call. Jim Shill knew him well and suggested that he was generally doubtful about judgments other than his own. So we agreed early on that Jim should drive to Jerusalem and explain things we could not mention on the radio or phone, particularly our assessment of Colonel Dani and the identity of our J-1 watch officer (whose military experience Nick knew personally). Jim made the three plus hour trip to Jerusalem in barely over two.

The Israelis first proposed that we open J-1 and that they would send an inspection group from Southern Command next day to review the situation. Then Tel Aviv said a general from the Ministry would come directly by helicopter. We said, "No" to all proposals and referred them to Nick in Jerusalem. We continued to get a lot of protest from J-1 and from the major. We could see his heavy vehicles at the UN checkpoint barely two miles away.

We were also in regular phone contact with our senior Israeli liaison officer in Jerusalem. He was a regular army officer, a colonel, had been on Peres' staff, and had direct access to the Prime Minister's office. As the tension increased, it behooved us to convince someone outside the immediate military chain of command around us. So we explained to him that our watch officer was an ex-Marine from Vietnam who had used bazookas, had seen it from four feet away, and that there was no way that we're wrong on this. The standoff continued right up to dusk. Then we got a call from the Ministry of Defense in Tel Aviv. It was just a message: "The colonel in charge of J-1 will meet you now at his perimeter now and turnover the bazooka." He did that, we collected it, and turned it over to the UN checkpoint for removal from the Agreement zones.

Much relieved, I invited the Israeli military in the area, including Dani and the major, to have supper with us that night. After dinner was over, and temperatures were somewhat calm, one turned to me and said, "What was all this fuss about, for just a little old bazooka?"

Basically the fuss was about the integrity of the system. We had been able not only to identify an event correctly, but had enforced our finding and buttressed our referee role. Once players in a rough game can intimidate or disregard a referee, his role is much

reduced. The same in peacekeeping. I would go further, considering the stakes and costs, and say that if peacekeepers are reduced to being just a presence, they should be withdrawn.

I also think Nick Thorne exercised a lot of courage and was correct in not asking Washington for instructions. He said: "This is our call. It's up to us to make it work. If we report to Washington, they will look at it politically and say, "Hey, you can't do this to the Israelis, we're negotiating something urgent with them. Also, the legal office will say there's nothing in your Agreement mandate that authorizes you to close off J-1 in order to break a deadlock. Furthermore, this should be negotiated; you are threatening disruption of a major international Agreement." All that is eminently reasonable. We were taking a real risk of disrupting the system. But if we let the Israelis get away with it, the system was also disrupted, but less visibly. At the heart of this was that as referee we in SFM were ready to walk off the field if ignored; I'm not sure the Department was willing to risk the operation in order to maintain it. I'm not aware there's ever been a decision on this point.

As for the other parties, we had reported to the United Nations and to the Egyptians that the violation had occurred. Then we followed up with general reports of on-going negotiations with the Israelis about resolving the problem. At the end of the day, we reported that the bazooka had been turned over and the matter was settled. So, for the outside world, there was just a small matter of a bazooka turning up where it shouldn't have been and it was turned over to the UN.

Later, I learned from a senior Israeli staff officer that the issue had gone up to the Prime Minister's office. The Israeli government, however, had negotiated the Agreement and they wanted to keep it alive. The senior political level also did not have quite the military's strong chain of command loyalty. Furthermore, all this was occurring pretty privately on phone and radio so there was less loss of face. Finally, I was chagrined to learn much later that the top Israelis knew the bazooka was there because some illegal weapons had been stockpiled at J-1 before we got there. Just in case the Agreement didn't work out. Security, for Israelis, is too vital to trust to anyone or anything except their own capability.

Q: I take it that the pressure from the Egyptian side was negligible. No problems?

ROBERTS: Very negligible. They were less concerned about territorial security than the Israelis. They had the confidence of thousands of years that they would always be around. They also had a single interest. They wanted the Sinai back. Right away of course; but the process could take time. Everything does. So they were more relaxed about operations out in the field. They did not act first and talk later; we discussed problems with them upon visiting their regional HQ near Isma'iliya and the Defense Ministry in Cairo.

There were some problems with the Egyptian supply of their intelligence station, E-1. Their trucks were in such terrible condition that it took them hours to negotiate the 40 plus miles from the Canal to the station. Then the trucks frequently broke down in the demilitarized zones. Once, several of them could not get up the last steep pitch to E-1 in time to meet the close-down dead line. We closed the E-1 gate, called a violation, and without saying

anything over a radio or phone, sent over blankets and hot food for the soldiers who had to sleep overnight in their vehicles.

Q: I think this is a very important matter, because as we are talking now, on the 18th of April, 1991, a UN peacekeeping force is being inserted between Kuwait and Iraq, after the defeat of Iraq. But it sounds like you need really somebody like the United States in there to make this gel.

ROBERTS: Not necessarily. Anybody who has a well-trained military or civilian group, and the right equipment, can do the job. The peacekeeping capability simply has to be at least equal that of the parties involved. That's a big "simply," however, and you have to have a clear mandate, two parties in sufficient control of their areas so they can keep an agreement, and a certain amount of technical capacity.

For instance, we had real communications. We could communicate with the Department within a matter of a half-second or so. Not only did we have the usual embassy radio gear and equipment, but we checked frequently every hour that we were in sync with pick up or repeater stations. When we wished to transmit, we could instantly. Ordinarily, a communications unit has to play around to get its signals to the satellite, or to hit the pickup station in Washington. And for an ordinary diplomatic message, it doesn't make much difference whether they take five, or ten, or fifteen minutes fiddling around to get in sync. But out in the Sinai, where we were dealing with airplanes going over that could get to either capital in ten or so minutes, we had to be quick. With practice, we were able to send out a violation notice in 45 seconds from receipt of an event from a watch station to completion of SFM transmission to all parties. The Department had a computer monitoring our communications unit that would ping us about every 15 minutes, at odd times, to see that in fact our communications people were always in sync. We built up a stock of formatted messages with everything but the final wording on them. We'd say "Violation" and the communications people would start sending the preset tape. Then we'd rush in with the message, graft it on, and off it would go. We also sent radio reports, but always supplemented them with hard copy messages to minimize mistaken versions at the other end. You might have noticed in the bazooka incident that much depended on our being able to contact a wide variety of people instantly and reliably.

In contrast to most diplomatic situations, Washington was not the first or most important audience informed. As a referee, it was the Egyptians and Israelis who had the most urgent need to know. Then we informed the UN and Washington. The difference in time wasn't great , but the concerned parties always had priority. We did not, or course, have to clear our messages with either the Embassies in Cairo or Tel Aviv, or with Washington. We were a totally independent agent with but once specific purpose.

Q: In these air violations, were Israeli warplanes probing?

ROBERTS: A lot of the violations were Israeli warplanes, but it's hard to tell a plane's mission or a pilot's intention. In one case, though it was obvious. It was a Sunday morning.

We were having a softball game. Three unscheduled Israeli planes came right over the empty zone, dipped down to where we were playing, wiggled their wings, and flew on through. Now then, they knew who we were, and where we were. They just deliberately came down and said, "Hi, fellas, we're flying through you."

Well, it is sort of annoying to have someone thumb their noses at you. But there was little we could do; we couldn't close down airspace as we had done access at J-1. We did follow up our violation report with a request directly to the Prime Minister's office that those guys be disciplined. We got an acknowledgment but never heard of any action. Didn't really expect to. We did not ask Washington for help, because enforcement of the referee role is better done in the field, quietly among the concerned parties. I don't think the Israelis would have backed down in the bazooka case had it been handled through diplomatic channels, which is pretty public.

Q: To keep the public record under control.

ROBERTS: Yes. The Israeli public posture was and is: "We would never deliberately violate a formal agreement made between Israel and the United States. No way would we ever to that." Yes, but they did. So if something becomes a matter of record, then it isn't really erasable any longer. Both the Prime Minister's office and the Defense Department, if we had gone public on J-1, would have clammed up.

Q: I think this points out something that's very important. I speak as a former consular officer. People in the field can often take care of things, whereas if they became public there would be no favorable action, and maybe even greater problems.

ROBERTS: Exactly, like negotiating the release of an American citizen, where the American has clearly done something wrong. The government cannot back down because its own rules are at question. But if there is some real friendship with local officials, and the erring American is reasonable enough and decent enough, you can usually get some accommodation.

Q: Put on a plane and kicked out without making a fuss.

ROBERTS: Right, or handled some way.

Q: Just right away; the sooner you can do it, the better.

ROBERTS: I very much doubt that the UN on Kuwait's Iraqi border can be effective. First of all, because they have to use various national military units. The level of education and training in such units is very different. A Third World enlisted man who is called upon to identify an airplane at 10,000 feet, and a Swedish high school or college graduate who is called upon to do it, represent two very different capabilities. Furthermore, the Swedes will have been training their people in airplane identification, and will have a whole sheet with airplane silhouettes at their outposts. Also, they will have good communications. Most UN

units are not up to their jobs. A UN peacekeeping force is much like a chain: it is only as strong as its weakest link.

So the basic issue is the capability of the units making up the UN group. Then there is the effectiveness of command and control. And there is the technical capability. Finally, there is the fact that the UN system usually reports back to the UN first, and then the UN secretary-general's office issues instructions or contacts the two parties. That's much too late for many types of incidents.

Q: Today is June 3, 1991, this is a continuing series of interviews with Ambassador Owen Roberts. Owen, we had left the Sinai peace force, and now we move to your next job, where you served in Ethiopia from '79 to '81. How did that assignment come about?

ROBERTS: I was, at the time, in the Defense Department's International Security Affairs Office, a policy outfit, as their head resident Africanist. Fred Chapin, who was ambassador in Ethiopia, then asked for me in particular as his deputy. I learned later that he did this largely because he had known and worked with me before, and particularly because he expected to try to do something difficult, and he was afraid that he might be PNGed...

Q: For the record, PNGed means declared persona non grata.

ROBERTS: And he wanted somebody that he knew left in charge of the post. I might say that Fred Chapin was a particularly smart, rational, non-emotional guy. Very few people would plan out a course of action, consider they might be PNGed, choose a deputy in terms of that contingency, and furthermore, tell him all about it ahead of time.

Fred's problem was that he was supposed to resolve a very long standing disagreement between Ethiopia and the United States over expropriated American property. Under international law, some restitution is supposed to be made. If it isn't, then under United States law, Washington should cease loans to that country and should also cancel AID programs.

Well, at the time Fred was assigned out there, we had a fairly significant AID program of about 25 or 30 million dollars. AID was very gung ho to be working in Ethiopia. Ethiopia had a lot of supporters, people interested in it back in the Department. And it was clear that if Fred pushed for compensation and the Ethiopian government did not respond (and he believed the chances were 50-50), then he was going to recommend to Washington that, in accordance with U.S. law...

Q: This was the Hickenlooper Amendment.

ROBERTS: The Hickenlooper Amendment, that we terminate loans and assistance to Ethiopia, which would cause a big fuss.

It would have been far easier not to have pressed the issue, to have simply tried to get the compensation, reported no success, and promised to continue making best efforts. This is what earlier Embassy leadership had done. Fred was the first to take the law seriously and not finesse the issue.

Fred valued maintaining the best possible U.S.-Ethiopian relations, but he did not, as many others did, put this before U.S. law. He had prepared himself very carefully, before he went out, on the merits of every single case and on all the law regarding compensation. He tried extremely hard for the first months of his assignment to get the Ethiopians to make some slight payment so that they wouldn't be subject to the law. He explained it to them all very carefully, and if you read his oral history, he deals with this in tremendous detail. He really was an extremely capable guy.

Well, the Ethiopians did not respond. Fred did make a formal recommendation to the State Department. It did cause some concern in the Department, because it was during the Carter period and we had an assistant secretary who was very pro-Africa and who basically thought that Mengistu was not all that hard a man, it was just a question of how you dealt with somebody like this, and if you really shook his hand and got to know him, you could overcome problems such as...

Q: Who was the assistant secretary, Moose?

ROBERTS: Dick Moose, yes. Moose did have lots of personality and capability, and in Africa you can solve a lot of problems that way. But there are people with whom that doesn't work. Mengistu was somebody who had shot his way to power several times. He was a very strong, determined, rigid man and he was not going to be influenced by handshakes and friendship.

Fred had fully reported his basic analysis of the Ethiopian government and of Mengistu, and he was not popular with Moose, who felt that Fred was a little conservative and didn't appreciate that a certain amount of Socialism and Marxism was natural in Africa, and that Fred perhaps did not have the personality to be friends with Mengistu. (Nobody was friends with Mengistu.) So that when Fred's recommendation came in that the Hickenlooper Amendment be applied in accordance with its clear stipulations, there was considerable consternation in AF. Also within AID/Africa, which had a big investment and a fairly big group -- about ten U.S. and 15 local staff -- in Ethiopia, and a particularly committed AID director.

The Legal Office, on the other hand, was absolutely behind Fred. And the higher you went in the State Department, the more people looked at it in terms of the law and less in terms of Africa and Africa relationships. So, very slowly, the Department swung around, agreed with Fred, and the first public statements began to be made.

The AID people were very bitter. Our AID director went back to Washington and fought Fred's recommendation, including visiting Congressional offices to advocate his case

(giving priority to development over law) outside official channels. So, as Fred expected, his recommendation and views became public. And that was when he expected to be PNGed.

Rather surprisingly, he wasn't. The shoe never dropped.

Next Fred talked with European NATO member ambassadors and tried to get a consensus as to what the future was going to be like under Mengistu, and whether or not we should be trying to help the Government, or whether we should all back off and say we can't do anything while this rascal is here.

The Italians didn't want to back off. They felt that this had been their ex-area of influence and they wanted to stay with a presence. The French were inclined to agree with Fred, as were the British. But the Swedes, in particular, had quite a strong socialistic element in their outlook at the time, and they had a very big aid program they were reluctant to jeopardize.

Q: Sweden traditionally, even way back before World War II, had been involved in Ethiopia.

ROBERTS: I went to visit the Swedish ambassador once, early in the morning, about nine-thirty, and there was a delay of about 15 minutes, which was unusual. When I walked in, his coffee table was wet, there were stains on the rug, and there was some broken crockery off in a corner. After a while I asked the ambassador just what exactly had happened. And he said, "Well, we were having a staff meeting, and I had to tell my aid assistance group that we were going to have to tell the Ethiopians that we would be cutting back unless they stopped persecuting the Swedish missionaries. The aid people said, 'Absolutely no. Religion has nothing to do with this.' But back in Sweden the churches have much political influence, and I had received specific instructions to do this. So we had quite a warm staff meeting."

Fred's efforts to get consensus among the European ambassadors on how to deal with a very authoritarian regime were essentially futile. However, some of the NATO ambassadors mentioned it to other ambassadors, and the word got out that Fred Chapin was organizing a counter-Ethiopian bloc. And he was ordered to leave the country in 24 hours.

Q: This happened about when?

ROBERTS: As a matter of fact, it was one of his good friends, his frequent bridge partner, the Swedish director of the UNDP, who squealed to the Ethiopians. He presented it as a plot against their efforts at socialistic development. So Fred was PNGed, in a sense, accidentally.

Q: When did this happen?

ROBERTS: This would have happened in '80.

Q: In the time when Chapin was there, how did he use you as his deputy?

ROBERTS: I basically did the things that he did not want to do. He divided jobs into things that he was going to do directly with the government, and a lot of things for me that had to do with running the mission, the relations with the other Agencies, and with AID in particular. I was responsible for the embassy reporting program and for day to day supervision of the administrative and consular sections, the basic role that the British Number Two has in an embassy.

Fred was always very open. He always took me with him when he went to the foreign minister. But this wasn't, I think, as much from a sense of how to negotiate as it was that he wanted to make sure that there were two people to report what had been said. The Ethiopians were giving us a very hard time and Washington was somewhat discounting our messages on the basis that Fred was unsympathetic to the regime. Fred wanted to make sure that it was clear that the Ethiopians were terribly unsympathetic to the United States.

Q: While you were the DCM, how did you and the other officers view the situation in Ethiopia?

ROBERTS: An embassy's outlook is shaped a good deal by the ambassador. I don't know the extent to which the CIA and myself and Andre Navez, who was the political officer, developed individual outlooks, or the extent to which we were shaped by Fred Chapin.

We had all been in Africa a while and were very interested in Ethiopia. We were agreed that under Mengistu Ethiopia was being run as a traditional empire. It had always been ruled on an authoritarian basis, under a long series of emperors. Somewhat to Ethiopia's later discomfort, the colonial period had come along just when Ethiopia had expanded to about its maximum size ever. The French and British signed agreements with the Ethiopian government back in the late nineteenth century which accepted its then existing frontiers. This included a lot of territory which Ethiopia had just recently conquered. So later Ethiopian governments were left with boundaries which they had to struggle constantly to maintain. Haile Selassie, and then Mengistu after him, inherited an empire which was always trying to break up, like the Austro-Hungarian one. Both men went about it in the same way, basically militarily. In Eritrea, at our time, a full scale secessionist war had been going on for 17 years.

We watched Mengistu and his government officers closely. There was complete uniformity, absolute control from the top. Mengistu did institute some needed economic reforms and tried unsuccessfully to nationalize agriculture. He certainly was relying on the Soviets at that time, for about two billion dollars worth of military equipment. We had no influence whatever on him, nor did any other European Embassy.

Our Embassy was agreed that we could not do business with this man and that the real issue was: did it matter that much, should the U.S. be making any big effort about it? Should we, for instance, be trying to overthrow him? Or should we be trying to make life uncomfortable with him? Should we decide we don't have enough U.S. interests here to put money into CIA operational activities, but instead suggest to Arab countries that they might support the Eritreans and the Tigrean movement and the Somalis?

We basically decided, within the embassy, that it was not sufficiently in the U.S. interest to try to mount any anti-Mengistu activity, and that we were basically going to be a political reporting post. Our CIA group agreed. When the AID contingent was withdrawn, with the application of Hickenlooper, we were then about 30 people, half-State, half-CIA.

Q: Were there many Americans working there at the time?

ROBERTS: No, Mengistu had earlier instructed the U.S. to withdraw the military mission, the Peace Corps, and USIA. Most American businesses had been expropriated, and all businessmen had left. The missionaries had also largely been expelled; there were maybe two or three very small missionary groups left. Some of the missionaries had helped members of the royal family and their children to escape. Much of the missionary movement had been expelled partly for that activity. As with the Swedish missionaries, the regime was making sure that there were no foreigners out in the countryside who in any way would be encouraging any kind of activity or any kind of free thinking which would lead people to be independent minded.

Q: In your political reporting, outside of explaining how you felt about the situation, were you able to get any insight into the Tigrean revolt, the Eritrean revolt, and the Somali business?

ROBERTS: Right, the Ogaden Somalis and the Oromo in the southwest.

Q: This was sort of a new one. We're talking right now on June 3, 1991; we're in the first week or so of the takeover by the Tigrean and Oromo movements of power in Addis Ababa, and a new Ethiopia may emerge...may, I say.

ROBERTS: All those opposition elements were present when we were there. The Eritreans at the time were the best organized. The Tigrean movement was just beginning. You have to remember that this was only four or five years after the terrible civil war within Ethiopia and Addis, as the revolution progressed from being a kind of parliamentary revolution against Haile Selassie into being a radical revolution and then a fight between the radicals--the military and the civilians--as to who was going to control the radical revolution. A military element led by Mengistu won out, largely by shooting all other groups that opposed them. During those four years of civil war and revolution, so many people got killed and driven out that for quite a while there was no real opposition movement in the country except for the Eritreans. They were way up in the north and could get support from outside the country. There were a few elements left who fled into Tigre

and into Gondar, but they were insignificant at this time. We had no Embassy contact with any of them.

The difficulty from the reporting point of view was that the government did not allow us to travel outside the central Shoa province. I think there are 11 provinces, and we were only allowed at that time to travel within the Addis Ababa area. Our requests to travel were always turned down, and we couldn't get out into the countryside.

We relied in part on what we could learn from third-party people. There was a very large diplomatic representation in Addis. The Organization of African Unity had its headquarters there as did the UN Economic Commission for Africa. There were about 45 African embassies, 12 international agencies, and a good number of European embassies. We particularly talked with such locally acceptable Third-World Missions as the Yugoslavs, Indians, Indonesians, and in fact anybody who had a program going on in the countryside. It was the only contact insight you could get as to what was happening outside Addis.

The CIA provided separate, excellent sources of information, both through human contacts and through intercepts. We had a very good working relationship there because basically the CIA station chief and CIA Washington agreed with us State officers that Mengistu was not to be won over and should not be courted.

There were one or two CIA officers who felt we should take an activist role and try to overthrow Mengistu. But most of us felt this wasn't practical, that we would have to mount a major program to succeed -- if possible at all -- and that we didn't have enough U.S. national interests in Ethiopia to justify trying. We were in competition generally with the Soviets, but there were no specific strategic interests at stake. Also, Ethiopia was not exporting its revolution anywhere. They were cooperating with the Russians, but this was for arms, a question of expediency.

So the CIA agreed on a reporting role and cooperated very closely with me in discussing who our contacts would be, what kinds of intercepts they would set up, where they would try to put in bugs, where they would try to get line-of-sight pick-ups. It was the best working relationship ever with the CIA.

Q: What you're saying I find very interesting, because I think there is a tendency on the part of Americans, really, not to write anything off. If you're in a place, let's do something. Or if you're dealing with it back in Washington; this is what I've got. Ethiopia is not like the Central African Republic or something; it's been there a long time, everybody knows about it.

ROBERTS: That's why I give Fred a lot of credit, because he was very pragmatic, establishing policy on the basis of U.S. law and the presence or absence of significant U.S. national interests.

Q: Did you have any congressional opposition to this? Because so often you find that if you're dealing with Morocco or something, all of a sudden you find a staff member who has control over a congressman, who gets highly emotional on this. And I would think Ethiopia, either within the Black Caucus, or somebody who maybe had missionary antecedents, or somebody like that, either a Congressman or a staff person... Were there problems?

ROBERTS: We had some problems under the Carter administration and AF Assistant Secretary Moose, as discussed. Then the Reagan administration came in with a different point of view. They were far more willing to believe that Mengistu was in fact a dictator, committed only to his own ends, and if he wasn't a friend, why pay any attention. And so life after the change of administration was easier.

After AID was withdrawn and the mission was reduced, Fred looked at me and said, "You know, we've got too much staff here. Why don't you give me your suggestions on what to do about it." So I gave him some suggestions, and he said: "This is all very good, but as you probably realize, we don't need a DCM. You and I are now doing about the same thing here." I had to agree, but said that it was a bit hard. Fred replied: "Yeah, but that's the way it is." So he sent off a telegram proposing our changes for reducing the embassy some more, including removing the DCM.

Well, the Administration had really changed. Fred got back a cable saying, "We agree completely with you on reducing the embassy. We agree too that currently nothing constructive can be done with the Ethiopian government. So we think you should come home, and we'll just leave a chargé." That was bitter-sweet support for Fred. But at that point the Ethiopian government PNGed him.

I thought of this again, much later, when I was ambassador to Togo and Secretary Shultz sent out a message saying to all embassies, "I want you to send me plans on how to reduce your mission up to 50 percent. We have got to make some real savings." I did exactly the same thing: I asked my DCM to draft proposals covering both State and other Agency personnel. His plan cut the embassy about 20 percent. And I said, "But, look, the instructions were 50 percent." He replied this would mean cutting the front office. I agreed -- and believe that at small posts the Department does not need two good senior people full time.

Q: How did we view both the Soviet influence and, as far as America goes, the Soviet menace at that time?

ROBERTS: The Soviets had a broad relationship with the government, including several hundred military advisors and other people in most of the important ministries. They had the same kind of relationship we'd had with Haile Selassie. There wasn't really anything that we could do about it. The Soviets did not get too much in return: some support on international issues and common rhetoric. Plus once concrete benefit: the Ethiopians allowed the Russians to use the Dahlak Islands as a small naval base. These islands are in

the Red Sea, northeast of Massawa. We followed this very easily through satellite reconnaissance. In some of the pictures, which I'd seen back in Washington, you could actually see the names on the stern of the ships.

After Fred was expelled, I was regularly given a very hard time by the foreign minister. He always started off our meetings by asking me how many American Indians we had recently killed and by ticking off a series of our latest "imperialistic" activities. In response, I finally noted the Government's dependence on the Soviets and their navy's use of Ethiopian islands. The Minister was furious, absolutely denied it, and asked for proof. So I got authorization from the State Department to show him satellite photographs of the Russian ships at the Dahlaks .

The Department sent a very good series of photographs, starting with the whole Red Sea, narrowing it down until you saw the islands, then the base, next the Russian ships, and finally you could see the people standing on the stern of a Russian ship with its name in Cyrillic writing. I then told the Minister I had received photographic evidence. He examined the pictures carefully and was thoroughly upset. So he turned to attacking the map that was keyed to the photographs, saying, "Oh ho, you're using a map that's six years old. These photographs are tied to it and must also be out of date; it's no good." This did not improve relations, but it wasn't meant to. It did show that we knew what we were talking about and could find out matters of interest to us. There was no constructive way that we could deal with Mengistu's people. And there was nothing we could do about the large Soviet presence. Relations consisted of going to their national-day party, sending one person, either myself or the political officer. Our policy was to abide and report all the spots.

Q: Did you, every once in a while, sort of sit back and say, "Well, better they than we," as far as dealing with this rebellion that was going on and the poverty and everything else? Did we ever sort of tweak the Ethiopian foreign minister, saying, "Well, that's, of course, a Soviet problem, not ours," or something like that?

ROBERTS: We were fairly serious about our situation. We concentrated on being diplomatically correct and minimizing getting caught out in our reporting activities. This was more a practical approach than a philosophical one. It wasn't yet clear that Mengistu and the Russians were bound to fail and that it would cost the USSR a lot. The ordinary Ethiopians did not like the Russians and would even pat the official car when stopped in the streets. But they had no power and all local political groups had been eradicated. The only effective opposition were the Eritreans, and at that time it looked as though they might very well be overrun. I think they saved themselves by the skin of their teeth at Nakfa in 1980-81. It seemed possible that Mengistu could hold on to the whole empire, with military force, indefinitely. This kind of territorial warfare had been going on in Ethiopia for about 1,000 or 1,200 years.

I remember being told by a European colleague, when I went off to Ethiopia, "Why don't you do something about this silly little warring between Ethiopia and its neighbors. After

all, look what we've managed to do in 30 or 40 years in terms of relations in Europe, resolving problems between the Germans and French and English." I didn't have much to say to that, but I went off to Ethiopia and learned that the Ethiopians had been fighting with the Somalis since about the year 670. And in 670, the Europeans had been running around in bearskins and didn't even know who they were. The Ethiopians had been bitter enemies with their neighbors for many centuries; the Russians were just the latest handy instrument in the struggle.

Q: Did you or your staff feel under any danger at all?

ROBERTS: No, because we were living under an authoritarian regime that wanted to ensure there was absolutely no possibility of anybody getting loose with a gun, or any crowd getting out of hand. You could travel around, where allowed, quite safely in terms of terrorism or physical threat. Mengistu had, however, organized down to the village level, encouraging local authorities to watch for spies and arrest anybody who looked suspicious or was not known. Despite diplomatic identification, embassy members were likely to be stopped if off the beaten track.

As Chargé, I was detained once despite the official car, flags, identification, and an Ethiopian bodyguard. It happened up in the far corner of the province to which we were limited. I also had with me the visiting Dean of the Episcopal Cathedral of Washington, who had expressed interest in a little known monastery which I wanted to find, a walk of about six miles from the road. I had informed the Foreign Ministry in advance, as required, and traveled visibly official. But after we returned from the monastery, I was detained for about five hours by the local, armed authorities. They insisted that I write out a statement saying that we had made contact with unfriendly elements in the countryside. I refused to write anything more than that I had visited and that my trip had been authorized by the Ministry. By being very patient, simply sitting there, and being responsive but absolutely unmoving, they finally said, sometime around eleven o'clock at night: "Well, okay, you write down what you will write down, and we'll turn you over to the central authorities." Which meant that I was free to go.

This kind of thing could happen almost anytime because there wasn't much telephone or other communication between Addis and the rural areas. Local authorities mostly took local affairs into their own hands.

Q: Was there any change when you were chargé, as far as dealing with the Ethiopian authorities? When the Reagan administration came in, were you delivering more abrupt...

ROBERTS: No, it made very little difference. The diplomatic language of demarches and notes remained the same. A politician may speak of another state as an "evil empire" but official exchanges tend to remain in terms of one sovereign entity to another. The Foreign Minister did slang us in private, orally, but not in writing. There was mostly a freeze; it was like serving in Moscow.

Q: Was there any consideration of shutting down the embassy?

ROBERTS: We did cut back three or four more staff after Fred's being PNGed. But we were getting enough interesting information, and occasionally frustrating Ethiopian initiatives, so that we earned our keep. We were almost closed down, however, by an off-hand decision of Secretary Haig's. We had managed particularly good access in some places. As a result, we were able to report that the Ethiopian government had drafted a diplomatic note expelling the embassy, but was undecided on whether to send it. Haig had not been Secretary long and was anxious not to have any embassies taken hostage on his watch. So when briefed on our report, he ordered that we all be withdrawn immediately.

He didn't ask for any opinions on a hostage situation developing, he just ordered the withdrawal. His cable was certainly an unexpected bolt. We didn't know if Washington had leaned something we hadn't, or if this was a small move before some greater development, or if maybe the Department had just become fed up with Ethiopia. After thinking about it a while, and assuring ourselves there was nothing special brewing locally, I called our Office Director in AF on the secure phone. He explained the home situation to me, guardedly. So I suggested our sending back a temporizing message: "Yes, Mr. Secretary, we are preparing to evacuate as ordered. But we believe the Ethiopians are not going to order us out yet. And we are in no danger as they have never used mobs or hit-men, just power politics." The cable would present an account of past Ethiopian diplomatic practice -- pretty punctilious -- and hopefully not show there had been any back channel discussion of the Secretary's order. Our Office Director -- Curt Kamen, a good man -- bravely agreed and promised to hold off any follow-up actions until our message arrived. This worked. Haig had many more important concerns and the order was not pursued.

Q: What about the Ethiopian Jews, was this an issue while you were there, and did you get involved with that?

ROBERTS: It was indeed a continuing issue. I don't believe that the Falashas are part of a lost Jewish group. It appears more likely that they are an off-shoot of the early Hamitic people in the northern Ethiopia-Yemen area. The Ethiopians became Christians in the fourth century, when their ruler in Axum adopted the Coptic faith. The Ethiopians, as you probably know, do trace their origin back to the union of their Queen Sheba with King Solomon in Jerusalem. And for six hundred years their supreme Bishop was sent them from Alexandria. It was only late in the 19th century that they won the right to select their own Bishop. Somewhat similarly, I believe the Falasha derive their origins from Jerusalem. But a "lost tribe", no. The Falasha did practice elements of the Jewish faith, but most of the orthodox leadership in Jerusalem did not accept them as fully Jewish.

Most of the Falasha did not want to leave. The terrible drought conditions in '83-84, plus the later advance of the Eritrean-Tigrean military forces from the north, combined to drive them out. There were several Jewish groups in the United States that firmly believed these people to be the lost Jews. These Americans were committed to getting the Falasha out of

Ethiopia and wanted our embassy help in making contacts and in arranging permission for departure.

We had to be as correct as possible, because the Ethiopian government was very cautious about letting any of these people leave. I could make representations, which I did to the Foreign Ministry, but I was not about to get involved clandestinely in helping make local contacts or trying to set up some system to buy their way out. At that time, there was no pressure from Washington to do so. The Falashas were of interest to parts of the American Jewish community, but not to a very large part of it. Some Jewish elements from various parts of the U.S. visited Addis and made arrangements on their own, but it wasn't a centrally organized Jewish effort, and we did not have to get involved.

Q: Before we leave Ethiopia, is there anything else we might touch on?

ROBERTS: Well, I think I might give you an example of what you can do if you have really good intelligence capability. The CIA had, as often, an intercept capability. In our case, it was very good and constituted an important reason for maintaining an embassy.

Q: What do you mean by an intercept capability?

ROBERTS: Intercept capability is largely a NSA (National Security Administration) function. You set up antennas so that you can listen in to local radio broadcasts, whether they're Defense, Foreign Ministry, or other departments. You listen to military broadcasts between sub-units, to police broadcasts, and you try to listen to local administrative broadcasts in the countryside. Remember, we couldn't develop any open Ethiopian contacts, or travel much, so we resorted to intercepts.

Q: And, of course, there's not a wide telephone network in Ethiopia, I take it.

ROBERTS: Well, there were both radio and limited phone networks. You tap into these in several ways. You can place bugs on electronic equipment or in places where there are such instruments. Or you have line-of-sight pick-ups, and local places under your control for re-transmission or collection of the data. Then of course you have various antennas for picking up different types of emissions. This can't be too obvious. There are real risks involved, and I reviewed the essentials carefully with the CIA.

In most embassies where there is such intercept capability, the transmitted material is sent back to Washington, where it is decrypted, translated, and published. The embassies get back only what Washington chooses -- or remembers -- to provide. And with considerable delay. In Ethiopia, because reporting was our primary function and there was so little other means of getting information, the CIA and NSA were willing to provide a minimal computer decryption capability at post. This decryption, of course, comes out in Amharic, so you've got to have, if you want real-time intelligence, a 5/5 Amharic speaker.

Q: Five-five being absolutely fluent.

ROBERTS: Absolutely perfect native speaker. Well, in all of the United States, there were only two or three of them. Both Washington and the embassy had to exercise considerable encouragement to get one of these people to come and spend two to three years locked up in our 18 acre compound being the cryptologist-interpreter on the spot. But it was managed. We thus had the capability to make intercepts, decrypt many of them, translate them and have real-time information. This provided a mass of material, much of it relevant as we carefully targeted the networks. Mostly it was good background material and not time sensitive or actionable. But it was occasionally.

At one period when I was chargé, the intercepts showed that all leaves for Ethiopian military personnel in the Ogaden area had been canceled.

Q: That's the Somali-Ethiopia frontier area.

ROBERTS: Yes. Then they indicated medical personnel had been told to report to their stations in the area. Further intercepts showed that all vehicles in the area were to draw three-days' worth of gasoline. At this point, Mengistu flew off to have a meeting with the President of the Sudan. We put two and two together and thought that he was preparing a move on Somalia, and at the same time, he was going to Khartoum to allay any worries that the Sudan might have if a fellow Islamic neighbor were attacked. So we alerted the Department and suggested that maybe while Mengistu was up there, we should have the Sudanese weigh-in and say, "Hey, we hear rumors of some movements in the Ogaden, should we be concerned?"

The clincher came when we got an intercept which instructed the engineering units to start clearing mines on roads leading to the frontier. It was fairly clear what was happening. At this point, Washington would normally be urgently trying to get good overhead photographs of the region. But there was no satellite making passes over Ethiopia. No need, ordinarily. At that time the U.S. was not covering the whole world, so Washington had to move a satellite in order to get such a picture, which takes time. So we could not get confirming pictures of an Ethiopian buildup to attack Somalia.

But the intercepts were pretty damn clear. The advantage of an intercept, of course, is that there is just no questioning the accuracy of it. Whereas if we had had oral information, say from the Indian military attaché, that something was going on out there, it was hardly the kind of evidence on which Washington could base any important action. But this was clear enough so that Washington did in fact authorize our ambassador in the Sudan to tell the president of the Sudan pretty much what was happening. The president of the Sudan was indeed interested, he discussed it forcefully with Mengistu, and when Mengistu came back to Addis all those orders were countermanded. So there are times when you can do things behind the scenes.

There was another action development that shows what can be done on just the diplomatic level, even if you are only a small embassy. The Organization of African Unity (OAU)

usually met in Ethiopia. We did not really try to affect its sessions and resolutions. Too big a job and mostly of too little importance to us. We would assign one or more of our young officers to cover the meetings -- a hard job as access to most meetings was closely controlled. But we had a particularly capable officer in Frank Day, who covered many of the sessions. He was a particularly ingenious, if not crafty young man who could get in almost anywhere, and he did some marvelous reporting. So we were satisfied with just getting good coverage of what the OAU was doing.

A frequent issue on the agenda was whether or not the rebel movement in Mauritania, the Polisario, was to be seated. This was of vital concern to Morocco, where we had real interests. A minority OAU group, mainly French-speaking states, did not want the Polisario to be seated. There were security and political reasons; also the Polisario was a movement, not a state. These countries constituted, if organized, a clearly blocking vote. The issue had come up previously but had always failed to get the necessary two thirds majority. I went to the formal opening meeting. Just before all the delegates trooped in, a lot of turbaned, blue-robed Polisario representatives came in and sat down at a table with a Polisario flag. It became evident that somebody had administratively made a decision to seat them -- to present a fait accompli. Well, all the delegations came in and settled down, most not aware of the situation. The president of the OAU came up to the podium and looked down, and there were the Polisario. Drama. He made some polite remarks and then said, "I think that we have a question here which has not been resolved, and I suspend the meeting until it is settled." I talked to a few delegates and reported the impasse and strong pressure from the pro-seating faction.

It turned out later that the secretary-general of the OAU, the head of the OAU staff, had made the decision, probably under some pressure--or possibly payment--to set up the seating. He may also have thought that this time arrangements had been made for a two-thirds vote and he wanted to be on the winning side. Well, the outcome wasn't all that clear, and the OAU suspended meetings for about a day and a half while the delegations negotiated among themselves. This provided a diplomatic opportunity.

I got a very strong message from the Department to do what I could to help block the Polisario from getting into the OAU. A blocking third was needed. The Department got involved partly because Morocco felt very strongly about Mauritania and weighed-in with Washington, and partly because Senegal and Abidjan also did. These were important countries for our African policy. Remember now, we're under the Reagan Administration, and they were good conservative regimes, and Morocco was very much on our side when it came to the Mediterranean issues and relations with Algeria. So I got strong instructions to do what we could.

I first met with the Moroccans for a vote count. They identified some of the fence sitters: the Liberians, for instance, and the Upper Voltans. I went to see those delegations and found that their problem was that they didn't have communications and therefore they didn't have any instructions. The Ethiopians were not allowing outgoing international phone calls from the minority Embassies. They also closed down the telex that the Moroccans were

using. So I fixed communications through U.S. Embassies, both cable and radio telephone, with the appropriate Foreign Ministries so these delegations could contact their own people and get instructions.

This is a little dicey because foreign ambassadors don't necessarily like to go to somebody else's embassy or to rely on somebody else's equipment, and they aren't quite sure that what they're getting is really their own message. But it worked, and we managed to get a blocking third, and the Polisario was unseated. From that time on, they went downhill. We thus managed, through good technology (as in the Sinai), to exercise a little bit of influence on history. Which is what the Foreign Service should do.

Q: You then left Ethiopia . When was that?

ROBERTS: Oh, I think it was in June of '82. It was the end of a three-year tour. I was fortunate in being nominated for an embassy by the Assistant Secretary for Africa, Chester Crocker. Such a nomination is an important first step in the process, but it is only that. I got as far as the Under Secretary's Committee, or maybe the White House, and then the post I was going to was handed to a political appointee. The nomination then starts all over again. You may not be on two nomination lists at the same time, and it takes months to get even as far as the White House.

Personnel said, "Well, we can either give you a two-year assignment, or, if you are willing to wait on the sidelines, we will put you back into the process. The AF Bureau supports you, and you can try again. But you cannot both have a post and be on the ambassadorial list at the same time because we don't want to withdraw you from an assignment in order to give you an embassy. You could also wait till six months before the end of a two-year post and then ask to be put on a list."

I decided that this was the best chance I might have so I elected to take any short term assignments available while a nomination percolated through the system. This turned out to be rather demanding, because it took two years to get finally approved. I ended up serving seven different short-term assignments.

Q: Just to give a little flavor, what short of short-term assignments did you do?

ROBERTS: Well, the director for West Africa had had a heart attack, so I was head of the West Africa Department for three or four months. Then they needed somebody in the fall up at the United Nations, so I went to New York and was African advisor there. Then the political appointee to the post I was first nominated for made some indiscreet remarks in Washington about Republicans. The nomination was withdrawn and I went out as chargé for a while.

Q: Where was that?

ROBERTS: It was in Gambia, for six months. And then there was a problem with getting an ambassador in the Seychelles, so I went and filled in there for six months. Then I was needed again at the United Nations, so I did another assignment there. After that, I was going off for some vacation. I parked my packed car and wife near the State Department and put 25 cents in the meter. I was going to be just a few minutes, stopping at AF's third floor administrative office to give them my address and phone in Maine. I didn't want to risk going further upstairs, because by that time I had spent a year and a half being useful and I didn't want to get grabbed just as I was going on vacation. So I very carefully walked into the administrative office and while I was giving them my data, a phone rang, and it was the sixth floor. They wanted me, wherever I was, to get up there immediately. So I went up and found that Chad had just broken open and that I had been made head of a Chad task force in Washington for the coordination of a military effort to protect President Habré and ultimately to beat back the Libyans, who were supporting his opposition. I protested, "But I can't, my wife is out there in a car and I've only got 25 cents in the meter." They said, "Fine," sent somebody out with some quarters to tell my wife, and walked me down the hall to a meeting which was going on and announced, "Here's the director for your Chad task force." After that, I did get some leave, and later I was sent out to Chad to fill in for the ambassador for two plus months. During these assignments I was put up for several posts, including Togo, which did go through.

There was one challenging common element among these short-term assignments. It was whether to maintain the status quo or use the hiatus to act on pending problems. In most situations, there are actions that are difficult not so much in defining the proper course as hard in terms of personnel or other consequences. Staff that needs to be disciplined or fired; questionable but beneficial procedures that should be stopped. If the legal or administratively proper action is reasonably clear, the TDY manager should act.

Q: You were in Togo from '84 to '86.

ROBERTS: It was a three-year assignment. I spent two years, felt that I had done as much as I could, and then asked to be reassigned. An important element was that I found it very difficult to sit on my hands. The fundamental thing about being at a small post is managerial restraint. You cannot contribute much locally or regionally because the U.S. hasn't got the interest for real involvement. In most cases you do not advance new programs, even the best ones, because although beneficial locally, you should not be spending more U.S. dollars. What you really do is make the best possible contacts with the foreign minister and the president. Then when the State Department does need you, the contacts and access are ready and you can make a quick, high level demarche, and hopefully get a positive result. That's your function. You are not at a small post to comment on U.S. policy for the rest of the world, or to try to change significantly what is happening even within this small country. You are there to fulfill the occasional U.S. interest. It means you have to sit very firmly on your hands. You should not be trying to expand the activities of your post. You should not be encouraging AID, USIA, and a military attaché program to increase what they are doing. This was my well-intentioned plan. But it is a difficult one to

follow, particularly if you have been operationally involved elsewhere, or been at a high U.S. interest post.

My major achievement in Togo was not a local action but formulating "the small embassy program." Secretary Shultz had sent all Chiefs of Mission a cable asking urgently for suggestions on an up-to-50-percent reduction in post costs and staff. I responded for Togo. But I also proposed that such savings could be made more broadly by creating a class of limited interest small posts with limited requirements. I suggested that only a few U.S. staff are needed at such places, but that in practice they could not be run in a reduced way if the Department was always going to task them with exactly the same requirements as for a big post. Small post ambassadors, as long as they were being heavily tasked, were correct in trying to expand operations to fulfill those requirements. Of course, such ambassadors could always try to fight each requirement. This is very difficult because each tasking has some reason and interest group in Washington. Also, you get a bad name for not being responsive. Washington usually could hunt around in house and answer an AID query as to whether eucalyptus will grow in Togo, or a DOD/Commerce Department question on possible sales of military equipment. But it is much easier just to ask the embassies. There are also worldwide, required reports, about 175 of them, even for small embassies. I suggested to Shultz that perhaps 40 posts, most with eight to twelve State staff, could be reduced to special purpose small posts with only five State people. As each U.S. overseas employee then cost about $250,000, this meant real savings. But the posts' requirements had also to be reduced. Let them be out there as diplomatic access posts, with some limited capacity for reporting, consular services, and help to businessmen coming through. Nothing more. This could be done with an ambassador, secretary, consular/reporting officer, administrative officer, and a communicator. Broad supervision of other agency activities would still be feasible through the Ambassador. Local feelings would not be hurt; small countries want an Ambassador. They do not care how much staff he has.

This was greeted at very senior levels in the State Department as being a terribly good idea. It even got White House endorsement. But it ran counter to the fact that there are a great many agencies and a great many offices in the Department and other Washington Bureaus that have particular substantive or administrative interests. Each of these wants to ask the overseas posts about those interests. They feel much more comfortable if they can ask every single diplomatic post whether eucalyptus grows there, or the extent of female circumcision, or whether the square foot limitation on housing is being respected, and will you please report according to this 15-page instruction. You remember the consular forms?

Q: Oh, yes, yes.

ROBERTS: I argued that small ports did not need to do a consular report. It was designed to determine staffing needs and had, I think, 186 questions covering every large and small aspect of consular work. A small post would figure out all the hours per year spent on such activities and report that they needed one-third of a consular officer's time. As they already had a dual purpose officer, they did not need more staff -- as everyone already knew.

Q: The so-called consular package.

ROBERTS: Yes. I suggested, for example, cutting the consular package for small posts to 10 or 15 questions. It also took considerable time to read and understand the 27-page instruction. Ultimately, after the Department approved the small post concept, the Bureau of Consular Affairs agreed. But it was one of the few offices willing the streamline or cut its procedures.

I found it difficult indeed to follow my own advice to keep quiet until called on by Washington. So I worked hard on the effectiveness of AID programs, Peace Corps activities, USIA projects to ensure that they were the most helpful possible, and that the three of them were consistent with each other. After I had contributed changes there, without infringing overly on my colleagues' management of their affairs, I either had to be relatively idle or go into local history, anthropology, or languages. As I am more an operative, manager type than a researcher, I opted after two years for another alternative and that was reassignment. Washington needs ambassadorial slots, and my own AF Bureau was annoyed by my small embassy proposal, so it was quickly agreed.

Q: What was the political situation in Togo, and how did you deal with it?

ROBERTS: Well, that's an example of where the best practice and policy was not to do too much. Togo was run by President Eyadema, who had personally assassinated President Olympio back in 1963 and had assumed power. Eyadema had been a staff sergeant and leader of a northern ethnic group that decided to resolve some staff problems. They went to the President's house, which was next to our chancery and completely unguarded--in those days an African president in his own country did not yet have security worries. They roused him out of bed and tried to get him to agree to pay hikes and more officerships. He probably refused, thinking them just temporarily aroused as enlisted men. They manhandled him, he escaped, but was recaptured about 6:00 AM and shot just outside the chancery walls. In a few months, Eyadema won leadership in the largely northern staffed military and made himself President.

He managed Togo wholly authoritarianly but, with experience, in an increasingly effective way. By the time I got there he had the sense to leave commercial affairs open and to encourage maximum French, World Bank, and other outside assistance. He helped such activities with broad support and did not interfere in their program management.

If you didn't say anything about Eyadema or politics, you could live quite freely in Togo. On the other hand, anybody who even mentioned the President's name had to clap twice to show support. Togolese who returned from Paris were often assumed to have talked with dissidents there--so their baggage and home would be searched. If you were up on a platform for some event, and you didn't clap when the President's name was mentioned, you would be summoned to his office.

The President also took direct, personal action on a wide range of very local matters. For example, an American business man told me that one day two of Eyadema's private police showed up at his workplace and asked to see the secretary. They picked her up by both arms and carried her out of the building. The American objected, but the policemen said, "Our business," and put her in a car and took her away to Eyadema's palace. A northerner had sent word to the President that this woman had done him wrong. The president decided to hear both of them and sent out his police for them. Well, in Togo, the police go out and grab whomever. That's how it is. The President heard them personally, decided that the secretary was right, that the northerner was wrong, and that ended the case. There were a good number of people, however, who spent years in jail, or were sent off into the far parts of the country in isolation. No due process or appeals.

As a diplomat, it was easy to conduct business with him. Eyadema gave big country ambassadors immediate, private access. He made decisions on the spot. Ideal. I had his home phone number. Whenever I got any instruction which would require his approval I'd call him direct. He would reply, "Fine, Protocol will notify you of the time." Usually I called him about six AM. He was at a military camp; he lived there for safety. And then about seven, I'd get a call from Protocol saying, "The president wants to see you at once." I would put on my dark wool suit, discuss the issue, and get an answer -- all in about two hours from the first phone call. Considering how hard it is to reach the top anybody these days, and get a definitive decision, this was efficiency plus. And we usually had his support.

We had an AID program, a minor amount of military attaché activity, some cultural exchanges, and sixty Peace Corps volunteers. It was enough so that we had an ongoing relationship with Togo. Eyadema had some personal reason to see me: he wanted to be invited as a presidential visitor to Washington. This wasn't favored at first, but he helped us with several regionally important matters and ultimately received the invitation. There needs to be a sufficient level of representation and of inter-state activities to make such senior level working relations possible.

On the other hand, given the way he ruled, you did not want to be identified as supporting him. There were a lot of Togolese who were suffering under this man. It meant not being too visible, not appearing to be a friend of his administration. At state occasions, on a podium, I clapped, but I was never the first, nor the last to stop. I attended his functions, but tried hard in behavior and conversations not to appear a supporter.

Togo was a place where the United States did not need to increase its AID program, or its USIA activities, or increase its influence. What we had was enough, and our concern was mostly to be doing it well. While my small embassy proposal was well received at senior levels in Washington, it was not immediately implemented because Shultz did much better than he expected in getting funds for the Department from Congress. I did not cut the embassy because the AF Bureau opposed reductions. They disliked my small embassy proposal because, if implemented, most of the small embassy reductions would be in AF. My idea was considered "disloyal." This was expressed in my efficiency report as "lacking

appreciation for the larger regional ramifications" of African affairs. While being Ambassador in Togo was to be a biggish frog in a small pond, unlike the frog you were all too aware of how small the pond really was.

Q: How well did you think our AID program was doing, and what were we doing?

ROBERTS: We had a small health component and some educational support. But two-thirds of our overall program was agricultural, which was proper for an almost wholly agricultural economy. The difficulty was that we were trying for fairly large-scale developmental improvement. One such project was to introduce use of animal traction in local farming. About 98 percent of agriculture in Togo was done with a hand hoe; there were hardly ten functioning tractors in the whole country. If production were to be increased to match population growth and provide some exports, it seemed reasonable to advance the next step beyond the hoe to animal drawn implements.

Previous AID people, Togolese Agricultural Ministry staff, and local World Bank representatives had earlier seen the same need and tried to introduce small tractors. This involved special loan arrangements, as even the smallest tractor was too costly for most farmers, and creating fuel supplies, spare parts networks, and repair facilities. This was too difficult a technology to introduce on a wide basis in a country as undeveloped as Togo. A hoe technology worked because it was low cost and in every village there was a blacksmith. If the blade broke, it could be fixed locally. There was nobody locally who could fix a carburetor on a tractor, except in one of the three major towns. Even the biggest farmers, really businessmen, who could pay for a tractor and hire a mechanic, couldn't find or develop a reliable support system. So there were ten functioning tractors in Togo.

Between the hoe and the tractor, it seemed reasonable to promote animal plowing. Our project was to train average farmers in the use of bullocks (there being no horses due to tsetse fly). There were lots of bullocks as northern Togo is part of the Sahel, which is a grazing area with even too many animals. Some of the farming Togolese in the north-central area also kept cattle or hired herdsmen, so a few were already familiar with the animals.

But it was difficult for a farmer, used only to a hoe, to train and use a big bullock. The animals, at several hundred dollars each, were expensive compared to the farmers' income. There was no veterinary support system. The simplest iron plows and disks were still more difficult to repair than local blacksmiths could handle. We found that in fact we too were trying to introduce a whole new technology. But it seemed feasible. We built training stations. We used Peace Corps volunteers as farmers' assistants. We promoted local government help. We were making a little bit of progress when I left, but it was far from a self-sustaining activity even after four years. It only worked as long as we provided staff and financial support.

When I first visited Togo, way back in 1967, the Peace Corps was promoting fishponds as a further food source. When I arrived as ambassador in 1984, the Peace Corps was still

making fishponds, but there wasn't a single one of the earlier ponds functioning. After 20 years of effort, no pond was operational unless a Peace Corps volunteer was there. This was a sufficient anomaly that an ambassador could promote change in another Agency's internal operations.

I concluded that fishponds failed because the Peace Corps method of organizing them was counter to local working practice. African agriculture at the village level is quite individualistic or family based. The Peace Corps, however, preferred to emphasize cooperatives and putting people together in groups--community efforts to do things. It does have some individual enterprise projects, but in the case of fishponds it was insisting on organizing them as cooperatives.

Fishponds should work. They are practical and relatively simple -- a suitable PCV activity. The fish are tilapia. They are very hardy and do not need to be fed protein, they thrive on weeds and silage. While a fishpond does take some care, the work is not onerous and there is a profit. But there's not enough profit so that you can expect 15-20 people to divide up the profit on the fish and have very much left. There isn't enough incentive for a co-op.

I suggested to the Peace Corps director that he interpret the terms "cooperatives" and "community projects" in his instructions as including an extended African family. Instead of creating an artificial community or a cooperative, to manage a fishpond, we would use an existing village family unit. He ultimately agreed and Peace Corps Washington didn't object. I left about then, so I can't say if that made pond projects more workable.

Animal traction and fishponds don't seem much like matters for diplomatic concern. But they were the stuff of life in Togo. And challenging! I can't think of anything more difficult than trying to raise the standard of living of a traditional African village. We had two further AID agricultural projects, both of which seemed promising but which had latent flaws. One of these was to create, on a very minor basis, a model land-grant college adapted to African conditions. It was organized under a contract with the Reverend King of Philadelphia, who had started out training blacks in U.S. cities in practical activities: building construction, TV repair, plumbing, electrical installation. He set up training clinics turning feckless street teenagers into successful technicians. He had already done this in some African cities but wanted to work with the biggest problem group, the rural under-unemployed. Under his Togo contract, he had set up a one-year training college for young Africans who had dropped out of, or failed in, the classical Europeanized school system. He offered such young people a more promising future in the countryside than the traditional hoe economy. There were a lot of such youngsters, most of whom drifted off to the cities.

When I arrived the project was a going concern. Buildings had been set up, staff hired, and enough land acquired so that each student got his own acre or so to practice on. Each student also was given a pig, chickens, a calf and rabbits. They learned how to raise all of these, were allowed to keep them, and were encouraged to specialize upon graduation. They were also taught animal traction and the best ways of farming locally. This was a

one-year program, after which the "college" tried to find a place for these people to start working.

Conceptually this was all very good. The participants were motivated and benefited. But upon graduation, some did well while many could not get started. There was no available land. As an underclass group, they had no money to buy any. Those that raised chickens needed minimum space, so they succeeded. The others either had to go back to family agriculture or be hired labor. This was largely a waste of training.

As a remedy, Reverend King got AID to amend the project and allow buying land for the graduates. When I arrived, this had expanded into help with clearing land and the farming of it. The project was now "successful." But when I asked about cost effectiveness (for there were only a modest number of participants) it turned out to be prohibitively expensive in local terms, about $7,000 or $8,000 per student. There were about 60 of them and maybe 250,000 potential candidates in the country. At that rate, we were hardly going to make a dent in the problem. And the cost per student was much too high for Togo to try to duplicate. It was a "model" program but not a cost-effective one in African terms. I advised that we close it down, but Reverend King was a political figure and AID hoped the costs would be lowered.

I found AID to be a big, slow-moving organization, but its people were very committed and they often found truly excellent field staff and contract extension technicians. Their projects usually appeared eminently appropriate, as animal traction or a one-year land grant college, but all too often they only worked while U.S. money and personnel were being provided. I came to feel very strongly that we should not start any project, from a Peace Corps fishpond to a multi-million AID program, unless it was reasonably sure to be self-sustaining after two to three years.

We did, in fact, develop one such program. But it was the only one, out of about 21 AID projects I'd been involved with, that was self-sustaining.

Q: Which program was that?

ROBERTS: It was called Partners for Productivity. It loaned money to small entrepreneurs or farmers, and followed up with simultaneous supervision/training on the job. Its loans were small--from $500 to maybe a maximum of $1,500--to people who wanted to start a bicycle repair shop, a rural bakery, a corn/sorghum grinding mill, or use new seeds or fertilizer for the first time.

Providing small loans to small entrepreneurs/farmers was hardly a new idea, but combining it with hands-on help during the loan was new. The French and the World Bank in Togo had realized that small farmers need small loans, so they had set up a rural bank system. There were maybe 200 small, two-room banks scattered around Togo, in which there were one or two loan staff. They sat behind a window and took loan applications from farmers or little businessmen. But these staff were strictly "white collar." They never got out to the

fields and never visited applicants' work places. Many applicants wanted money but only a few had really productive uses in mind. Consequently, only about 25 percent of these loans were ever repaid. It was a losing proposition and everybody said that making small loans to small users was not feasible.

Partners for Productivity, however, believed the problem was not with what the French were trying to do but how they were doing it. The French simply were not reaching viable applicants. And they were not helping them use the loan effectively. The need for helpful extension services was also widely appreciated and many such agencies were established in both French and British ex-colonial areas. But these services were totally separate from any small loan systems. The great innovation of Partners for Productivity was to combine them.

They set up a couple of very small headquarters in the countryside and trained Togolese to be both extension and loan agents. They then traveled about the countryside on motorbikes looking for people who wanted to do something, or who had something and wanted to make it more productive. These people sat down with such people and developed their entrepreneurial ideas into practical plans. They visited sites and got others' views on the general reputation and means of the potential loan applicant. Then they developed and wrote out a work-plan contract. The loan was the last step. After it was made, the extension/loan agent would return every ten days or so and review progress and problems.

Partners for Productivity charged enough interest to be self-sustaining -- about 14 percent. High by U.S. standards but far below rural African loan sharks. And they got a high rate of loan repayments, about 85-90 percent. There were some unexpected problems. Many recipients wanted the extension agent to hold much of the money, because if they had any cash their fellow villagers would expect them to use it for local needs or festivities. It was better, from their point of view, if they could say, "Well, the loan agent has the money. I haven't got it." Also, a village entrepreneur couldn't succeed too much or it would crate jealousies and sometimes retribution.

The major problem, as with the Reverend King's small land-grant college, was that this loan/supervision process was fairly labor intensive. One of the agents could only handle about 40 business people or farmers over a six-month cycle. Then about half of those would have to be visited further in the next six month cycle. So the agent ended up with only 20 new people each six months, or 40 a year. Not too efficient, but very effective. In fact, it was so good that it failed. What happened was that Partners for Productivity took on too many contracts in Africa, overextended itself, and collapsed in Washington. But what they did in the field was outstandingly practical.

Q: So you asked to leave Togo in 1986. What did you do then?

ROBERTS: Then I came back and joined the Inspection Corps.

Q: And you did that for how long?

ROBERTS: I did that for three years until retirement. I was a senior inspector, head of a team of three to six officers reviewing Foreign Service performance in the Department and overseas. It was a standard job. But there was an unusual development. Congress had been leaning on the Department to accept an outside Inspector General (IG). Suddenly, the Department acceded and Mr. Funk, formerly Commerce's IG, was appointed. I wasn't too sure, as were many of the other inspectors, whether or not this would be a good thing. So I had a personal talk with him and found him an open, direct man who intended to maintain the Department's inspection system but would add much extra capacity.

Having served in the IG before as a mid-level inspector, and then a year plus as a team leader before Funk's arrival, I had concluded that our inspection system could darn well be beefed up. There is always some fraud in the system, which was difficult to catch or prosecute. We had too few auditors and a barely adequate budget. There were a lot of activities that State Department inspectors never really got into--functional inspections of the overseas property management, the arms sale contracts, communications, and contracting--where the big money was. And finally, if we did find fraud, there wasn't anything we could do except refer it to the Justice Department, which by and large didn't want to get involved because our frauds were relatively minor and it was expensive trying to run down fraud overseas.

Congress more than doubled the IG budget and staff. Mr. Funk brought in his own legal staff, about 50 more auditors, and a new group of 30 criminal investigators. He continued the traditional inspection system largely unchanged while introducing much more auditing and fraud prosecution. He also reported both to the Secretary of State and to Congress. Having greater organizational autonomy gave him more muscle and maneuverability.

Congress's main reason for insistence on changing State's IG system was suspicion that as self-inspection it was likely to be soft on colleagues. There was some truth to this, but mainly it was inherent in our emphasis more on publicizing standards and counseling/assisting than "gotcha." After a year or so with Mr. Funk, and more on contract, it's my impression that the change brought much improvement, but less because of "independence" than because of much greater capacity in audit and investigation.

First, even an independent IG becomes so well acquainted with the host department and senior managers that understanding the system blends into a certain degree of co-option. IGs have to work with their departments, not just confront them, and their role is, as was State's traditional system, not just punitive but corrective. Among all the independent IGs in Washington, I don't believe you will find any that are outright confrontational, or who clearly put greater emphasis on reporting to Congress than to their Department heads. To their credit.

Personally, Mr. Funk was judicious and conservative. His agenda was to institute a thorough review system, not to influence any general State operational practice. He had no political or Congressional biases--he was just professional. As a result, there was little immediate change. But as he developed the office, many more areas needing

audit/inspection were covered and more fraud was caught and punished. It is now a much stronger system.

There is a special problem for an IG at the State Department. An IG takes established policies, laws, and procedures and determines whether they are being well and honestly executed. Much of the State Department's operations, like other departments, consists of executing presidential and congressional policies. But State has a larger than usual role in making policy. Both State's traditional inspectors and Mr. Funk's IG were wary of evaluating the soundness of policy and its formulation. It is difficult to evaluate policy because of the lack of standards, or the presumption that White House/Congressional formulations should always be definitive, and because of the politics involved in major policy issues. Congress and the press naturally monitor policy validity, but State's IG is even better informed than they. There is an additional, difficult role here that should be attempted.

Q: Well, looking back, Owen, you spent most of your career dealing with Africa. How do you view they way the Foreign Service and the State Department dealt with Africa? This is a very big question, but do we have realistic interests there, or is it driven by politics, or is it driven by personalities? Whether it's Chester Crocker or Soapy Williams or whoever, the head of AF often seems to be far more of a factor than in other areas.

ROBERTS: Yes, I think that's partly because the senior level of the State Department leaves African affairs very largely to the assistant secretary. If this person manages the Bureau without causing public relations snafus or problems with Congress, the seventh floor is perfectly content and usually does not get much involved. This is realistic and wholly appropriate. There are few developments, save in southern Africa, that deserve the Secretary or Under Secretary's attention. So the assistant secretary's personality and approach have a larger impact on policy and its execution than in other regions.

At the same time, the assistant secretary for Africa would find it a bit more difficult to get senior support for big policy changes, taking risks, and certainly for more staff or budget. The realities of U.S. interests limit considerably what the assistant secretary can do, just as they do for ambassadors at African posts, particularly small ones such as Togo. An African assistant secretary should thus probably be more concerned than his other regional colleagues with such broad issues as development, humanitarian concerns, and the environment.

As in Togo, I think one of the fundamental things the Department should do in Africa is assure that U.S. assistance is really effective, particularly that it's self-sustaining. Most of the AID projects that I knew about ultimately turned out to be white elephants. That's a real tragedy, because the African countries lose hard to raise funds and developmental opportunities are lost. Of course, local governments determine much of what can be done. If there is much corruption, or application of inappropriate political theories, we should be willing to suspend efforts. Perhaps too often we try to make programs succeed in situations where the odds are too much against us.

End of interview