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

AMBASSADOR LEONARD SPEARMAN

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INTERVIEW

[Note: This interview was not edited by Ambassador Spearman]

Q: This is an interview with Ambassador Leonard Spearman of Texas currently working at Coppin State College in Baltimore. Why don't you tell us what you're doing at Coppin State, Mr. Ambassador?

SPEARMAN: Thank you very much, Ambassador Palmer. After a number of years in the academic and several small --

Q: Let's address that. You started as an academic and got your Ph.D. at the University of Michigan, and what year was that?

SPEARMAN: 1960.

Q: And then after that what happened?

SPEARMAN: I was Professor of Psychology at Southern University in Baton Rouge.

Q: What's the period?

SPEARMAN: 1960 to 1970. I lectured at Queens College in New York during that period, I lectured at Rutgers for a summer as a Martin Luther King Scholar during that period, but basically I spent 10 years at Texas Southern as Professor of Psychology.

Q: You had said that you were at Southern University?

SPEARMAN: I'm sorry, at Southern University. There are two because I was -- subsequently you will discover that I was President of Texas Southern University in Houston.

Q: So 1960 to '70, you were at Southern University in Baton Rouge?

SPEARMAN: In Baton Rouge. During that period I became completely engaged in a number of social programs in that period, the Head Start, the Upward Bound programs. My interest in the social psychology aspects dominated my thinking, and I became involved in how to increase the numbers of minorities involved in post-secondary education and as a result became quite associated with programs such as Upward Bound, such as Talent Search, special services for disadvantaged college students, and the reshaping of federal student aid as it pertains to minority students. I left Southern in 1970 to come to Washington.

Q: That was in the Nixon administration?

SPEARMAN: Yes. I came here as Director of Student Special Services and remained here 10 years as Deputy Associate Secretary for Higher Education.

Q: This was in the government?

SPEARMAN: In the federal government.

Q: I see, so you were in the Department of Education?

SPEARMAN: It was then the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and of

course my last year here or the last year and a half here was when the change was made separating out Education from Health, Education and Welfare. I have served under five different secretaries during that period.

Q: Perhaps you could take us year by year, because this is also an interesting insight into the evolution of the Department of Education at the national level. You came to Washington in 1970, and what was your initial job and how long did that last?

SPEARMAN: My initial job involved three programs. The programs were designed for the disadvantaged in higher education. If you recall, during the '60s, many of the programs that focused on minorities and Appalachia and so forth came out of the old Office of Economic Opportunity. Congresswoman Edith Green and Senator Ed Brooke, I think, ought to be credited with moving many of these programs into some kind of institutional arrangement within HEW rather than lose them. So Head Start, Upward Bound, the Council for Legal Education Opportunity, the National Defense Student Loan programs, all were brought into the U.S. Department of Education.

Q: Into the Department of Health, Education and Welfare?

SPEARMAN: Correct. Health, Education and Welfare, and we were the "E" in that Health, Education and Welfare. Education had its Commissioner of Education at that time, and our titles were not -- we did not have the secretarial level rank, we had the Deputy Commissioner, Assistant Commissioner.

Q: So what was your job title then?

SPEARMAN: I came in as a director. There were five directors in Higher Education, and I was one of five.

Q: What would be the GS designation?

SPEARMAN: I came in as a GS-16.

Q: So you were a super grade?

SPEARMAN: Yes. I was promoted to a 17, and that gets into another part of the evolution which occurred during the Carter administration.

Q: First of all, let's kind of continue with the Nixon.

SPEARMAN: In a year and a half, 18 months after I arrived, I was called in and told that I was now in charge of all student aid administered by the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

Q: Who was your boss at that time? Who was the Secretary at the time? Robert Cohen?

No, he was a democrat.

SPEARMAN: No, from New Hampshire or Massachusetts.

Q: We'll get to that.

SPEARMAN: Yes, because the number is unbelievable, from Casper Weinberger to Califano, you name them.

Q: Anyway, I am sorry, I interrupted.

SPEARMAN: It's a very interesting story. There were two other minority directors in higher education, the eminent Fisk scholar, Preston Valian, and the former president of the All Women's College in North Carolina, Willa Playa. So there were three minorities at that time who were directors in higher education all at the super grade level and all having earned their doctorate degrees during that period.

After 18 months as a result of a reorganization, Peter Muirhead, who was Commissioner of Higher Education, called and said I would like for you to take over all of our student aid programs, all of our higher education programs including student aid. This gave me approximately 21 discretionary grant programs including the massive student aid programs with a budget of about $2.5 billion at that time.

I stayed for 10 years, from President Nixon to President Ford and through two years of President Carter, at which time he introduced what was known -- and that's why we go back to this GS-16 -- at that point I am now a GS-17, then we were moved to the Senior Executive Service category. When I left the Department of Education, what is now the Department of Education --

Q: What year? What year did it become the Department of Education?

SPEARMAN: '79, I believe.

Q: In the Carter administration?

SPEARMAN: In the Carter administration. And Patricia Roberts Harris is now the Secretary of Health and Welfare and Education during this split period, and Califano comes in as Education secretary and Patricia Roberts Harris takes over the other "H" and "W" part of the operation.

Q: This is perhaps an insensitive question, but presumably you came into the Nixon administration because you were a Republican?

SPEARMAN: No, the actual fact is that I was a bureaucrat. I was simply a high level bureaucrat, but the determination -- I was not a political appointee in the federal

government. So I came here really as the direct result of academic qualification and experience in the field rather than any political appointment.

Q: So it's not unusual therefore that you transited the Nixon to the Ford to the Carter administration because you were a civil service employee?

SPEARMAN: I was a civil service employee, yes. I believe that when I was interviewed it had absolutely nothing to do with the Nixon administration. In fact, my political leanings did not occur significantly until after I was in Washington but had little, if anything, to do with my appointment.

Q: Did being a minority have anything to do with your appointment?

SPEARMAN: I wouldn't rule it out, but I think the fact that the programs which I had dealt with at Southern were directed toward the disadvantaged, toward minorities, I had worked with migrant workers in Texas, Florida, Mississippi, I had worked with the Outward Bound program, I was on the board of Head Start in Baton Rouge, and so much of the focus of five years had been directly involved, so I could not deny that being black or being a minority was a determining factor.

Q: The reality is that you were a deeply experienced professional educator?

SPEARMAN: Yes, I think that's -- you see, you asked the question what year did I get the doctorate, but I had already spent 10 years in the academic arena while earning the doctorate. I was on the faculty at the University of Michigan --

Q: When did you get your BA?

SPEARMAN: I got my BA in 1947 from Florida A&M. I was 18 years of age. I took a master's at Michigan at 21 years of age and returned to Florida for four years where I taught as a lecturer and an instructor in psychology. I then went back to the University of Michigan. A part of this life that does not show itself is that for three years I was a therapist at the University of Michigan Children's Psychiatric Hospital working with severely disturbed children and also a lecturer in the School of Education at the University. So 10 years had passed between the time I took my master's degree and the time I took my --

Q: And you took your master's in what year?

SPEARMAN: I took my master's in 1950 and returned to the university in 1954. I completed my doctorate while I was working with a family with three children, and I did a Ph.D. thesis at the University of Michigan and then went to Southern University.

Q: What was the title of your dissertation?

SPEARMAN: A Profile Analysis Technique for Diagnosing Severe Reading Disability.

Q: That's extremely interesting. Now you left the Carter administration in 1979?

SPEARMAN: 1980 to be exact. I left the Carter administration in 1980 and on to Texas Southern as President of Texas Southern University where I remained.

Q: Was this the first time you had been solicited as a potential university president?

SPEARMAN: No, I suppose I had -- I am flattered, but let's see, I was asked to consider any number of presidencies prior to Texas Southern. I hesitate to mention names of institutions.

Q: Why don't you?

SPEARMAN: Well, at one point Tennessee State made very strong overtures toward me, Shaw University, Savannah State College, one of the institutions of part of the University of California system had asked me. I have been offered at least five or six presidencies.

Q: Why did you choose Texas Southern?

SPEARMAN: I think in 1980, my disenchantment with the federal government had reached an apex. I came to the -- I felt that in 1970 when I arrived in Washington, there was a moment of high creativity operating in the federal government, and those of us who ran programs had a chance for a great deal of input.

By 1977 or '78, we had become a completely legalistic organization, and every "i" that was dotted, every "t" that was crossed, had to be legally approved, and that was just stifling of intellectual people. It was not so much money, it was not so much the salary, even though the salaries were low. People were beginning to say, I can't take this lack of -- that is, people with an academic background who were not born into the bureaucracy began to feel stifled. And so I began to respond more aggressively, I suspect. The offers had occurred prior to that, and I had passed them over.

But all of a sudden a very distinguished elderly gentleman from Texas walked into my office. His name was Ernest Sterling, and he was Chairman of the Board. Rumor has it that he was very wealthy but in terms of a self made man and so forth. I listened to him very carefully about the needs of Texas Southern University, its location in Houston, and he said we need you. And I said, well, let me discuss this with my wife and with my family and see what happens. I accepted the position in a short period of time and went to Texas.

Q: So you became president of Texas Southern University --

SPEARMAN: July 1, 1980.

Q: What kinds of problems did you see when you went to the university?

SPEARMAN: Well, Texas Southern at that point was in the midst of strong civil rights issues as most Historically Black Colleges were involved. Texas Southern had been neglected by the State of Texas. Texas Southern was founded after most of your Historical Black Colleges. I'm not sure that you know that Texas Southern was founded in 1947.

Q: No.

SPEARMAN: And it has been called "The House that Sweat Built" because there was a black man named Human Sweat who applied for law school at the University of Texas. Through a series of actions on the part of the University of Texas to keep Human Sweat out and finally to permit him to take classes alone with teachers coming to him, the State of Texas decided to solve the problem of black folks by creating a university. And they said it will be a university of the first kind. We will offer pharmacy and engineering and law and all of the sorts of things that were clearly pie-in-the-sky promises. And after having created it and its enrollment having expanded tremendously, there was this period of neglect.

Q: How many students when you came?

SPEARMAN: When I came to Texas Southern University, there were 9,600 students. In fact, at that point it was the largest single campus, state-supported institution in the United States with one-third of its students basically from foreign countries, and most of these were from Africa or Iran.

Texas Southern had been a victim of state neglect on the one hand and a failure to provide competent management in some instances on the other. I came to Texas in 1980 and embarked on a number of issues to reshape education at Texas Southern University.

The governor of the state was Bill Clements at that time, and Governor Clements appointed me to a blue ribbon panel of four people to deal with the civil rights issues. This was an extraordinarily tricky assignment because it dealt with representing both Texas Southern and Prairie View. I guess my strongest ally in this was a black woman who was in the Texas state legislature named Wilhelmina Delco.

Although a Democrat, Wilhelmina was interested in Prairie View having a greater stake in the Permanent University Fund which everybody knows provides millions of dollars each year to the coffers of the University of Texas and Texas A&M. Prairie View was this isolated little black college over here that was a part of the A&M system but was not a recipient of the goodies that were part of the state coffers, and Texas Southern was the independent institution. So as a result of this action, I think we made great progress in improving both salaries, physical facilities, image, and so forth. And for the next seven

and a half years, I think that the campus of Texas Southern University changed, the faculty's morale certainly increased considerably, the students sought in record numbers attendance at Texas Southern University. So I had a great time.

Q: This is a moment that we ought to record for history. You have modestly pointed to achievements. Let's be specific.

SPEARMAN: I suppose if I had to list --

Q: Your achievements?

SPEARMAN: Well, I think two or three things occurred at Texas Southern University. I think the facade of the campus completely changed as a result of our work at Texas Southern University. More buildings were constructed during that period, renovations occurred, the interior of the campus was completely modified. Academically our law school became accredited during my administration.

Our school of pharmacy not only regained its accreditation but was expanded to include the offer of a doctor's degree in pharmacy. We became the third historically black institution to receive accreditation for the Master's Degree in Business Administration outside of Howard and North Carolina AMT during that period. Our School of Education was accredited. We submitted the first clean audit to the State of Texas that had been submitted in 10 years.

Q: What is a clean audit?

SPEARMAN: A clean audit means you have balanced your books and you can account for all of the funds that you have received and expended. Every year of my presidency from the first year, the state applauded Texas Southern as having met all of the state requirements in terms of providing an up-to-date audit.

Q: Were you able to increase the number of PhDs?

SPEARMAN: Yes, we increased the number of PhDs . We also increased the salary both at the base level of our PhDs and at the clerical and support level. I suspect that was the thing that increased my popularity more than the faculty, that secretaries and janitors were able to –

Q: Were you able to establish an endowment?

SPEARMAN: Yes, but very small. Here again it's extraordinarily difficult. Texas Southern was 35 years old when I was president; Howard is 120; Florida is 100. Any of the institutions, even Coppin State, where I currently work, is 100 years old this coming year. When you have an institution which is an inner city school and most of its students come directly from Houston, when you say you were able to establish an endowment, it's

a modest effort when you compare this to where you have a long list of alumni and supporters. But during that administration, we established a chair in the School of Business funded by TENECO. The radio stations, the television stations united behind my administration as well as the state representatives, the Texas legislature. I think more than any other president in its history, I probably had greater support from the governor on down. I think I may have been the first president in which the governor of the state delivered a key note address on its campus.

Q: Well, you know, I'm very grateful that we're having this discussion because it provides insight into the types of qualities that were perceived when the Reagan administration began thinking about choosing ambassadors and so forth. You must have then been a prize choice for them given your background?

SPEARMAN: Well, I think there were perhaps three things that elevated me to the attention of the Reagan administration. I think the first has to be credited to George Bush who I had known for a long time and incidentally whom I had supported for the presidency when he was running against Reagan, as you would expect, we were Texans, we were solidly behind him. But he had never lost the relationship with me, and my first commencement speaker for Texas Southern was George Bush, and he does hold an honorary doctorate degree from Texas Southern University.

Q: Wonderful.

SPEARMAN: I think George Bush kept in contact with me and I kept in contact with him, and when he and his lovely life Barbara visited Houston, my wife and I were often part of their company. And so we watched the Bushes grow, the older Bushes, but we watched the children, the Bush children, in a sense grow up and became to some extent familiar with them. We even flew with Barbara and President Bush to the launching of the nuclear attack sub, "Houston." So I have had a number of opportunities to visit with him.

There were two other factors. If we're leading to the issue of why the ambassador's appointment, there were several things that occurred. When I was in the federal government, most people did not know that Ford had sent me to Asia to interview troops in both Japan and Guam and to help shape legislation to provide for education of these soldiers upon their return. And if you recall that war, many of the blacks were ill-trained in the Vietnamese conflict.

Q: Ill-trained or ill-educated?

SPEARMAN: Ill-educated, period. And so Sidney Marlin and I undertook the responsibility of looking at these troops and talking with them and their commanding officers and trying to find out what kind of programs we could put into the federal government.

Q: This is 1975?

SPEARMAN: Yes, we're back in the '70s. I'm not regressing but I think it's important to know how you get to a certain point.

Q: Yes.

SPEARMAN: Secondly, I had represented our government at the UNESCO deliberations on higher education in Paris.

Q: When was that?

SPEARMAN: 1974-75. Thirdly, I had been appointed as chairperson of the International Education Committee for the U.S. Department of Education while I was president, and so the great picture with Senator Jim Bunning. He's a member of Congress right now, he's been up for the Hall of Fame two or three times, and he's a congressman from Kentucky. He was on that committee along with a number of distinguished educators and so forth, and I ended up having to chair the Committee on International Education for now the U.S. Department of Education. And finally, President Reagan through Vice President Bush's nomination, had nominated me to serve on the Board of International Food and Agriculture Development. So I didn't exactly walk off of the streets in a sense.

Q: You didn't descend from the heavens?

SPEARMAN: Yes. Now admittedly I had no idea that I would ultimately be appointed or even nominated to be an ambassador, but I didn't come into it without some knowledge, some awareness.

Q: Exposure?

SPEARMAN: And exposure. Let me also share something else with you. President Reagan had asked me to be on the delegation to the 25th anniversary of the independence of Kenya and the 30th anniversary of the independence of Ghana. The State Department had also sent me earlier to Egypt to pair many of the Historical Black Colleges of the United States with Egyptian universities in a research effort. So when this pattern of apparently isolated international exposures had taken place, it did not take away from the surprise.

Q: One might say you were a Bush rather than a Reagan republican?

SPEARMAN: Yes, I think that would be fair.

Q: Were you a registered republican?

SPEARMAN: Yes, but I was trying to answer the question about the 1970s when I

arrived in Washington versus the 1980s. At the 1980 level, yes, I was and remain a registered Republican, so it perhaps made it easier for President Bush because the line was certainly shorter in terms of the selection of individuals.

Q: You mean precisely that there are not that many experienced --

SPEARMAN: I mean that there are just not that many, period.

Q: -- black republicans.

SPEARMAN: As I said humorously to Governor Clements one day when he was up for re-election, "Governor, if you want me to have a fund raiser for you, two cases of beer and a phone booth would be sufficient to have all of the Republicans that I know," which is kind of interesting because the thing has changed in Texas considerably since those early days.

Q: We'll come back to that. So, when were you approached for the position in Rwanda which was your first African post?

SPEARMAN: Well, it's kind of an interesting story. One of President Bush's good friends, but also a friend of mine in terms of support who happens to be the president of a bank in Houston, we were leaving an affair one night, my wife and I and his wife, and we were walking along with our little black suits on and our bow ties, and he said -- I was no longer president at this time --

Q: You were no longer president of --

SPEARMAN: Of Texas Southern at this time. And this was in the spring of '87. And he said, "You know what your next assignment is going to be?" And I said, "No." And he said, "You're going to be appointed a United States ambassador." And I said, "Yup, and I'm also going to fly on the Apollo mission, and I'm going to do a moon walk for you." And he says, "No, no, I'm serious. I just left a vacation spot with Vice President Bush, and you're going to be nominated for an ambassadorship." I kind of smiled and said, "Great, tell me this is a good way to placate a warrior, the lone black Republican," and my wife and I just got in our car and left.

Subsequently Clements was reelected. My son went to work for Clements, my oldest boy went to work for Clements in Austin, and we called the governor, my wife and I, and said we would like to come up and just say thank you for employing our son and to congratulate you on your re-election to the governorship of the great State of Texas. The secretary said, "Oh, he would love to see you."

So we put on our Sunday best, we drove up to Austin, and we walked in, and the Governor said to me, "How is Africa?" And I said, "I suppose Africa is in the same place it was yesterday, it's doing well." He said, "What do you mean, you're not ambassador?"

And I said, "No, Governor, I live just south of Houston about 15 miles on a golf course." He said, "No, no, you've got to be kidding. I only wanted to see you because I wanted you to tell me about Africa, and I thought you were home on some kind of R&R." And I said "No." He picked up the phone, and he called the Office of the Vice President of the United States to find out what the mix-up was. And it seemed to me that my name had just slipped with all the things they have to do.

And shortly after, Ambassador, I have to tell you it was less than a month, less than three weeks, I was sitting in my office on the campus doing what we as professors do, and a gentleman stepped inside of the door and presented his FBI credentials, and said I am here to interview you, and so the process began. It ended with me coming to Washington to attend the language school, the Foreign Service Institute --

Q: You had no French?

SPEARMAN: As an undergraduate in 1944, I mean you know, that French.

Q: How did you find the language study?

SPEARMAN: I think this is probably one of the finest parts of the Department of State. I applauded every moment that I spent in the school, and while I did not -- I probably would not have passed the examination at a 3.5 or 4.0 level, I think that without it, I would not have been a very effective ambassador without having some clear understanding of what the language was all about from a speaking point of view and a listening point of view. I would hope that the State Department never relinquishes that part of its operation.

Q: I trust that there is no danger. The Foreign Service Institute is one of the best institutions for language training in the world. But we're ahead of the game here now.

SPEARMAN: Yes, I'm sorry.

Q: So you were nominated?

SPEARMAN: President Bush, then Vice President Bush, recommended me obviously to Reagan.

Q: This is '87?

SPEARMAN: This is '87, late '87, because it goes over into the winter of clearances, of Foreign Language Institute training, and things of that sort. When everything was cleared, I was standing on the golf course at Country Place, and my wife who never comes to the golf course -- she doesn't want to hear all the foul language and see how much we're betting -- came racing out to the golf course and said, "The President of the United States has just called you," meaning Ronald Reagan, "and they want you to return the call at

three o'clock and its two o'clock." So she didn't say anything to the people that I was playing with. So I raced over to the car and got into the club house-

Q: This is what month?

SPEARMAN: I left in March or April, so this has to be in a cold month like early February or something like that. Has to be in this period of time.

Q: So you raced to the phone?

SPEARMAN: I raced to the phone, and my wife said, "You didn't tell me they want you to be ambassador to Rwanda. Where is Rwanda?" And I said, "Well, let's get an atlas." And I picked up the phone and called, and they said just a moment, and President Ronald Reagan came on the phone. To be absolutely precise, it was during the time of the Bork hearings because I engaged the President in a discussion about Bork's capabilities, at which point he discovered my academic background.

I said to him, I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan, and if you had talked with me during the '50s, I was a Freudian buff. I read, I absorbed everything that Freud and Jung and Ranke did in this business, but by the time I completed my degree, I was no longer a Freudian. And I said our positions change academically, and I felt that the treatment of Bork was a kind of political witch hunt of an academic who has the right to change his mind. I don't necessarily have to agree that I support Bork, but I do have to support the academic respectability and freedom of an individual to write earlier a series of articles of which he has the right to change. My wife was sitting there looking at me saying, "You're talking to the President of the United States," and the President was sitting there saying, "I appreciate your comments, now what do you think about this?" So this conversation went on I'm sure much longer.

Q: How long would you estimate?

SPEARMAN: Fifteen to 17 minutes, I suspect. The tape will show that we had a very good conversation.

Q: You had not met him?

SPEARMAN: Yes, I had met him. Yes, I had not only met him, but I rather modestly will share with you that we were also his guests at a White House dinner for the President of Brazil. Again, George Bush had -- I was president of Texas Southern at the time. And so we had been to the dinner. I had met him then. I had also met him at a luncheon for the Historical Black College presidents. Did he know me? The answer is probably not. But the answer is I did meet him. I also met him when he was running for the presidency.

I would like to just share that real quick story with you. I think it's an interesting story. I was about to come to Washington, and I was at the airport when my assistant, Dr. John

Lash, called, and said the governor wants you to call him. And he said call before you get on the plane because he has an assignment for you.

So I called the office, and the governor said, "Yes, President Reagan is coming to Houston for a fund raiser and we want you on the program to deliver the invocation." And I said, "Governor, there are a lot of things that you may want me to do, but prayer is --" He said, "And there are a lot of things that you may want in life that a good prayer won't hurt a college president to deliver." So I prayed individually for all of the Republicans as they lined up, I prayed for Phil Gramm, and I prayed for George Bush. I did individual prayers all the way down the line because I wanted to be sure that the Lord heard our plea for this.

That was one of the cute little things, but the great highlight for my wife was the night that we were invited to the President's. I believe Jonas Salk, I believe one of the Huttons was at our table, and we had a chance to --

Q: This for the President's --

SPEARMAN: Yes. So anyone who says, "Oh, if the President invited me to dinner, I wouldn't go," would have to be telling the biggest untruth that I have ever heard. It was a marvelous experience for us.

Q: I appreciate what you're saying with regard to being invited to the White House or indeed being addressed by the President of the United States. It's a very special situation.

Anyway, so you were sworn in as Ambassador to Rwanda when, in 1981?

SPEARMAN: No, 1988, spring of 1988.

Q: And when did you get there?

SPEARMAN: April. Prior to going now, the entire family went to the White House. One of our colleagues said to me, the only advantage that we non-career ambassadors have is that we get an invitation to visit with the President and get cuff links while you guys spend all of your time studying to be ambassadors and you have to go straight to post. But the non-career ambassadors are invited, and so my wife and my three children all walked in, and President Reagan greeted us. An absolutely fantastic memory, the man's abilities and training from the movies, plus his own natural instincts are unbelievable. He greeted us as if we all went to college together, and with individual names and the warmth that was so evident of Reagan. But, yes, I arrived at post and I left -- departed for Kigali and arrived in early April 1988.

Q: This is 1988?

SPEARMAN: Yes.

Q: Had the troubles in Rwanda begun by then?

SPEARMAN: No. They started shortly afterwards. For the first year and a half or so, outside of some conflicts that had occurred between the Burundi Tutsi and Hutu, which left -- shortly after I arrived, there was an insurrection in Burundi, and that put about 100,000 people in refugee camps, and we had to address that matter immediately. And now this experience in the Foreign Service Institute becomes very important because the Germans, the French, the British, all of us were working together to try to address some very critical problems that occurred.

Q: Did you feel comfortable- (End of tape)

All right. This is the second iteration of an interview with Ambassador Leonard Spearman. We had to break off the last interview because he went overseas to South Africa in his capacity as special assistant to the president of Coppin State College where he is at the present time and pursuing his interest in energy matters. After South Africa, he then went on to West Africa, and we will try to pick up his contemporary activities later, but today let's focus on your experience in Rwanda. When did you go to Rwanda, Ambassador?

SPEARMAN: I was confirmed by the Senate in the spring of 1988 and got to post in April 1988. This was toward the end of the Reagan years, and I was asked to assume the post at that particular time.

Q: And you left Rwanda when?

SPEARMAN: I left Rwanda in December of 1990.

Q: And the troubles in Rwanda began when?

SPEARMAN: Well, actually they began in September of '89. An interesting anecdote on that, without boring you, is that President Habyarimana and I were both in Washington at the Grand Hotel, and there was a reception in his honor by the Rwandan citizens and the embassy here. During the course of the evening, Irving Hicks, who had served as ambassador on two different occasions and was Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, walked up to me and quietly passed me a note and said, "Go home, your country is at war."

I was absolutely flabbergasted. While there were many telltale signs that the conflict was brewing, I don't think any of us expected it at this point. The next morning, of course, I departed on Air France, we kind of bypassed the Fly American rule, and I flew Air France to get the connection and go straight to Kigali.

But it didn't work out that way. When we got in Paris, we were joined by of course the

Libyan ambassador, the foreign minister, the French ambassador. All of us were trying to speedily return to troubled Rwanda. We got to Nairobi, and Air France took us to Bujumbura, and I had to spend the night with Ambassador Cynthia Perry.

The next morning the Belgians flew a flight over and picked about 15 of us up who were virtually stranded. I mean, here we were generals without troops, separated from our troops and our families. So after a path was cleared, we were able to land successfully in Rwanda to discover that the Tutsi rebellion had marched into Rwanda from Uganda.

Q: You spoke of telltale signs, what were the telltale signs?

SPEARMAN: Well, there was a considerable amount of unrest among the Tutsis. The Tutsis in Rwanda are indeed, were at that time indeed well trained, well educated, but were really afforded second class citizenship.

There were two major telltale signs. The first, the Soviet ambassador, Ambassador Sakharov, asked me to come to his residence one day where he presented me with photographs of the unloading of semi-armored vehicles at Entebbe which were all pointed south. The Ugandan explanation for this was that it was in preparation of the summer bivouac. The Rwandan government under Habyarimana had very little confidence in the Ugandan government, so Foreign Minister Bizimungu approached me and told me that there was really evidence that there was going to be an attack.

Q: When was this approximately?

SPEARMAN: Oh, these events were occurring from February through September of '89.

Q: This is of '89?

SPEARMAN: Of 1989. I can recall vividly him asking me whether I would intercede on his behalf to ask President Bush if we would send a Stealth plane over to monitor. And I said while there is a very strong Texas connection between President Bush and Leonard Spearman, it is unlikely that I would be able to do that.

But what he was doing was appealing for help at that point. They were aware of the military power of the --

Q: "He" is the --

SPEARMAN: He, meaning Foreign Minister Bizimungu.

A third signal was my wife and I were invited to a private party at one of the President's homes away from Kigali. There were only three people present, the President, the Foreign Minister, and me, and our wives, of course. During the course of that evening, the President expressed grave concern about several things: one, the brewing pressure of

democratization on him to create a multi-party system; two, the growing concern about the Tutsi rebellion which was stirring in southern Uganda; and, three, a very real concern that the United Nations had not responded positively to eliminate much of the pressure and suffering of the Tutsis who were in refugee status in Uganda.

It was interesting because -- let's take the first one, the growing pressure of democratization. President Habyarimana was reeling under very real pressure on both sides. The West was saying create multi-party systems, create democracy, eliminate the green cards, and open the society.

Q: Green cards?

SPEARMAN: I use green cards here to mean identification cards. "I am a Tutsi and I carry my card" kind of thing.

On the other hand, his hardliners were saying, can't you remember? Don't you know who these Tutsis are? These are the same people who 50 years ago kept us in bondage and kept us suppressed and kept us on our knees and told us that we were farmers and told us that we were nothing, if anything, and they were the sons and daughters of kings and queens. So here was this dynamic president saying, I really want to respond to the West because I need your bilateral support in the sense of aid to our country, but on the other hand, I do know that these hardliners are telling me that the Tutsis are going to take us over. Well, he was nervous, he was not sure even of Museveni's role.

Q: Museveni?

SPEARMAN: The President of Uganda. President Habyarimana was a man on a hot wire. Every move he made to accommodate the West and democracy was interpreted as a weakness on the part of his own hardliners. So the Arusha Conference became an absolute disaster for him because he was thinking, "I don't know where to go."

I think this is the part of the thing, Ambassador Palmer, that fuels the speculation of who killed him. I mean, who shot the plane down? Was it his hardliners who said he's going too far, he's giving away the store? Was it the Tutsis who said we have got to do something? I think I grew up diplomatically during these discussions and during these crises that occurred as to the kind of philosophical, moral pressures that were operating in the society.

So there are those who say that Habyarimana was a benign military, not the --

Q: Benign authoritarian?

SPEARMAN: Benign authoritarian is the more appropriate expression. Well, surely enough, the conflict did surface. The Soviets had alerted me, the Soviets were -- I don't think that they thought that they would be involved in it. I felt that they were simply

saying, this is a western problem, and I don't know how to go to the Belgians and the French on this, and in a sense, I thought Sakharov was reading us as his closet ally to say something is going on over there and you guys are better equipped to get into it because our role here is limited. We train mathematicians and physicists and engineers, but we don't want to get involved in the dirty linen of armed rebellion.

Q: That's worth reflecting on just for a second, the fact that by the late '80s, the Russians had had their fingers burned here and there in many places in Africa, and I just don't recall that they had a particular policy. They were dragged into Angola, as it were, by the Cubans.

In any event, I think history would welcome your insights on how this boiling anger erupted. What was behind it? You said before that the Tutsis had this memory of being kings and queens and the Hutus of being serfs, of being servants.

SPEARMAN: Well, without pretending to be a Rwandan scholar, there are certain -- there were certain exposures and certain information that I was privy to. If you look at the society prior to 1900, the Germans were present. The hierarchy -- there was a balance here. The Tutsis said, we will provide cattle and military support, and you provide us with grain, and we'll try to get along.

Q: "You" being the Hutu?

SPEARMAN: Yes, you meaning the Hutu, and we'll try and get along. The Germans, of course, came in, and stayed until roughly 1915, and they began to paint the Tutsi as a superior group. Anthropologically, they had the thin lips, tall, the thin noses, as opposed to the squatty, short anthropological or anthropometrical types.

Q: The Bantu?

SPEARMAN: The Bantu groups. And so the Germans orchestrated this in a way in which there was this three-tier caste system. We're at the top, the Tutsis are here. And so the Belgians, who reluctantly accepted this trust territory, said, hey, if it's working for the Germans, let's maintain the same system. So the Hutus worked their backs to the bone to provide corn and vegetables and fresh fruit which were really taken off the top through their Tutsi representatives.

Q: Was it a feudal system?

SPEARMAN: It was clearly a feudal system. Some people claimed that the introduction of money contaminated the system completely, that it was a feudal system, but it was a feudal system based on mutual jobs rather than the presence of wealth per se. But when wealth and dollars, when francs got into the picture, the system of course became more and more corrupted.

In 1955, '56, '57, the Hutus appealed to the Belgians for equality and equal treatment. The Tutsis rejected their request and said that they were the sons of kings and queens and these were squatters and peasants and were condemned forever to toil the soil. After two or three years of attempted negotiation, the Hutus struck back.

Q: This is 1960?

SPEARMAN: This is 1957 through 1960, and please forgive me on my times, but this is in the late '50s. They struck back with machetes, and because they constitute 85 percent of the population, they virtually decimated the Tutsi population, driving them into Tanzania, to southern Uganda, to Zaire, and some fled into Burundi. At this particular point, the military role of the Hutu became more and more confident and ultimately took over the government.

Q: This is the early '60s?

SPEARMAN: This is the early '60s. Habyarimana, I believe, was the second elected president of Rwanda. Kayibanda was the first one, the airport in Kigali is named after him. And so there was always this uneasy peace. "We in Uganda are truly Rwandans, we are coming home one day. We want to come home."

On the other hand, Rwanda, the size of the State of Maryland, 7.4 million people, growing at an extraordinary rate of 5 to 6 percent a year --

Q: Five to 6 percent a year?

SPEARMAN: Yes. -- is saying what are they coming home to, what are they coming home for? Why doesn't the Ugandan government... Well, at first the Ugandans had welcomed them because Idi Amin and the others had capitalized on this tremendous brain power and prowess of the Tutsi warriors and military leaders. They were excellent teachers, they were good businessmen, and things of that sort. But now the Ugandans --

Q: What is the period here, is it the 1960s?

SPEARMAN: We're in the '70s now. The Ugandans apparently were growing a little weary that their refugees had remained a long period of time. So they probably were under great pressure to rid themselves. I would not be surprised that they were under some pressure to say that these people are taking our jobs, we want them to go home. They are really Rwandans. And Habyarimana is saying, no, I don't want you back because we are fearful of the retribution and the skill that the Tutsis have, and we are doing pretty well here, we've got a nice peaceful society, and everybody is in place.

Q: I just find that note, a nice peaceful society, what is very difficult to make sense of is the violence, is the hatred, is the extent to which the Hutus really apparently tried to eliminate, took genocidal action against the Tutsis. How do you explain that?

SPEARMAN: Well, I think you have to put both countries together. I think you have to put Burundi and Rwanda together. I think you have to ask yourself, here are two mirror countries, Burundi at the south, Rwanda to the north. In the south, the Tutsis were the dominant military power and the dominant power. Even though they were only 15 percent of the population, they controlled 85 percent of the Hutus in Burundi. Now, right across the border, this is a split territory, here is Rwanda, it's 85 percent Hutu, but now we are on top and the 15 percent --

Q: "We" being the Hutus?

SPEARMAN: We being the Hutus. We do not want that to occur to us. We are refusing to go back to a system in which 15 percent of the people up here will control us again. So there was this fierceness, there is this hatred, even though there had been intermarriages, and anthropologically you could not tell in many instances the Hutu from the Tutsi, but they knew.

Now secondly, it's very difficult for us to see as Americans the closeness with which seven million people live in an area the size of the State of Maryland, which means that there is no place that you can turn that there are not people, even though as you travel along the highway you say to yourself, there is nobody here, stop, just stop, get out of your car, and then 50 people will be there before you know it.

I turned over in a vehicle on my way to a golf course on a slick, sandy road. It appeared that before the roof could touch the ground, they had turned the car back over. It didn't occur that rapidly, but the point is, it was almost as if a wrecker, but it was a human group of men who said, ah, and I knew just enough Kinyarwanda to say I'm in trouble, and the car was flipped over. But there was no one as I turned that curve. That's the point I'm making.

Q: Well, this is an important point. The effect of demographic pressure, population density, and that thing where sometimes as in animal experiments you have species biting, fighting, killing each other.

SPEARMAN: Well, listen, here in the United States, an increase in violence occurs as you decrease the amount of space. What we have got here are people who are here together, who are afraid. The radio is the primary means of communication. Now a few zealots get on the line and say these Tutsis are coming back, you must destroy them. These cockroaches -- is the proper term for which they used to refer to them -- these cockroaches will take us over, they will maim our children and so forth. You must destroy them. If I repeat this on the radio village by village by village, and I have got this tremendous, as you point out, demographic issue of population density, how long does it take a group of 25 Hutu to destroy with machetes and stones an entire village of helpless people? The answer is it doesn't take very long.

Q: Well, we're going to pass on now to your next post. But I want to just reflect on the fact that we have just seen, as it were, tribal violence in Kosovo, we saw it earlier in Bosnia, and it's useful to remember that these types of killings have taken place here in North America, specifically vis-a-vis the Indians. Unfortunately it is a part of our inheritance, not to mention the 30 Years War and what happened in that period.

So you left Rwanda in December 1990?

SPEARMAN: I left Rwanda in December. I came back for confirmation hearings.

Q: You were assigned to --

SPEARMAN: Lesotho. I had received a very lovely message from President Bush stating that we had been without an ambassador in Lesotho for 18 months, and he was afraid that this was conveying the wrong message and that he would appreciate it if I would remain in Rwanda until a successor was confirmed because the war was going on at this point, and as soon as that occurred, then he would like for me to prepare to move.

Q: Who was your successor?

SPEARMAN: Robert Flaten. I came home in December, spent Christmas with my family and the grandchildren, and then in January we were off to Lesotho.

Q: January 1991?

SPEARMAN: Yes, and if we can think of the date in which the American forces, the United Nations forces invaded Iraq to push back the Iraqis, it is the same date in which we were flying.

Q: It was the launching of Desert Storm?

SPEARMAN: Desert Storm. I always remember it by that. And off to Maseru we went.

Q: Broadly, how would you compare, maybe first impressions, but how would you compare Lesotho with Rwanda, both of them being agricultural societies?

SPEARMAN: Well, both are small. Lesotho, of course, is more mountainous. Maseru is about 5,000 feet above sea level, and the entire country gets up to in the northern part about 11,000. It's rocky in terms of its terrain, less population density, only two million people in the entire country as opposed to seven million people.

Q: What is the size of Lesotho?

SPEARMAN: Roughly the same as the State of Maryland. But the population of Lesotho is -- I mean, the size is not much greater than the State of Maryland. It is located in the

belly of South Africa. That is, you can't go into Lesotho or out of Lesotho without traveling into South Africa. It is extremely influenced by South Africa because its economy depended on -- while the French and the Belgians had a great deal of influence in Rwanda, now I'm moving to South African influence, British influence.

I am moving from a Francophone country to an Anglophone country. I'm moving to a country with no television, and very strict rules of Catholicism regarding the conduct of women and young women under President Habyarimana to a more -- a little bit freer society because of access to television, access to local hotels, there were more bars and restaurants available, and while there was limited travel out of the country, people were able to go out of the country even though that travel was limited to perhaps Swaziland or Botswana or South Africa.

The National University of Rwanda was largely a Catholic, self-contained university. The National University of Lesotho was formerly the BLS, the National University of Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland. So the education of these people took on a little broader scope, and, interestingly, Lesotho had the highest, among developing nations, has the highest rate of literacy among women of any country in the world.

Q: Why is that?

SPEARMAN: The phenomenon is probably caused by the fact that men ritualistically enter into the mines at an early age in South Africa. It is kind of expected that you will go across the border into the gold mines, the diamond mines, the coal mines, to earn a living. After all, 76 percent of the gross national product of Lesotho at the time I arrived came from South Africa. So it was, "I hate you, but I can't live without you."

Q: Just a quick insert. It's interesting that it would suggest that the women had to be trained up, had to carry on activities in the country, which reminds me of the Vikings. The Vikings periodically went away and the women had to take on roles of the men.

SPEARMAN: It's the same. That's an important point because it's worth -- the students at George Washington who want to understand the nature of mining and so forth, or any students for that matter, to visit because these camps are extraordinarily complex and elaborate operations, with dormitory facilities --

Q: This is in South Africa?

SPEARMAN: In South Africa. -- with pool halls, with tennis courts, with everything that you want to see. And on Friday -- these workers must work two weeks rotation before they go home. Now I'm looking at the South African side because I'm looking at the men at this particular point. Now as unprecedented as this is, these men really have to struggle to get home with their money because the prostitutes are lined up on the outside of the place. They know when payday comes, too.

Q: I was going to ask, with so many other needs taken care of, what the situation was with regard to the sexual needs of the workers.

SPEARMAN: This is a big business out here. If you drive up to these camps, from a distance they look like a huge institution of higher education, except that you see the mounds and mounds of dirt that have been removed from the depths of the earth. And I fortunately have had the experience of going deep down into a gold mine a mile below the earth. South Africans weren't comfortable with having an American Ambassador down that deep, but we did participate in that.

Now you've got to get back over here. Here is the problem, because this is an important point. As the squeeze on apartheid and the squeeze on the exportation of diamonds and gold from South Africa --

Q: Because of the sanctions?

SPEARMAN: Because of the sanctions. Now you have a problem. The South Africans no longer need all of these workers from Swazi and Lesotho, and so between 1991 and 1993, I saw the gross national product of Lesotho that depended on South Africa drop from 76 percent to 51 percent.

Now, in the meantime, the women are at home. Sure, they get more education, they do the farming, they do the rearing of the children, they are primarily responsible for that. But Lesotho was changing. There was gambling in Lesotho's hotels, which is allowed by law but not South Africa.

Q: The South Africans ran these enterprises?

SPEARMAN: Of course, the Sun Enterprises is in all of the free states in essence.

Q: I met the man who is responsible for the Sun Valley Enterprise because he also owns casinos in Mauritius. I can't think of his name now.

SPEARMAN: I didn't mean to get off onto that, but the point is, when I arrived, General Lekhanya was the military head of the government.

Q: There was a military government?

SPEARMAN: Yes.

Q: There had been a coup?

SPEARMAN: Yes, there had been a military government in Lesotho. Lekhanya had -- General Lekhanya had taken over -- all right, this gets a little complicated.

Q: That's all right. He had taken over.

SPEARMAN: It's a monarchy, you have to remember, King Moshoeshoe. The prime minister was running the country, Lekhanya. The king kept interfering allegedly into the operation of the government.

Q: What is the period?

SPEARMAN: We're dealing in the late '80s. So the King had been exiled on one occasion, and finally they said to the king, you have to go to London, you have to leave. The king left, he left his wife, the queen mother, and a son, which gets very important. And I'm going to have to edit this thing, but Lekhanya was unpopular with the South Africans. Lesotho was also a stopping-off place for members of the ANC who wanted to get out of South Africa. South Africans had butchered in the early mornings thousands of Lesotho while they were sleeping, looking for ANC refugees.

Lekhanya militarily overthrew Leabua and took over the government and created a military cabinet of generals. When I arrived it was in place. Lekhanya is short in stature, not necessarily a very attractive man, but -- it's almost a contradiction. He was so bright that he appeared to be attractive. He was articulate, yet he had only worked in the mines, he had dropped out of school. He had traveled widely, he clearly loved music from the classics to jazz, could fly a plane, extraordinarily literate, and loved the social event.

Q: How did he get into the military?

SPEARMAN: Came out of the mines. And men joined the military. Almost every one of those generals sitting on that podium has been in the mines. So his ritual and now the person who succeeded him, both are graduates of the diamond or the gold mines in essence. And so you had this experience, you don't want to go back to the farm. In most developing countries, the military has the largest budget, and to be an officer in the military is of course prestige.

I made very good friends with Lekhanya. I got there in January, and we began to relate and to talk. Lekhanya came by my house and I said to him one day, "You know that the street that I live on, the American residence, is muddy, and therefore I can't keep my car very clean out here, and I have noticed that all of the other ambassadors have paved streets. Is there some reason that you don't love the Americans?" We got into a lovely discussion, and he says, well, you Americans are so rich, you can pay for your own street paving. And I said, "Well, I will only pave it up to the point at which I turn into my house." And so in a few weeks someone came by and began to put some gravel and tarmac the area for me. But we developed a very warm visiting friendship.

Q: What was the human rights situation?

SPEARMAN: In a sense, the military controlled things. We didn't have very good

protection of labor laws, environmental protection laws, but you didn't have a great deal of abuse. It was not like you couldn't speak out on television or you couldn't write articles. Lekhanya had been to the United States, and he had made a commitment that he wanted democracy, and he welcomed me to shepherd him through how do we get to it, to this process, and it was important to him that we move toward a democratic reign. But it was important to him that Moshoeshoe not return, because he felt that the biggest block to democratization in Lesotho was the presence of the king who wanted to run everything with an iron hand.

Q: The presence of the monarchy.

SPEARMAN: The presence of the monarchy, and so he was not popular with the monarchy. He also had gotten himself into a little bind because he had killed someone from his role as the military head. He killed a young man at a dormitory at a university and had been exonerated, but he retained the power of office. And so he was looking for redemption, he was looking for a way to come out of this.

But he had a strong team around him, and the people were upset with the team, and the military was upset with the team that included the foreign minister, the minister of finance, and one of his generals. And so I met with Lekhanya, and I said to him, "You are going to have to make a decision, General. Do you wish to stay in office because there is going to be a coup to overthrow you."

Q: You knew that?

SPEARMAN: I knew this. "You can avoid this coup if you will dismiss three people." And he said to me, "Mr. Ambassador, I can't do it -- I am a military man, I'm a loyalist -- until you can give me some evidence." I said, "It is not for me to give you evidence, it's for you to ask the question, but here is the moral dilemma which you face. You have a vision of a democratic order for Maseru. Are you willing to give up that vision or delay and defer that for three people? You have to make that moral decision, not the American ambassador. I am here to assist you in getting to it, but here is the dilemma. You will be overthrown." "Do you have any idea about when?" "Yes, in less than two or three months. So you have time to think about it, to consult with your family, and I'm available."

Whether he believed me or not, whether he became bullheaded and said I can overcome this, I'm not sure. But the records do show that I advised him. And he was overthrown by his own military. He was under arrest, he was taken to the radio station, he was asked to give up his -- he did.

He was not brutalized, he was not beaten, he was not placed in jail, contrary to reports that came out. He was treated with every ounce of respect as a general. This was in 1991, the spring of 1991, and I'm going to guess about April if my memory is serving me right.

Another general, Phisoana, but the military remained in power. It was kind of interesting.

I think that more than any other time in my diplomatic career, having moved from Habyarimana to Lekhanya and now to a third leader, and I was older than all of them, I think there was this --

Three military people. There was this difference to me. I felt like, and my wife would say, "Wow, they want to talk to you all the time about issues and things of this sort." And I think it had to do with the fact that I was older and the developing world's respect for the graying hairs, I think it was partly that. I think it was that they didn't think I had any ulterior colonial motive.

Q. You had no agenda?

SPEARMAN: I had no agenda except to try to see could we help you where we possibly can, can we get to where we want to go, and can I work with the other embassies in marshaling the support to get there. But anyway, the transition for me was not a difficult one even though Lekhanya kept visiting me.

But there is one little anecdote in here that I have to share with you. Lekhanya went away quietly across the border, and many of his older military people convinced him that the time was right that he could retake his -- well, he failed. His coup of coups or his recouping, as it were, failed, and Lekhanya knocked on my -- about 1:30 in the morning, my guards notified me that someone is on the outside. "It's 1:30 in the morning, who is on the outside?" "General Lekhanya." Lekhanya came in, and I said, "General, can I help you?" And he said, "Well, I've got to get out the country and I need your help."

Well, I'll skip a lot of the particulars in this, but we did manage to get him across the border into South Africa, and he is now -- I have seen him since then, I visited him two years ago. He's an extraordinarily rich and successful farmer.

Q: In South Africa?

SPEARMAN: No, in Lesotho. He has got a lovely home up on top of a gorgeous hill, and he's got peach trees, and he sits out on the veranda, and he has got a trailer sitting out there. So be it.

Q: In any event, the interesting thing is, at a certain point, the king did come back.

SPEARMAN: Yes, okay. We went through a period of time, and I became dean of a small diplomatic corps.

Q: 1992?

SPEARMAN: 1992. And in 1993, we carried out our first democratic elections in Lesotho. That was my pride and joy. I think if I had to look back at it, carrying them through their first democratic election in 27 years was indeed a highlight. The

establishment of an American school, the Lesotho American School and the Rwanda American School, were two of the highlights for most people, but from an education -- as a professional educator, you know that there is a certain amount of satisfaction you see in having 57 different kids from 25 different countries sitting in a class singing to you. It's a real warm feeling.

Yes, the king, back to your question. The king's son was the king. He was sworn in with all the trappings.

Q: How old was he?

SPEARMAN: 29. He was a frequent visitor in our residence and often asked me to come over to his. And the queen mother had my wife and me to her country home on more than one occasion for dinner and we chatted. She felt very comfortable talking to the Americans. She had visited the United States on one occasion.

But she loved her husband. The son was a reluctant king -- King Letsie was a reluctant monarch. Following democracy, following the elections --

Q: What month were the elections?

SPEARMAN: Elections were probably in February because by this time --

Q: February of 1993?

SPEARMAN: Right. Because by this time, President Clinton was in office, and all of us had to resign posts, the typical State Department procedure, and there was a critical issue -- the records and so forth, and they would make a final decision on it, and the prime minister agreed to abide by the verdict of this, I believe, three-country tribunal in essence. And they agreed that Moshoeshoe was officially the king to the delight of the son Letsie, and Moshoeshoe did return to regain his thrown.

Q: This was before or after the elections?

SPEARMAN: This is after the elections.

Q: The elections were for a parliament?

SPEARMAN: Yes, the elections were for prime minister and a parliament. They established a prime minister.

Q: Okay. And following the elections, there was an effort to restore the monarchy?

SPEARMAN: Restore the monarchy. Well, the monarchy was never destroyed, but to restore the king to the throne of the monarchy, the father of the king, the rightful king.

But they wanted certain concessions.

Q: They?

SPEARMAN: The government wanted concessions, I'm sorry, the newly established government wanted concessions from Moshoeshoe. "Yes, you may return, but once again we're going to tell you, there is a separation of the monarchy from the operation of the government. Please do not dictate to us."

Well, that was the problem. He would have never been exiled, but he had such powerful influence in appointments in government and appointments in the military and appointments every place, so it became extraordinarily difficult, that is, the perception of the government, that it became extraordinarily difficult for them to run the government because the king was running the monarchy and the government. And so they were in essence saying, do the rituals, grow the goats and the sheep and so forth, but do not deal with the operation of the government.

Q: This is extremely interesting because what the politicians and the parliament, the newly elected parliament, were asking, was that a king give up his traditional powers, authority, influence, hierarchical status and remake himself into a constitutional monarch.

SPEARMAN: That's correct. But he had a number of years to practice this. You see, Moshoeshoe had been elected as president 27 years ago. They had exiled him to Holland on one occasion. And so it kept going, going, going. This is an extraordinarily brilliant man, Moshoeshoe. His writings are superb. His legal training in London is phenomenal. This is not a I-grew-up-in-the-wild-come-to-office king. This is an articulate, skillful man who with a pen is as uplifting as deadly.

So the Moshoeshoe line going from the founder, he comes from a very distinguished line, King Moshoeshoe who founded the country of Lesotho. This man is a -- in American terminology -- is a blue blood descendent, and he is very well-educated, as is his son King Letsie, who is also a lawyer.

So Moshoeshoe is a threat to a military government based on mine workers, mine graduates, as opposed to the elite.

Q: But the mine workers would typically be people who had a primary education?

SPEARMAN: Right, primary education. And so his rhetoric and his pen made them extraordinarily nervous, of course.

Q: You say that he had time to practice becoming a constitutional monarch.

SPEARMAN: I say that only because Leabua, who was the prime minister, had run into

difficulties, so it was not his first time being exiled under General Lekhanya. He had been exiled once before. But when he returned, he always resorted to the same. Now, would he have done it a third time, I have no idea, because he was killed.

Q: The king?

SPEARMAN: The king. He was in an accident off of a cliff. He and the driver were driving up early in the morning. Whether there was fog, whether there was foul play, no one seems to know. Everybody seems to have reduced it to a sheer accident.

Q: And that was in what year?

SPEARMAN: 1996. Now, I'm out of there at this particular point.

Q: Looking back, I was exposed to people in 1991 or so who were very interested in the hydroelectric potential of Lesotho and the possibility of selling electricity to South Africa. Recently there has been a great deal of criticism of corruption in the awarding of contracts and so forth. Do you have any comment on that?

SPEARMAN: Well, the Highlands Water Project really began during the time that I was there. In effect, to be candid with you, I would try to get there early enough to welcome American bidding into the process because it was strictly a European contest. And so the Highlands water project began during that particular period.

It was extremely complicated because here is a country that is being suppressed by South Africa, preparing to award a dam which is being funded by South Africa to provide water into the Orange Free State to assure that there are no droughts, because Lesotho's wealth is the water in the northern part of the country. So a massive project began. I am not at all surprised that there are stories of corruption involved in this. After all, the selling of water is like the selling of diamonds or like the selling of gold or like the selling of arms.

Q: One cannot look too closely at the history of water in California.

SPEARMAN: That's correct. So the promises that were made that we would rebuild houses, build schools up in the north, for people who were being displaced, the opportunity, the insertion of controls to block off the diamonds which might be swept through by the water, all of these give great opportunity for hanky-panky.

Q: Speculation.

SPEARMAN: That's right, speculation. And so, yes, I have heard, I'm aware of this.

Q: Speak for a moment about diamonds. This is the great export of Lesotho, isn't it?

SPEARMAN: Lesotho has some diamonds, but there has been no really heavy diamond

markets identified with Lesotho. What they were doing when they did the water dam was that they had to develop some kind of elaborate mesh that ran through a certain area in which if diamonds were flushed out of this area, they would stop there. A number of companies have said that they tried to go into Lesotho to mine diamonds, but their veins do not appear as prosperous despite its close proximity or they would have pulled them out a long time ago to try to alleviate some of the poverty.

Q: But there is diamond smuggling, too.

SPEARMAN: Yes, yes.

All in all, it's been a -- I hope that I tried in my two terms' appointment to dissipate the notion that all non-career ambassadors are not well-trained, not well-schooled, have no understanding, are political puppets of the President. But rather, we took this very seriously because, in the first place, how many people get tapped by the President of the United States to serve as an ambassador, whether it is career or non-career? And, two, you represent the most powerful nation in the world, and what you say at a dinner party, what you say at a cocktail party, and of course of your conduct, when your wife's affairs translate into what America is all about.

As a black American, I began to understand a number of things. I was never called an Afro-American, I was never called a black American, I was called an American and perceived as such. Secondly, there was another notion that I think is important as you all put this together. I had heard rumors that African leaders did not respect black ambassadors because they felt they had no power to effect change. I think that's an abusive statement --

Q: It's not true.

SPEARMAN: It's an untrue tale.

Q: To respond to it very bluntly, African-American or Irish-American or Jewish-American or female American ambassadors have as much power as their ability. There are good, bad and indifferent, and that's the answer.

SPEARMAN: Of course, yes. I had someone say to me when I was in Texas, oh, you will be home in three or four months because you won't be able to make the adjustment. Well, here it is 1999, going into the millennium, and I am still traveling backwards and forwards to Africa.

Q: I would like to just stop there for a moment as we begin to bring this interview to a conclusion. You are presently the Special Assistant to the --

SPEARMAN: No, I'm Distinguished Professor.

Q: Distinguished Professor at Coppin State College. So what are those responsibilities, and how is it that you continue to go back and forth to Africa?

SPEARMAN: Several years ago, we created a nonprofit organization called Renewable Energy for African Development. The object of our organization is to stimulate the use of clean energy technologies or solar technologies in the rural villages. We are aware of the fact that roughly 60 to 70 percent of the world's population is without electrification, and the rural people suffer. And while a great deal of work is moving forward in India and Asia and South America, very little is being directed toward Africa in terms of adequate electrification. Our organization, with support from the U.S. Department of Energy, some from the USAID-

Q: This is a for profit organization?

SPEARMAN: No, no, it's nonprofit. We receive funds, we solicit funds in order to go in and train and to persuade government to embrace solar technology in its energy sector and to find more economical ways to expand this energy to rural areas, to increase education, to increase health, to slow down the migration to urban cities. Why did we do this? Because the SADC ministers, we met with the SADC ministers --

Q: SADC is the South --

SPEARMAN: Southern Africa Development Cooperation. And we said, what is your most pressing problem, and the answer was, the need for electrification in our rural villages. People are moving into the cities. We have a fragile infrastructure, we cannot take care of them. We have to do something. We can't get teachers out in the rural area. Well, through a series of grants since 1994, we have trained-

Q: From the Department of Energy?

SPEARMAN: From the Department of Energy.

Q: How much annually?

SPEARMAN: Roughly $200,000 to $250,000, depending on the year. Currently, I am operating out of a $250,000 grant with the Department of Energy. We have trained professors, we have trained NGOs or local nongovernmental organizations in the installation, we have modified energy policy by getting into the government, we have helped governments establish funding mechanisms for rural electrification.

Q: How much progress is being made in solar energy?

SPEARMAN: Oh, unbelievable, Ambassador, when you consider the fact that it costs between $15,000 and $20,000 per kilometer to extend the grid of those electric lines that run up and down the street. That's what it costs in developing countries, whether it's in

India, Malaysia, and so forth. The cost is prohibitive.

Q: Again, what was the cost?

SPEARMAN: Between $10,000 to $20,000 per kilometer. Now you've got to do this in a way in which you don't destroy the village atmosphere of the people. So big companies like ENRON have now created solar components. British Petroleum bought SOLAREX right outside of Gaithersburg here. Shell has gotten into the whole solar thing. ESCOM, the great power utility company of South Africa, has a whole section now, all of this since 1994, in solar technology.

Q: So in addition to being present at the creation, it sounds to me as if you have found a vocation.

SPEARMAN: Yes, I suspect that -- well, the Department of Energy and many of the people in South Africa and Botswana have now seen me as a forerunner of the expansion of solar technology in their countries. So the new Minister of Energy in South Africa has called on me, and for your information, I may have made this point to you once before, the ambassador from Tanzania was the former Minister of Energy in Tanzania. The ambassador from Botswana was the former Minister of Energy in Botswana. So people kind of wonder, what does Palmer do, what does Ambassador Palmer do other than be an ambassador, and they never know that you're an expert in Asian studies and Asian affairs, but we do have lives outside of diplomacy.

Q: Bless your heart. I know that you have to go and we're going to conclude. But just a few words about your work at Coppin State College. Is it a Historically Black College?

SPEARMAN: It's a Historical Black College that was created about 1900 for the primary purpose of educating women for teaching established by Fanny Coppin. Its president is Calvin Burnett who has been there 28 years.

Q: A distinguished educator.

SPEARMAN: A distinguished educator, a Washington University doctorate who has really identified himself strongly in Jewish-Black relations in Baltimore and in his ability to maintain a liberal arts atmosphere in a state-supported institution located in a troubled neighborhood of Baltimore. We have less than 4,000 students. We have about 120 faculty members, all of whom are extremely dedicated, it appears to me.

When I sought to retire and devote all of my energies to our new organization, Renewable Energy for African Development, and my wife and I had agreed that we would settle here in Washington, someone approached me and said, well, there's Coppin over there, and you ought not put yourself out to the field too early. President Burnett welcomed me with open arms and said I would like for you to bring your organization, Renewable Energy for African Development, headquarter it here at Coppin State, and begin to involve us in the

process. And so I now no longer write proposals for Renewable Energy for Africa, I write them for Coppin State College, Sub-renewable Energy for African Development. They were kind enough to permit me to continue to pursue this.

Q: Do you teach?

SPEARMAN: No. I lecture at the request of various people on the faculty who ask me to come in and discuss international affairs. I meet with student groups to talk about opportunities and careers in the foreign service. I host a distinguished lecture series at Coppin State in which Ambassador Palmer does not know it, but he is going to be my spring presenter. We do this with no funds.

Q: I would love that. Let me accept.

SPEARMAN: Ambassador Jeter has already spoken; Ambassador Marguay has already spoken.

Q: Palmer is different.

SPEARMAN: I know Palmer is different, I know that. And I will do a seminar on October 25, we will do a seminar at Coppin State on financing strategies for clean energy projects in Africa, and five African ambassadors will be present. And I chair the International Education Committee at Coppin State.

Q: Well, I would like to suggest that perhaps Coppin State and George Washington could do something together.

But let me bring this interview to a close by expressing on behalf of the American people our gratitude for you, a man full of years, who went overseas to difficult destinations, Rwanda and Lesotho, and not only comported yourself with honor and dignity and professional achievement, but as you suggested, did everything you could and successfully to demonstrate that non-career ambassadors can be just as good if not better as career ambassadors.

I would like to say, finally, that we the American people are delighted that you found a vocation in this -- how old are you now, Ambassador?

SPEARMAN: 70.

Q: Well, given your energy, you appear to be a much younger man. I think you should look back on your experience not as rejuvenating but as one that will open up new paths for you. Thank you very much, Ambassador.

SPEARMAN: Thank you for having me. I think what you're doing is absolutely splendid, and I am glad that I had the opportunity to share my thoughts with you.

Q: Thank you very much.

This ends the interview of Ambassador Leonard O. Spearman, distinguished former Ambassador to Lesotho, 1991-1993, and to Rwanda, 1988-1990.

Thank you very much, Ambassador Spearman.

End of interview