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

AMBASSADOR GEORGE M. STAPLES

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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INTERVIEW

Q: OK, today is the 27th of March, 2008, and this is an interview with George M. Staples, S-T-A-P-L-E-S, and what does the M stand for?

STAPLES: McDade, M-C-D-A-D-E. It was my grandparents' name.

Q: And you go by George.

STAPLES: That's correct.

Q: OK, well, George, let's start kind of at the beginning. When and where were you born?

STAPLES: I was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, on December 7th, 1947.

Q: Let's talk a bit about the Staples family. What do you know about them? How did they end up in Knoxville?

STAPLES: Well, my father was originally born in Oliver Springs, Tennessee, but his parents, they all moved to Gary, Indiana, when he was a little boy, and he grew up there. My mother was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, a McDade, my grandfather was an attorney there and his wife a housewife. My grandfather has a very unique history. For many years he was the only black criminal lawyer in East Tennessee. At the age of nine or 10, he left home and joined what was the Barnum Circus, which eventually became the Barnum & Bailey Circus, and he played the coronet in the circus band. The sharpshooters

in the circus taught him how to shoot. And he traveled around that way and eventually left and got his education.

Q: Where did he go?

STAPLES: He went to school in Chicago, became a lawyer there, one of the first black students at the University of Chicago Law School, came back to Knoxville, Tennessee, and began his practice. He and his wife, my grandmother, they had two girls, my mom and her sister, and had a very interesting and unique life together.

Q: Do you know anything about the prior life? Had they been slaves, or had they kind of come from the free...

STAPLES: My grandfather's father was a freed slave, and he came from Alabama. He moved to Knoxville after gaining his freedom and established a little store and a bar. Above the bar was where my grandfather went to school until he left and joined the circus. My grandfather had three brothers, one of whom died in a railroad accident. Another, my uncle Fred, his youngest brother, went on to become a contractor in Cincinnati, Ohio, a builder.

The middle brother, my uncle Louis, became a football star at the historically black Knoxville College, and a referee and eventually electrician. And my mom's sister, Mildred, who my sister is named after, died tragically at age 19 of a brain hemorrhage, and it affected my mom very much.

Q: Of course it did.

STAPLES: My mom grew up in Knoxville and when the Second World War was underway, Clyde Staples, my father, passed through town. He had joined the Navy, and my father grew up, as I say, in Gary, Indiana, one of I think four or five brothers and one sister, who was quite well known. Her name was Yjean Staples. She just passed away a few years ago. She stayed in Gary, was educated there and became a nationally know professor of linguistics at Purdue University.

My dad joined the Navy and trained at Great Lakes Naval Facility, came through Knoxville, met my mom, a World War II romance. They married and went off to live in Norfolk, Virginia, during the Second World War. My dad served in the Navy on destroyers in the Second World War.

After the war, they moved back to Knoxville and had me in 1947, and my sister was born in 1949. It was just me and my sister. And that's what I know about them from those years.

Q: Well, let's talk about what you got from them. In the first place, was your father – I hate these definitions, because they're so imprecise, but was your father white or African American or what?

STAPLES: African American, black, on all sides of the family.

Q: Saying, looking at you, that's why this thing is such a lousy way to classify people, but there we are.

STAPLES: Oh, yes. In America, we still have, I guess, the one-drop rule, and it certainly applied in my family. On my grandmother's side, she I had I think 11 brothers and sisters, and they ranged from very dark people to very light people. Her father was an Indian, full-blooded Indian. I don't know about her mother.

On my grandfather's side, he was light skinned. His uncle Fred, very dark skinned. And I think black people from that time, you found that huge mixture of colors, from migrations, from the post-slavery years, from intermarriage that was on the Q.T., that was quiet. You never knew, but everybody considered themselves Black or African American.

Q: What were you getting from your family about the pre-World War II years?

STAPLES: Yes, those were interesting years. I was born, as I said, in Knoxville, lived there until I was five, and then my parents divorced. My mom moved me and my sister to California, and we'll talk about that in a little bit. That's interesting, too. She was a schoolteacher. But as money ran out in the summers because she wasn't teaching, we always used to go back to Knoxville. And we would talk about those times, because one of the reasons for leaving Knoxville was that she didn't want us to go to segregated schools, as she had been forced to do in her life.

While Knoxville wasn't certainly like the Deep South, if you will, in Mississippi or Alabama, there was still segregation. There were still places you couldn't go. You had to watch your step. My dad would tell me about the days in Norfolk in the Second World War, where he would go to and from the naval base, riding in the back of a segregated streetcar, serving the country in wartime. I'd ask him, "How could you do that?" And he would say, "Well, that's what we knew. Those were the systems, those were the laws, and we all believed in better days to come." So he put up with it.

But the times were difficult. My grandfather, being the only black criminal lawyer, he defended people accused of very serious crimes, like raping white women, and he would sometimes receive death threats. As a little boy, I still have in my mind the image of a Ku Klux Klan cross burning in his yard. He sometimes had police protection going to and from his office. But he also was quite an interesting person and had a range of interests you might not expect to find in a small town lawyer.

He learned to fly, had his own plane in the '40s. A World War II fighter pilot taught him to fly and he had to go out to Knoxville Airport to take flying lessons at 6:30 in the morning because he wasn't allowed to take flying lessons or be seen doing that at during more normal hours, because he was black. He owned a plane and his insurance rates were

three times as high, because people thought that wasn't what a black man was supposed to do.

Besides being an upstanding, law-abiding person, my grandfather also, with a partner, had all the slot machines in Knoxville, Tennessee. And, as a little boy, I used to go into these funky little bars in the back where the machines were and help roll quarters and nickels and pennies and those kind of things.

But my grandfather was very well read. He was a pianist and he learned violin and had an opportunity to go to Italy to study the violin. But when the people in one of the conservatories, and I'm not sure what city, when they found out he was a black American, the invitation was withdrawn. So that didn't happen, but he was a very wise person, well read, and by all accounts an excellent lawyer.

He helped many people, rich and poor, and, in his later years, he even ran for office in the state of Tennessee, as a member of the Republican Party. He was very close, in his older years, to Howard Baker and other politicians. He was the father figure that I didn't have in my life after my parents divorced.

Q: Yes, what happened – your father really just disappeared from the scene?

STAPLES: Not in the least. He stayed in Knoxville, Tennessee and remarried years later. My father ran a series of little bars and small businesses. We would see him in the summertime when we came back to Knoxville. Most of his business enterprises and the little bars, they all failed, and I think probably the mistake of his life was to come back to Knoxville with my mother and try to get something started there after being in the Navy.

I imagine, looking at it from this distance, that he was probably very much overshadowed. He didn't have a college education, and he went back to the South with discrimination and limited opportunities, overshadowed by my grandfather, who probably felt my father was probably not good enough for his daughter. My father was in his own way a good person, but was not a major influence in my life. I did, however, become closer to him in later years thanks to my wife Jo Ann's encouragement.

Q: What do you recall about Knoxville as a place, as a kid? Do you recall much about it?

STAPLES: I remember Knoxville in the summertime, and going back there driving across the country. My grandparents ran a motel out on the Chapman Highway, on the road to the Smokies, and I would help them check in guests, clean rooms, mow grass, etc. Knoxville was a small town. It had the University of Tennessee, which was not as big as it is today. Football was still important. A pleasant place, nice little parks and places to picnic. I couldn't tell you much about restaurants or cultural events, because we didn't really go to those places because of concerns about race.

Being in Knoxville, just for the summertime, you had to be careful, because you never knew. Always, in the back of your mind, you wondered, will there be an incident? Can I

go in this place and eat or buy something, or am I going to be turned away? You just never knew. So you just didn't put yourself in those situations, if you could help it.

Q: Did you have friends there? I mean, run around with a bunch of...

STAPLES: No, because we didn't go to school there. We grew up in California. I guess there were other kids, but my sister and I played among ourselves, spent a lot of time with my grandfather, tagged along with him to see what his office was like and went to court a few times to hear him on a couple of cases.

One summer, he put me to work. He also was a real estate investor. He owned houses and built buildings and he was remodeling a building for the Atlanta Life Insurance Company. And it was a great thing that he did. He made me do construction work with his crew, and I got paid when they got paid and waited my turn to get paid. I had to do what the foreman said and I got to work with often uneducated men and women. It was a great experience, to learn that you're no better than anybody else and that others no matter their perceived station in life just might be smarter than you or have something to teach you..

Q: Did you get a feeling, considering the background of your family, that there were very definite class distinctions within the African-American community?

STAPLES: Oh, yes. My grandfather was one of the members of the so-called black elite. He and my grandmother had a certain level of people, the professors or the small business owners or the dentists, doctors, who they spent time with. Others like the bus drivers and the other people who worked for them they were cordial towards but weren't the people they associated with very much. My grandmother was always quite conscious of telling you who to be seen with. Her mantra was you're known by the company you keep.

Q: How important was the Episcopal Church for you?

STAPLES: Well, important for my grandparents, but not for me at all. I'm not – well, I am religious, but in a very different way. I'm a Muslim, but I never even started out as a Christian. I went to church with my grandparents, to make them happy. In Los Angeles at one time in the '50s, when I was going to elementary school, they had a system where your mother could sign a permission slip and one hour a day you could leave the school and go get religious education somewhere.

When my mom went to church, she went to – I think it was a Presbyterian church. I understand the difference between Catholics and Protestants, generally. But if you asked me what's the difference between a Presbyterian and an Episcopalian and a Methodist, I couldn't tell you, to this day. I don't know. The service is probably a little different, but the essence and the reason why someone decides to be known as a Methodist, a Presbyterian, a Baptist, etc., confuses me.

Q: In Tennessee, you said – was the whole family Republican?

STAPLES: No, my grandfather was but nobody else. He felt the Republican Party was best for business development. But politics was interesting and sometimes humorous. I remember one summer there was an election of some kind and they printed out these sample ballots. My grandfather would take one and he'd check off some blocks and say, "Here, Mabel." That was my grandmother's name, Mabel McDade. And he'd say, "Here's your ballot."

And I asked, "Grandma, do you really vote the way he wants you to?" She said, "Well, he thinks I do." I think my father was probably a Democrat, my mom and grandmother too. I'm an independent.

And he did one very, very good thing for me in my formative years. I think this, if we're going to put this on the record, needs to be understood. My grandfather believed that going to school and doing enough to get a grade didn't mean you were educated. You had to do more. You had to read the classics. My grandfather, his valued possession was a set of the Harvard Classics. My mom bought for me and my sister the *Great Books of the Western World.*

Q: This is part of the University of Chicago, Hutchinson.

STAPLES: Exactly. We had Encyclopedia Britannicas in those days. We had books. And when I was 11 years old one summer, my grandfather said, "This is for you." I was 11 years old, and it was a copy of the *Wall Street Journal*. And he said, "An educated man reads this every day." And he started a subscription for me to the *Wall Street Journal* when I was 11 years old.

Q: My God.

STAPLES: And he said, "It has the news and it has business and an educated man is to know both."

Q: Were you much of a reader, I mean, sort of on your own?

STAPLES: On my own as well, and to this day. I read everything.

Q: Do you recall as a kid any books that you liked or were influential?

STAPLES: Well, I read I guess the normal – well, not the normal, the Mark Twains and the adventure stories and things like this. But, again, *Great Books of the Western World*, encyclopedias. I would get up in California, say, on a Saturday morning and pull out an encyclopedia, the first book beginning, for example, with the "A" and for a couple of hours, just read, page after page after page.

I've always liked anything to do with ancient history. And I remember in elementary school I would read Gibbon, "The History of the Roman Empire," Plato, Aristotle, and

other philosophers. Elementary school, sixth grade, I had a friend down the street who liked history as well. We'd come back from vacation and the teacher would have us do a project about what we did that summer and make a presentation to the class. The other kids would talk about how they did this or where they went on vacation. Jeffrey, my friend and I, we made up a scale model, about half the size of this table, of Alexander the Great defeating the Persians at Gaugamela!

Q: Oh, yes.

STAPLES: We explained the intricacies of the Macedonian phalanx, the use and misuse of calvary, etc., and we were in the sixth grade. We liked that kind of stuff. Weird, maybe.

Q: Well, no.

STAPLES: We were a little different, but I do read, and we have way too many books everywhere.

Q: Well, you went to California. Where did you go in California?

STAPLES: We left when I was five and my sister was three and a half years old., We moved to Los Angeles, and that's where I grew up.

Q: Where in Los Angeles?

STAPLES: We first moved over near the L.A. Coliseum on Budlong Avenue, and we lived with my grandmother's sister, my Aunt Nan – and my grandmother's brother who lived with her as well, Uncle Calvin and his son Norman, Calvin and Norman worked at the L.A. County Jail, and they were custodians. And my Aunt Nan had retired. I don't remember what she did, but the house they lived in belonged to my grandmother's other sister, who had just passed away, who was an interesting woman.

I'm sorry I never got to meet her, and I don't remember her name right off. But the one who passed away, whose house we all lived in, worked as a wardrobe person in Hollywood. And to that house to visit her, because they loved her so much, came Cary Grant and other famous actors and actresses. I think it was Gary Cooper, I'm told, who offered her a chance to buy this wonderful oceanfront property that was absolutely vacant at the time in this strange place called Malibu, and she passed it up, unfortunately!

We lived in that house because we didn't have much money, and my mom became a brand-new elementary school teacher in the greater L.A. city school system. In those days, this would have been 1952, you started out teaching the furthest way out. So my mom in her little car every day had to go all the way to San Pedro to teach. The freeway or interstate wasn't in existence then, so she went as far as it went and then it was a two-lane road all the way to the harbor and back. And that's what she did every day to earn money to pay her share of the rent.

My sister and I went to the local elementary school, and we lived there four years, until my mom had enough money saved to buy a house on her own.

Q: Well, let's talk about that.

STAPLES: Yes, let's talk about those years there.

Q: Those years there.

STAPLES: It was interesting.

Q: Was Los Angeles at that time sort of divvied up into racial – or I imagine it was economic divides. How did it work?

STAPLES: Well, of course, my frame of reference was Knoxville, and for me Los Angeles was wide open. You didn't have to worry about where you could go or where you could eat or whether you could go to a certain school or not. I seemed to remember our area, where we lived, was somewhat integrated, maybe a little bit more black and Hispanic, but there were white children there along with Asian kids.

I had lots of friends and people to play with and in Los Angeles – I've always liked sports. And in those days, until all the way through the time I graduated from high school, and maybe to this day even, during the school day, one hour every day was mandatory gym class. And that was required from elementary school all the way through high school, even if you later in the day played a sport like football or basketball. I think this is one of the reasons that California produced so many outstanding college athletes and pro players.

And the schoolyard was open, the gates never locked, so you could come back after school and shoot baskets or run around and play, and I had lots of friends up and down the street, many good friends.

We had good, good years there. In those days, they still had the streetcars in L.A., and my mom and sister and I saved money on gas and wear and tear on our car, so on the weekends we would go to the movie together on a streetcar.

Q: Well, one of the things, and I think it's interesting to point out, is I think parents at that age were still turning the kids pretty much loose.

STAPLES: Oh, yes.

Q: They'd say, "Dinner will be at such-and-such a time. Now get out of the house."

STAPLES: Oh, absolutely. And other parents would sort of – the only time I ever saw it like that was my second assignment in the Foreign Service, we were in Montevideo and

we had our daughter Catherine with us. And the kids would go out to play and a parent would wander out and watch the kids and another one would come out and it was the same kind of thing in Los Angeles in those years. You could feel free. The idea of someone coming along and kidnapping a child, who could imagine something like that?

Q: And so if you're an adult and a kid was misbehaving, any kid was misbehaving, you'd say, "Hey, don't do that."

STAPLES: Sure. Or whoever it was would come out and grab you and stop you. It never happened to me, but I saw it – and march you up to your parents' house and that parent wouldn't say, "I'm going to sue you," they'd say "Thank you," and appreciate it, and "if I can do anything for you," or "would you like to stay and join us for dinner?" Or a parent would even – there were people up and down that street who would say things like, "We hear you're a good student and you like to read. What are you studying?" And they'd spend time and talk to you and exchange views with you, and that was nice.

Q: Oh, I know. I recall as a kid, I was a great reader and our next door neighbor and my best friend, his mother asked me if I'd read and help him get interested in reading, which I did.

STAPLES: Right.

Q: How about movies? What sort of movies? Do you recall any movies that really impressed you?

STAPLES: All Walt Disney movies and anything to do with World War II. I liked the combat movies and the bombing movies and adventure stories, *Robinson Crusoe*-type stuff, anything like that. And always a good mystery movie.

Q: I used to sit on my behind and wiggle all during the Bette Davis movies, but I saw them all.

STAPLES: I always liked a mystery, and, in fact, that's what I read a lot to day, adventures and mystery stories. In my later years in the State Department, nothing serious, thank you. I liked to escape. Even as a kid I liked to escape to a different world.

Q: Had you gotten a pretty good idea of geography from your reading?

STAPLES: Absolutely! Geography was taught in school and you were tested on it. And, in fact, my parents, my mom, bought me an atlas at an early age and encouraged us to read all the time about different places in the world. Speaking of reading, I'm told I could read when I was three. My mom said it drove her crazy, but being the good teacher, she would teach us our letters and alphabet, and she would encourage us in the car to read signs.

So I'd say, "Lucky Strikes," and my sister would read what she saw, and it must have driven mom crazy, but we were shouting out the words we knew on the signs. On geography, we would play state capitals. OK, what's the capital of Idaho, what's this or that? And whoever got them all right would get a little candy. She taught us that way. And she bought us this game I remember that had plastic snap on pieces in the shape of the states so you had to put them in the right places to form the US. We had a globe. We had a world map. My grandfather would do this game – not a game, but I guess he was elderly and in his 70s or so. And his health was failing and he lay on the bed and I'd sit with him. We'd talk about things and he'd say, well, "Georgie," – he called me "Georgie." "What's the capital of Greece?" I'd say, "Athens." He'd say, "OK, who are the people who live there?" I'd say, "Athenians, Grandpa." He'd say, "What were they known for, what did they do? Who was their great rival?" "Sparta."

"Well, did they have a conflict about plays, about fishing or whatever?" I said, "No, they fought." "Where did they fight?" I said, "Well, all the time, and then they fought each other really seriously." "Oh, really? It was a war, wasn't it?" "Right." "What was the name of it?" "Peloponnesian War." "Why did they call it Peloponnesian?" "Well, that was a part of Greece." That's what we'd do, and we had great discussions with my mother and grandparents.

Q: I've got to stop here for a second.

(END FILE)

Q: How were the Mexicans treated at that time? The Hispanics, but they're mostly Mexican American. Was there much division there?

STAPLES: In Los Angeles in those years? Not really that I remember at all, among anybody. No one that I remember – maybe these are child's memories, but I don't remember people being mistreated.

Q: I was just wondering because of the language and all, but I guess the kids were pretty well speaking English.

STAPLES: Yes, you spoke English. I don't remember, we didn't have bilingual education or anything like that in those days. So I don't remember that. I remember differences and sometimes gang-related activity in high school, and you had certain areas of Los Angeles, like East L.A. was Hispanic.

Q: I imagine – did you have a bike?

STAPLES: Yes, I had a bike.

Q: I imagine Los Angeles being flat, you could go all over the place.

STAPLES: Oh, you could, in the neighborhood and all. I had a bike, especially after we left my Aunt's house and moved to our home, which was about three miles away but in a totally different area. We moved, as I say, I think it was '57, to our home which was over on Westside Avenue in the Crenshaw-Leimert Park area of Los Angeles. And the street we moved to and the area we moved to was all white, with a few Asian families. And that's where we ran into a few problems, even in Los Angeles, in those days.

Some people in the neighborhood let it be known that we weren't so welcome on that street, et cetera, but it kind of passed over after a while, and we played with the other kids and so forth. But those were big, long beautiful streets, all with palm trees in front of the houses.

Q: What was the name of the area?

STAPLES: Crenshaw-Leimert Park area. Today, it's almost 90 percent African American, but in those days it was almost completely white. And the elementary school, the junior high school, and also our high school were integrated. We had a situation where it was just about one-third black, one-third white, one-third Asian. And everybody got along. Absolutely everybody got along. It was one of those unique experiences. You think, well, life should be like this, but regretfully it's not.

Q: Well, in school, were you the sort of kid everybody hated because you were the smarty-pants who knew all the answers?

STAPLES: No. But I didn't have too many friends. I'm not all that outgoing. People liked me. People respected me. The teachers really liked me because I studied hard. I got a lot of A's and did well in school, but I also played sports, so I was on the team where I played with the other kids, especially basketball and football. I ran track, wasn't so good in baseball. But if it was a game, I played it. I liked games that had the physical contact, and I was tall. I was I think in middle school almost six feet. I'm 6'1" now, so I shot straight up and stopped.

Q: As you sat around, did politics intrude or not? Were you sitting around the TV or something and watching news and things of this nature?

STAPLES: I remember in school we did care about politics, about who would be governor of California. We didn't worry so much about the national political until the Kennedy-Nixon election came along in 1960. Everybody followed that. My mom thought Kennedy was just marvelous, what we needed: change, a fresh face. About that time, I think I became interested in politics, presidential elections.

I don't remember who our congressman or woman was. We did care about gubernatorial elections in California, but that was about the extent of it. More than anything, I remember caring about international affairs in those years, because the '50s, early '60s, Cold War, Cuban missile crisis. We used to have the drills in school where you'd drop to

the floor and hide under your desk away from the windows. Today, that seems just so incredible, as if that was going to protect you from a nuclear blast.

Q: Well, you had to do something.

STAPLES: The radios still had the little arrow on them for the emergency radio network dial. We had an emergency supply of canned goods and a little water in the middle room by the bathroom, the place to go to where you could best be shielded from a blast. I always liked history, so I was very aware of the Cold War.

I followed very closely events in divided Germany. I very strongly believed that we had to stop the communist effort to change the world. I followed NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). I knew who the NATO allies were, and treaties. I remember the '58 Lebanon crisis, the Berlin Wall, and the Cuban missile crisis. Remember Herman Kahn's book on nuclear war, nuclear deterrence?

Q: We'll only lose 43 million, but they'll lose 62 million. Therefore, we come out ahead.

STAPLES: That's right. We will come out ahead. I bought into that. I look back at that now and I think, "Really?" And the idea of diplomacy ever stopping a conflict, of course not. It's military might that deters another country, or so I believed at the time.

Q: You went from high school from when to when?

STAPLES: I went to high school from '63 to '66.

Q: What high school was this?

STAPLES: Dorsey High School, Susan Miller Dorsey High School, named after the first female superintendent of the L.A. city school system. And in those days the yearbook still showed Dorsey High School with a big sheep on the front of it, because that was farmland, just to the west of us. It was still pretty rural, still being developed.

Q: Los Angeles always had this problem. I think they're trying to change it now, but there's no downtown there.

STAPLES: There was a little bitty downtown by city hall, but whoever went to downtown? It's a city of neighborhoods. It was the Crenshaw-Leimert Park, Baldwin Hills area, by the way, here the really upper-class/ middle class whites, blacks, and others lived. And then there was the area down by Inglewood, and Westwood where UCLA is located, Hollywood up to the north and Pasadena over here. It's a city of neighborhoods.

You got around on these marvelous freeways, and I remember growing up thinking that that was just so wonderful, so many things to do. But we would go back to Knoxville every summer, drive cross country, which was for part of the way the old Route 66. And we'd even race trains. Mom would honk her horn and the engineer would honk his horn

and we'd race along for a while. We would always stop at the Painted Desert, the Grand Canyon. But when you started getting close to Amarillo and then Oklahoma City, then you remembered you were in the South again. The laughter stopped, you had to be careful.

We'd get back to Knoxville and I loved my grandparents, but there was nothing to do there. We'd always go to the Smokey Mountains, the big family picnic, but I missed my friends and life in L.A. I think back to those times now, and I tell you, how could I have lived that way? The smog didn't bother me. The traffic didn't bother me. Here today I'm living in Pineville, Kentucky, outside of a town of 3,000, up in the mountains, and I'm back sort of in Knoxville. It's an hour and a half north of Knoxville.

Q: By the time you were into in junior high and then high school, the civil rights thing was going. You were in a way outside, you might say, the belt of this, but at the same time this must have...

STAPLES: It affected the whole country, and I followed the sit-ins and Dr. King and the marches very closely. And there were sit-ins and lunch counter demonstrations in Knoxville, and my grandparents let me know what was going on.

When we were back there in those summertimes, '63, '64, '65, you were right in the middle of it and there were college kids from U.T. (University of Tennessee) and from Knoxville College going further south to demonstrate.

Q: Well, how about your grandfather. He had sort of made a place for himself. How did he react?

STAPLES: My grandfather defended kids who were arrested. Of course, in the '60s – he was born in 1890, so he would have 70 years old, so he wasn't going to be marching. But he supported everything that was going on. My grandfather was a great admirer of Dr. King, as I am still today. My grandfather thought that once a year everybody in the country should read Dr. King's, "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," one of the greatest documents, I think, of American history. I think on Martin Luther King Day, every American should ask what has changed – I think, today, a lot – what hasn't and understand still why we have issues that need to be addressed in America.

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Q: Now, something kept me awake most of the night so I thought I'd quit a little before two and go home and take a nap.

STAPLES: OK, that sounds fine.

Q: How engaged were the students? I mean, did you find, were the activities of the freedom marchers and Martin Luther King and all this driving any sort of a wedge in your community?

STAPLES: If you remember those years, and this is something that I think every person of my generation who lived through those years had to deal with, you had what was going on in the deep South, a more subtle form of discrimination in southern California and other places. You had Dr. King, nonviolence, but you also had the Stokely Carmichaels and the Black Panther movement and on and on and on.

You had the influence of my grandfather and my father, who I saw in the summertimes, other people in the community who agreed, disagreed, this group's right, this group's wrong. All of that was floating around, and what it meant for you and what you hoped people could achieve, and I think all of that influenced your bigger image of America and what it was like. And also, right at that time came our growing involvement in the Vietnam War.

Q: Just one second here. OK, yes.

STAPLES: So those were tumultuous years in terms of defining yourself as a young person, as to how you felt about the country, felt about yourself, felt about Americans in general, felt about questions of race, ethnicity. Those were challenging times.

Q: What was happening to you?

STAPLES: Well, I was conflicted, and I think that was true for everybody. I absolutely believed that Dr. King and what he was doing was absolutely right, forcing people to take a real look at what the country stood for and stood for on paper versus reality, and finding where we were as a people in this world It was the right thing to do. But when you'd see officials set loose police dogs on marchers and beat people, there were times when you felt like the Black Panthers had it right. Just get a weapon and to hell with America and all it claimed to stand for.

But what grounded me and what also shaped me – I alluded to it before – was my school and the kids in it, one-third black, one-third white and one-third Asian, and we were all close, not just me and my group, but the school. Most everyone liked each other, our parents got along. We did things together. We used to have, and again I always think it was unique, my junior high school, everybody had to take music, and I went a step further. I learned an instrument. I learned how to play clarinet.

We had a music teacher named Mr. Inocenzio. He was Hispanic. He must have been a savant, because he taught anybody any instrument they wanted to learn. He could play everything, absolutely everything.

We had an orchestra, in 1962, in my junior high school, and we made recordings. We played professionally, junior high school kids. We had a jazz band made up of people who were called the Crazy Cats, and they would go and perform where they could in clubs, even, as kids, but before liquor was served. It was absolutely amazing, and he just inspired people to love music.

We had a school newspaper at my junior high school. I was the sports editor. "Staples Speaks" was my column's name. We just had so many things. I thought that was normal. I thought other kids had it, too, at their schools. I just didn't know.

Q: How did the Asians fit in? One looks at it, Asians, from my observation – I don't know if it was at that time – of really insisting that the kids study and all.

STAPLES: Yes, and that, regretfully, remains the stereotype today: they're all smart, all of them are going to get the highest ACT/SAT scores, go to the best schools, and they're very clannish. But it wasn't true. In my schools the kids played with one another, they dated one another. We had Asian kids who were on the football team, the track team, in the band, in the orchestra. Many had good grades, but in my high school, I think probably 98 percent of my senior class went on to college somewhere. The idea of not going onto a two-year school, four-year school, that was unheard for us.

We had the Ephebian Society. I was a member of that, which was recognized for academic achievement in the L.A. City school system. We had teachers who, in pre-college courses, saw that we learned how to take college level notes in the 10th grade. We had public speaking classes, we had debate teams. In my junior high school (I pulled out the yearbook the other day. I had it at home in Kentucky) we had 36 after-school clubs. We had music clubs, chess clubs, sewing clubs, debating societies, science clubs, etc. And the idea of somebody dropping out? Why, who would do that?

Q: Of course, this shows peer pressure, because this has been one of the tragedies of so many almost all-black schools, where boys dissuade many of their contemporaries from doing anything but sort of hanging around. The girls keep going.

STAPLES: Exactly. Honestly, it was our school, and we were in what was known as the Southern League, my high school, which was an all-black league, if you will. The other schools were 90 percent-plus African American. We were mixed, as I say, one-third white, one-third black, one-third Asian. I played football. We would go to other schools for away games, so to speak, and I remember we went to Jefferson High School.

We went to that school and we were waiting for the kids to go to the last class. Then we could take the field and start practicing before they finished up and the games would begin. I remember the bell rang and there were hundreds of students just walking around. I mean, we joked. Half the school is tardy. No standards. The kids weren't dressed properly, because we had a dress code in those days, too, in the L.A. City school system.

But I remember thinking, "What kind of schools are these?" But our teachers and we ourselves and our student organization folks, we would find someone who was struggling. We had students who would do after-school tutoring to help other kids. We took that for kind of granted, until we'd go to these other schools and see what was going on there.

Q: You mentioned your music teacher, but do you recall any other teachers who particularly influenced you? I'd like to just get their names in, since it's going to go out on the Internet and we might as well. It's a small slice of immortality, but let's get it.

STAPLES: I wish I could. One I remember in middle school, her name was Ms. Lefkowicz, and we called her "Lefty," for short. And all I remember about her is that she was tough, she would not take anything but the best from the students. If you didn't turn in your homework on time and it wasn't prepared properly, she would send you out of the room. And I remember afterwards that one time there was the orientation, the PTA evening where your parents came to school and you went to visit the teachers. And I remember looking at her and her room so forlorn and alone because no one had come to visit her. People tried to avoid her.

My mom asked me, "Who's your toughest teacher?" I said, "Ms. Lefkowicz over there." She said, "Let's go talk to her." We went to talk to her and she told my mom what a good student I was and so forth and so on, and I thanked her for what she had done, because she was tough, but she was good. And I don't remember the other teacher, but she was excellent because she taught us in the 11th grade how to prepare for college, that there would be no bell, that you were on your own, you had to set standards, you had to be organized. And she taught us how to take notes and how to do it in an outline form, and she taught us how to write for college. This is in the 10th or 11th grade, how to do correct papers. And sometimes we would have student teachers from USC (University of Southern California) who would come over and explain what college was like and what we could do to prepare.

I just remember that we had lots of people who taught us how to succeed after high school. And the idea of just getting a grade never occurred to me. You wanted to learn. The grade was secondary. You wanted to learn and do well.

Q: What about dating during your time in high school?

STAPLES: I had a few dates here and there, but nothing really serious and the problem was mainly financial and physical, physical in the sense of I didn't have a car in Los Angeles. That was a limiting factor, and the reason for it was my mom could only afford one car. I had a driver's license, but I never got a car until after college – couldn't afford one.

Q: I didn't get one until I came in the Foreign Service.

STAPLES: I went in the military and then got my first car.

Q: What about the attitude towards the military when you were there, and Vietnam and all?

STAPLES: Well, in my high school years, the military was still held in the highest of esteem, no problem. We did not have an ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps)

program in high school. When I started college in 1966 at USC, the military was held in high esteem. But around 1968 the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations started. But that's a whole separate story, if you want to do that, from my time in ROTC.

Q: We'll come back. But how about when you were in high school, and even junior high, did you have after-class jobs and all that?

STAPLES: Yes. For a brief time I had a paper route, and in junior high school I had a job in what was known as the Cash Math Society. This was for people who were pretty good at math, which is funny, because I stopped being good after algebra. But what we did was not only do our math class, but we were also the cashiers in the cafeteria. You did the cashiering, handled the money and the accounting, and then you got to eat for free, which I didn't need to do necessarily, but it was sort of an honorary thing. I suppose that was kind of a job. But I really didn't have real jobs until I got to college, and then I worked three jobs for three years.

Q: Well, did your mother, being a teacher, did she have a strong influence on you?

STAPLES: My mom was a huge influence. She set very high standards.

For an example, we'd come home and she knew we had a test that day and she'd say, How did you do, what did you get?" I'd say, "Well, mom, we just took the test. We won't know the grade until a few days from now." She said, "No, no, no, you know how you did. How'd you do?"

Oh, yes, she set very high standards. She insisted on absolute honesty and integrity. She would even ask us to help grade her students' papers, so we would find out what that meant. She had a tremendous influence on my life and she was the kind of person who struggled so much to give me and my sister a good life. My mom never remarried. A couple of men came along, but nothing came of it. Everything she did she sacrificed totally for us, to give us a chance and make sure that we would have a good life.

The worst thing I could have ever imagined would have been disappointing my mother or letting her down or doing something that would have been illegal or shocking or that would have hurt her. I'd have rather died than hurt my mother, so her influence was tremendous.

Q: Well, then, you graduated in 1960-what?

STAPLES: From high school?

Q: High school.

STAPLES: February of 1966.

Q: February of '66. Were you pointed towards anything?

STAPLES: Oh, yes, my family had the plan, the master plan. I was supposed to go to college and do pre-law and then be a lawyer and then return to Knoxville, Tennessee, and take over for my grandfather in Knoxville, Tennessee. I got to school, to college, I went to USC, which was expensive, a private school, not the public school, UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles), because, again, how life does things to you, UCLA I applied for and I had the grades and I was eligible automatically to be accepted and they made a mistake and rejected me. I got so upset, I didn't even want to find out why. I found out later, a clerical mistake, but I just went right over to USC and did an application and was accepted the very same day.

But the tuition was $750 a semester, and I could not therefore live in the dorms, so I lived at home all my years in college. But I went to USC, walked in the door and had no idea what I wanted to do. So I took general studies and I realized right away, I didn't want to be a lawyer. The law, I admire people who do it, very interesting, but not for me. To graduate, you had to have a year and a half of a foreign language. I'd studied French in high school, so I signed up for French, and my first semester at Southern Cal, struggled with French.

But there was a guy right next to me, and I'll give you his name for immortality. His name was Phil Loga, L-O-G-A. I'll never forget Phil. He was an excellent language student, and the walked in one day wearing this blue uniform and I said, "What's this?" And he said, "It's Air Force ROTC." I said, "What's that?" Remember that this was during the Vietnam times. You either went in the military or you had a college deferment, and I had a deferment.

And he said, "You've got to go sometime." The idea of getting out of it never occurred to me. You had to serve your country and it was just a question of when. And he said, "Well, if you're going to serve, you should serve as an officer." He said in AFROTC you get this great experience, and if you really want to become an officer the third and fourth year, after you sign a contract, they pay you $50 a month and you don't have to take a gym class. And I said, "That's great."

So I signed up and came to love it, and for me, I wanted a military career, which flew right in the face of the anti-Vietnam movement, and so some interesting things happened as a result of that. The other thing that happened to me my first year in college was I wanted to play sports, but I didn't have an athletic scholarship.

I played football in high school, which ended my musical career, by the way, because we had a marching band and you couldn't play football and be in the marching brand, so the clarinet came to an end, which I regret because I was very good in clarinet. I was first seat in the orchestra and the band in my junior high school, so I had musical talent, but I didn't pursue it.

So, when college came along, I went out for basketball, which I was good at, and I was able to make the freshman basketball team as a walk-on, but I could see the next year, the

big recruiting class was coming. My place, if I had remained, would have been at the end of the bench, so I quit and concentrated on academics.

And, for the record, in this day when we worry about college recruiting scandals and what they do to make sure the athletes are eligible to play, in 1966, before I turned in my class cards, the old, long IBM cards from which they printed out the sheet from which you paid your tuition, there was a coach right there, and the coach checked your cards before you turned them in. And he said, "No, you've got to take this back," and it was a history class. He said it would take too much time. And he said all athletes first year have to take this, George, and you too. And I looked at it, and what it was, was the History of Film 101, and so I signed up for my other classes, plus the History of Film 101.

Well, for five nights a week, after practice, you went in an auditorium at 7:00 in the evening, the lights came down and you watched movies so you could sleep and rest. And the questions on the exam were really tough ones (kidding) as to what were your favorite films you watched, and why, etc?

So, USC, 1966, made sure that athletes stayed eligible, and one of the courses was History of Film 101. And today we still have fits when we hear about academic scandals involving athletes at universities.

Q: Oh, boy.

STAPLES: At USC, I majored in political science, but what I really majored in was Air Force ROTC. I wanted a military career, and nobody but my father in my family, both sides, had ever served in the military. I'm sorry, I take that back. One of my uncles, one of my father's brothers, had served in Korea and actually had an illustrious career in the military in that he survived. He fought off the Chinese human wave attacks at the Chosin Reservoir and other terrible places.

But I never knew him until within the last 10 years, maybe, 15 years. So he had no influence on me growing up, but I thought that – remember, my Cold War orientation. The United States was right. We were right to fight in Vietnam. We can't let that country fall because the rest of the countries will fall, the domino theory I believed in it 100 percent. And, to this day, a strong part of me believes that a great country doesn't lose, that we should have gone north and defeated the North Vietnamese and their allies, and if we had done so maybe that wall in Berlin might have come down in 1979 and all those people who died in re-education camps and on boats, the boat people, would have lived and we wouldn't have the problems we have today if the United States had made sure that no one questioned our capabilities or will to win.

Q: So how did you find ROTC? Because I would imagine, I mean, with your strong interest in history and all, that you would find that sort of the ROTC courses weren't as challenging or not? How did you find them?

STAPLES: Well, I thought they were very challenging, because you learned about the military and I count my success as a Foreign Service officer and a United States Ambassador to my time in ROTC and the Air Force. It goes right back to there, because even in ROTC, as a cadet, you learn about leadership. You learn about respecting people who rank above and below you. You learn about organizing and time management, about meeting standards, about, even though you don't want to, doing as you're told, which is a good lesson in and of itself sometimes, about discipline, about self reliance.

You learn about the history of the military and how it works and why it works as an organization. You learn about the different fields, very challenging and technological innovations coming into being: new planes, new weaponry, the space race, new technologies, the whole missile field itself. So I felt that I learned a lot and the standards and practices I learned there carried over into my other academic subjects, which helped, again, get me organized and so forth. Because, as I say, to pay that tuition I had to work three jobs for three years.

Q: What were you doing?

STAPLES: Well, I worked at J.J. Newberry's in the stockroom as a stacker and a stock clerk. Then I went on to work at Sears in the catalog department. I'd unload the truck and then freshen up, put on a tie and work the counter. I did those jobs after school and on Saturdays, and for one year I also had a job in the business library at USC.

So I had all those jobs and my last year I got an ROTC scholarship that paid the full tuition my senior year. You learned how to be organize your time and how to study. I would study on the bus, going to and from a job. During breaks, I would outline my readings and then memorize my notes and I found in all of the jobs, and ROTC as well, you come into contact with so many people. And you understood or learned, maybe without even knowing it about people who were and the different walks of life from which they came.

If you just lived at USC in those days, which was upper class and private and so forth, you would have had a view of the world very different, I think, than from other kids who went to other universities at those times. But I'd leave USC and go work with poor people or kids who weren't even in school or dropouts, working in the warehouse or working here and there, and it was good to do that and to understand how you could relate and talk to and get along with and understand and appreciate people from all walks of life.

Q: Well, did USC ROTC have any specialty? I mean, were they preparing you to be pilots?

STAPLES: All kinds of career fields, all of them. The pilot field, as well as the non-rated, or non-flying fields. I wore glasses even then. My eyes were not perfect. I couldn't be a pilot, but I felt that the future was with the Air Force and that I wanted to be in the branch of the service that would lead the way for the United States as it confronted new challenges out into the future. I wanted to be a part of that and to have a say in how we

would prepare and fight our next wars, which shows, looking back on it, how naive I was, because organizations, including the State Department, are slow to change. We have our traditions, and the idea, as I found out later in my military career, that a non-flying officer, no matter how good you were, would ever rise to senior positions where you would affect policy and decision making, it wasn't going to happen, which is one of the reasons I left after 8.5 years, worked in the private sector, and later became a Foreign Service officer.

Q: Were you seeing any distance between what you were learning – you were a political science major. Is that right?

STAPLES: Right.

Q: Between what you were getting there and what you were getting from the ROTC?

STAPLES: Not really. The political science courses were more – a lot of it was history. Well, ROTC, you learned history. Especially you learned about the influence of the military in shaping events. International law, we also studied that in ROTC.

I had philosophy classes. I had classes on the technical side of political science, too, which I found interesting: voter analysis, voting patterns. For example, one of my most interesting things, I wrote a paper on it, too – I wrote a paper on the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), the revolutionary party in Mexico and its influence. I also did a paper on northern Europe, the Scandinavian countries, why people who technically were so close to each other, ethnically and geographically, but had voting patterns that were so different with parties that developed in different ways.

But the political science and the military subjects and my other subjects I studied in college were not that incompatible at all, not in the least. The difficulty with ROTC was that in my third and fourth year, the antiwar movement came in a big way to even conservative USC, and those were difficult years. We had to wear our uniform only on campus to our ROTC classes. You didn't wear it elsewhere. We participated in, as ROTC students, and demanded to participate in, different student forums that centered on the war, and we stood up for American policy.

There were efforts to remove ROTC from Southern Cal, as there were on other campuses, which we fought off successfully. And the only time in those last two years I wore my uniform anywhere else on the whole campus was to my graduation. We had our ROTC swearing in and commissioning that morning, which my grandparents came from Knoxville to attend. It was a great day. And then we went over to the big commencement ceremony and I wore my uniform to that.

I don't remember any boos, but I remember second, third and fourth looks and angry stares, but that wasn't a problem. What it did for me, however, was in a – I don't know if to this day it was a negative development or a positive development, but I was isolated. The normal kinds of things that college students do, maybe dances, parties, after-school

things I didn't participate in because, number one, I was working, so I left campus after my classes. But, number two, being in ROTC, everything seemed to have an antiwar bent to it, and so I just didn't participate.

Q: Well, did you get any feel for the antiwar movement? Were these, the leaders, sort of young people trying out their wings?

STAPLES: Everything. We had that. We had young socialists, young communists, sincerely troubled people who questioned the war, etc. We had flag burnings. There was a sit-in or two at the president's office and the police had to come in and remove people. Nothing on the scale of across town at UCLA, and we had people who were conflicted, like my sister, for example.

Q: Was your sister going to USC, too?

STAPLES: She did for a while, but she quit, and it was a big disappointment to our family.

Q: Well, did she quit because of the money or just lack of interest?

STAPLES: Not the money. In fact, my grandfather was going to pay her way completely, whatever it took to get my sister educated. She dropped out. I think years later she went back to school.

My sister is still alive, by the way. She eventually found work with the State of California, where she works today. She lives in Sacramento, but we aren't close. But her life's OK. She has a house, she works for the state, she's financially secure and has health care and this, that and the other. But we sort of drifted away in the college years.

Q: So you graduated, went into the Air Force. You graduated, this would be?

STAPLES: Nineteen-seventy, June of 1970. I had to wait a few months because I' started ROTC a semester late, because I didn't meet Phil with his uniform in the French class until I started, so I had to wait until the next summer. So June of 1970, I was commissioned as one of the few non-flying officers in the country that year to earn a Regular rather than a Reserve Officer Commission. It's the same as that year's academy graduates received.

Q: So what were they doing with you? What did they do with you?

STAPLES: What'd they do with me? First of all, they paid me! I got a check, my very first check, of $416.70, and with proof of income I could get my first car, a 1970 Chevy Vega, with the aluminum engine, and a black and white TV.

They turned me into a personnel officer, which was a great field, because you know everything that's going on with respect to people. So I first went to training school at

Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Mississippi, the year after Hurricane Camille had come through. So I got off the plane there in July in sweltering Gulf heat and took a taxi passed these abandoned, ruined buildings taking me to the base.

I went to personnel school for eight weeks, learning all about how to be a U.S. Air Force personnel officer. And an interesting time because I had some free time to myself and I joined the Aero Club, where I started taking my first pilot lessons. At Biloxi, the Air Force was training South Vietnamese Air Force pilots, and I got to meet some of them. Little did we know that most of them would be killed or exiled in just a few years.

After Biloxi I went to Hill Air Force Base Utah, my first real assignment and lived in the bachelor officers' quarters. I had a roommate from New Hampshire, Parker Dawkins, who was another second lieutenant. He was an engineering officer.

And Parker took this kid from L.A. out into Utah and taught me how to ski and do other fun things in nature. And the boss I worked for, Major Bob Keane, was a great outdoors man. They both introduced me to activities I had never even thought about while growing up in southern California. And after Parker got married, I had another roommate, Jerry Rolwes, who I admire very much and who has become a life long friend. I spent almost two years in Utah and learned a lot there.

Q: While you were in the Air Force, did you run across any discrimination?

STAPLES: No, no overt discrimination, so to speak. In fact, the Air Force was making a real effort in those days and in the '70s to do cultural sensitivity training. Remember, this was is the aftermath of the Watts riots, the King assassination, Vietnam War demonstrations. You still had the turbulence of the '70s. You didn't want that in the U.S. military. So, no, I wouldn't say so at all. I wouldn't say so. I got along with everybody. I had a very good experience in that regards.

Q: Did you feel that you were on a track in personnel that was limiting you?

STAPLES: Not in the least at the time. In fact, after Hill, I was going to be assigned to a NATO – no, I'm sorry, to Incirlik Air Force Base in Turkey, which would have been interesting. But before I left, the personnel staff called me up and said, "Look, you've got a great record." I did very well as a young Air Force officer in a first assignment. Hill was Air Force Logistics Command in those days. I was the junior officer of the year for the whole command. I had awards. I was doing good things. I also was a Little League baseball and football coach and on and on.

Anyway, so they called me up from the personnel center and said, "Look, we have a deal for you. We still want to send you to Turkey, but how would you like to go to Monterey, California, to the Defense Language Institute, learn Turkish for a year and then go to Turkey in a NATO job?" And I said, "Well, yes, OK, I'll do that."

So I went to Monterey and I studied Turkish for 52 weeks, and that was a wonderful year.

Q: How'd you find Monterey?

STAPLES: I loved it, and it's very interesting, because I later on had the chance to learn Spanish here at FSI, the Foreign Service Institute, so I could compare in my own mind the military way of learning a language, Defense Language Institute, versus the State Department way.

Monterey was absolutely fabulous, a great experience for me. The school and the way they taught was that you had a lesson in Turkish and you memorized the dialogue and you had to memorize about 30 words a night. And then you went to class from 9:00 in the morning to 3:00 in the afternoon, six hours a day. That was it. Or, with a lunch hour, 8:00 to 3:00.

So I would memorize my 30 words, and I'd do it quickly. I'm very good at memorizing. I have a photographic memory. Well, after about the first three or four weeks, my homework was done in about 40 minutes, and the Monterey peninsula is famous for Pebble Beach and Spyglass and Cypress Point. Fort Ord, around the point, had one of the best military golf courses in the world, and Fort Ord in those days – it's closed now. I don't know if you know that, but it's shut down. In those days, it was the advanced infantry training center. Everyone was going through there before going off to Vietnam. So what I would do is after school was over I would play a few holes of golf, then go over to Carmel, sit on the beach and watch the sun go down and memorize my 30 words.

Monterey was heaven. It was fabulous.

Q: I'm a graduate of the Army Language School. I go back. I went there, I joined the Air Force as an enlisted man and I came in 1950, and so from basically all of '51 I took Russian.

STAPLES: It's a great place to learn a language.

Q: It's a great place to learn a language and I used to get out. I couldn't afford a car, but I used to hitchhike all over the place.

STAPLES: That was fabulous, and the Turkish went well. I did real well. I graduated with a 91 percentage. This was '72 to '73. Yes, '72, we were starting to begin the drawdown of Vietnam a little bit, and the Army had all these people they didn't know what to do with, so they would send them to the DLI (Defense Language Institute). And I would meet soldiers who had learned German, and they didn't put them in Germany, so they stayed on and learned Chinese or other languages.

It was really a wonderful experience, but also for me a time of real tragedy, as well, in my own personal life. One night I got a phone call from my sister. My mother had died, a sudden heart attack. She came home and complained of chest pains and not feeling well, heart attack, went to the hospital, but she was gone.

I think that was about the eighth or ninth month of the program, and I had to leave there, go to Los Angeles, and we had to make arrangements in Los Angeles and then with her body fly back to Knoxville. My grandparents were quite elderly. You're quite elderly and you lose your other child, so we had to deal with that.

I had never experienced something like that in my life up to that point. I guess I was just lucky. But it seemed like after that point, for the next two to three years, I had a negative leave balance because my grandfather passed away, my uncles, a few aunts, other relatives, and about all I did for the next three years in the military was take leave to go to funerals or take no leave at all, or see about my grandmother, who was alone then in Knoxville.

After my mother's funeral, I went back to Monterey, but I had to go on some kind of tranquilizers. I felt I had all of these responsibilities on my shoulders.

Q: Were you married?

STAPLES: No, I was not married. What saved me, in a sense, was going on to Turkey, because I was away. I could finally be far away. I don't know if you want to move on to the assignment in Turkey.

Q: Why not? You were there from when to when?

STAPLES: I was there from '73 until the summer of '74, a year and a half, almost two years. I was in Izmir, Turkey, at the NATO headquarters, serving as an American officer working for Turkish Air Force Command. My supervisors were Turkish officers, including a Turkish general and two colonels.

I ran a financial operation with NATO funds that supported Turkish military personnel assigned to listening posts all over Turkey. I lived in Izmir, was rated by a U.S. Air Force officer, a colonel, but I spent all of my time with the Turks, and it was marvelous.

I'd get on a plane in Izmir – I don't know if you know Turkey – but I'd get on a plane in Izmir, this wonderful tourist city in the west, and travel to the Black City, tea country, green and beautiful, with my Turkish colleagues. We would have a meeting or go to this site and do this, that and the other. That evening we'd get on a plane and go down to Diyarbakir in the southeast – desert, hot and dry. And then from there, get in Land Rovers and go down to these outposts down by the Syrian border on these mountaintops. My rule, was whatever they did, I would do. Wherever they ate, I would eat. Little not so clean hotels, I would stay at the same places.

I met people who literally had nothing but would share whatever they had with you. And then I'd go to Ankara, Turkey's capital. I think maybe to this day – I've had some Turks tell me years later when, for example, I was in a NATO job with General Jones – I was the only American who had an unrestricted pass to Turkish General Staff Headquarters.

And our military attachés, Generals and Colonels at the US embassy in Ankara would call me, a young captain, and ask if I could help them get an appointment with Turkish generals because I knew them.

Q: This is tape two, side one, with George Staples.

STAPLES: So those were wonderful, wonderful years. And we had the NATO listening posts on Cyprus, as well, and I would visit them. In the NATO headquarters in Izmir, we also had Americans who were dealing with the Greek military living and working there as well.

And I would go to Cyprus, and I've been all over Cyprus and to the British bases on Cyprus, in my NATO capacity. And you saw what was going on, how Turkish Cypriots were being mistreated, even beaten in the streets for going out of their "ghetto" areas after dark. It was terrible.

Q: Well, what were you picking up with your Greek counterpart? Because I speak as someone who spent from '70 to '74 in Greece. This was not – the Greeks and the Turks, to put it mildly, particularly nice in those times. That's when colonels are in charge.

STAPLES: Well, exactly. I remembered so well, we never had any issues at the headquarters in Izmir. The Greek staff, the Greek personnel, there were over 100 of them in Izmir at the NATO headquarters, lived out among the people. They had good relationships and local friends. But, as you know, along came the coup in Cyprus and Makarios was overthrown.

Q: This was July 14th, 1974.

STAPLES: Yes. And, you know what? It happened just before I was due to be reassigned from Turkey on July 30th! Olympic Airways planes came and took the Greeks away, and those of us who were young American officers were designated to go into the Greek residences, or quarters, wherever they were, and pack up their effects and ship them back to Greece.

That was a sad time. The Turkish people in those apartment complexes were crying when the Greeks left. They were afraid that we'd have a war, but they were also sad to see people leave. I mean, the kids had gone to local schools together. They were friends. They were neighbors, and it hurt them, but the Greeks left and those of us in the military were quite upset about the Greek's behavior. Basically, a big Olympic Airways plane came in every Saturday. They loaded up all the things they purchased from the BX and commissary, shipped them out.

When we went into their quarters to pack their effects, we found illegal ration cards, merchandise that had been missing, had been shoplifted, it turned out. So we had to clean that mess up and get that straightened out, and nobody wanted to raise a stink because

both Greece and Turkey were very close to going to war. But I'll never forget, like you say, July 14th, because I woke up in Izmir and right by my apartment building was a minaret, and usually there was the call to prayer. But this time, there was marching music, and I said, "Oh boy, they've done it." Sure enough, that day the Turks had gone into Cyprus. The military action had begun and we were basically out of business. The Turks took all the NATO listening posts, which were pointed at Russia, and they turned everything towards Greece whether it would be useful or not.

At my apartment complex, there was this incredible sound two or three days later. The Turkish military was bringing up in pieces antiaircraft guns to put on the roof. Little boys went around in the streets and painted your headlights blue, because they thought there would be air attacks on Izmir. There was a curfew, and the Turks, remained my friends. In fact, the family I was very close to gave me this bracelet that I still wear, with "George" on it. They gave their son one with his name on it.

But over time the Turks became rather distant, because they were sure that the U.S. was going to stop the Turkish military from doing what it needed to do, as they saw it, in Cyprus. And my American colleagues who worked with the Greek military received similar treatment from the Greeks who were certain the US would help Turkey. My last two weeks in Izmir were not pleasant because of what I just described.

But overall, I learned a lot from this assignment. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to learn a language and use it daily, and to travel extensively to get to so many out-of-the-way places. I used to ride buses and I'd say something in Turkish, and people would say, "Oh, you're from Germany," because those were the years when the first Turkish guest workers were going up to Germany. They assumed a foreigner who spoke Turkish must be a German there to recruit more workers. They couldn't believe an American could speak their language.

I remember visiting Afyon, which in Turkish means poppy, with the fields outside the city bare to the end of the horizon because the fields had been cut, so all of these angry men were standing around who had no jobs, no way of making a living. But the Turkish government had agreed to do end poppy cultivation. And I thought about that when we talk about Afghanistan today and the need for alternative livelihoods.

Q: Well, what was your impression from your fellow officers about the Greeks pulled this coup. This was done by the colonels on Cyprus and they put a man who was just impossible, Sampson.

STAPLES: Sampson, I know. As soon as that happened, I knew the Turks were not going to allow him to remain in power.

Q: This was essentially like putting Osama bin Laden in charge of the government.

STAPLES: Sampson was a man who used to brag about killing Turks.

Q: I mean, was there – did you feel a strong sympathy towards the Turkish cause?

STAPLES: Again, I had been on Cyprus, inspecting the NATO listening stations there. I had been in Famagusta, and they had the equivalent of a ghetto there for the Turkish Cypriots, where if they were found on the street after a certain hour and not in their section of town, they could be beaten.

I saw a Greek policeman roughing up a Turkish man leaving his shop and people laughing at him. I heard stories of the two different educational systems on the island and the strict segregation and how Turkish Cypriots were not allowed to go to certain schools, they weren't allowed to go to certain parks at certain hours. It sounded just like the worst of America in those days, there on Cyprus.

And on one of my inspection trips, leaving checkpoint A and the Turkish enclave here and Famagusta, with all of that going on there, we went to one of the British bases. I visited both, and we were at the officers' club and it was like another world. You went in this gate and there's quiet and peace, and people were lawn bowling at one place.

But I remember asking the Brits about this, what was going on here and how people were being treated and so forth. And they said the Greeks hated Turks, but one day it would come home to haunt them, and it sure did. So I knew when Sampson took power that it was just a matter of time. Before the crisis I spoke sometimes to Greek officers who I knew, I said, "You know, I've been there and I saw what was being done." And they said, "Well, you don't understand what the Turks did to us historically. These things aren't right, but it takes time to get over the wrong that was done to us." The Turkish position was that they didn't want to conquer the whole island., just protect the Turkish Cypriots. And when the colonels fell, the Turks would say, and will tell you to this day, they actually helped the Greeks because the invasion helped end the dictatorship. So there you are.

Q: It was a very – I've gone to some Greek-American meetings, got roped into a few of those. The history of Cyprus, the present-day Cyprus starts when the Turks parachuted in. They will not talk about what they had done before.

STAPLES: Right, right.

Q: It's a real problem. I mean, the hyphenated Americans.

STAPLES: In 1990 to '92, I was the senior Turkish desk officer at the State Department, and the first thing I did, we had a little more money in those days, I took an orientation trip. I was in the Office of Southeastern European Affairs, so I visited Turkey, Greece and Cyprus. Those are the three countries covered in that office.

I first went to Turkey with my wife Jo Ann, who has been my strong right hand, a fabulous mother, and at times my most observant critic. She had never been to Turkey, Greece or Cyprus. So much had changed. In Ankara, I met with the embassy staff and

people in the ministries and so forth. My Turkish was still pretty good. I also went to Adana, Izmir, and Istanbul. In Turkey, finally, at some point, with a Turkish official in Ankara, I said, "By the way, how are things with Greece?" We'd talked about it, et cetera, et cetera.

Then I went to Athens - first meeting, second meeting, every meeting, was all about Turkey. Every official was obsessed. Thessaloniki, the consulate there, I went there. The same thing. You know, after a little bit of time, "What are the Turks thinking? What are the Turks going to do? Do you think they'll invade? Do you think they're going to invade?" I said, "It's all they can do to maintain what they've got." Invade? I couldn't believe the paranoia.

So the third stop, we went to Cyprus. We flew into Larnaca on the Greek side, went up to Nicosia, and we went through the checkpoint into the Turkish side and came back. It was a shame to see the economic differences and the division of the country.

But I remember at the hotel, we met one of the waiters who was really nice. Jo Ann asked the guy, "You know, do you think there's any chance of everyone getting together again?" And this man had been a soldier. He said, "Madam, I hope so. Right from your balcony I look and right over that hill on the Turkish side is my little house and I love to see it." He said, "We'd really would like to go back, and I know we can live together." And she said, "Well, if you go back, what do you think you'll find?" And he turned red in the face and he said, "I've heard about those animals, what they did to my property." And I'm thinking to myself, yeah, you're going to live together and go back and it's all going to be okay? It's so sad.

Q: It is.

STAPLES: It's so sad. And we didn't want to ask anything else like heaven forbid, "Well, why did it happen?" Oh lord, then you open the doors, and you just don't want to hear it. And on the other side, too. They have their view of life as it was, and I'm sure if you talked to their leaders you'd hear that nothing was ever any good.

But I saw it early on, in 1973, '74, as a young Air Force captain, and I had to leave in '74 and come back to the States. Again, another tragedy, when I was in Turkey, my grandfather passed away. I had to go back, take care of his funeral arrangements, and my grandmother was alone in Knoxville, Tennessee.

I had lined up a follow-on assignment to NATO headquarters up in Brussels, because, you see, I had a "master plan" which was after leaving Turkey I was going to go to Europe, to NATO headquarters, because I knew we had stripped Europe for the Vietnam War effort. We were coming out of Vietnam, we were going to rebuild NATO and I wanted to be a part of that effort. But I couldn't do it. I had to return to the States to see about my grandmother. So I got an assignment back here at Andrews Air Force Base in Washington, and I walked into a base that two weeks before had failed an I.G. (inspector general) inspection and the Base Commander and Wing Commander had been fired.

Q: I.G. being inspector general.

STAPLES: Morale was rock bottom. It was in absolute turmoil and here I was, at Andrews Air Force Base, working in the base personnel operation for people who didn't want to be there. It was absolutely awful.

The only thing good that came out of Andrews Air Force Base that was good, in the sense I got to see it, was to see President Nixon fly away when he resigned. That was it. But I stayed there 1974 to 75, lived over in Oxon Hill, Maryland, in a little condo. And in 1975 I was reassigned to San Antonio, Texas, to the Air Force Military Personnel Center. I really liked Texas. I got to stay in San Antonio from 1975 until November 1978.

I had two wonderful jobs. I ran the selection boards that sent officers to all the senior service schools like the National War College, Naval War College, etc. And in my last job, which was fabulous, I headed the Office of Officer Accessions. So all the second lieutenants coming out, brand new from officer training school, ROTC and the Air Force Academy, the non-flyers, I gave them their first job. And I got to say, "You are going to go into intel, or missiles, or personnel, or aircraft maintenance." And it was very pleasant in Texas at the time, where I learned a lot and bought my first little house, right outside the base from Randolph Air Force Base, where I was stationed.

Q: Had you met your wife by this time?

STAPLES: Nope. Now we're getting to the good part. It's 1978 and the military is in this drawdown, post-Vietnam era, and we're breaking contracts to kids who've signed up to be pilots and sent for pilot training. We didn't need them. They could leave or we were going to turn them into personnel officers or maintenance officers, and they were unhappy. We had a number of lawsuits.

Morale was down, equipment was shot, all of which we're maybe going to see again as we come out of Iraq and Afghanistan. You can see it coming, eventually. The same kind of thing. I just did not see how staying in the Air Force would mean very much. I probably was going to be a colonel, I was sure, maybe a general, but in charge of what? So I decided it was time to start looking at other career opportunities and get out. And this was very hard for me, because I had so badly wanted a military career.

So I went to a job fair up in Dallas and met Ross Perot at EDS, Electronic Data Systems. I didn't like him at all, but they were really hiring former military officers. I think Electronic Data Systems at the time was 90 percent former military.

But I also met people from Procter & Gamble, and it sounded interesting, what they were doing in terms of consumer products, and they had openings in Cincinnati, Ohio. Cincinnati was just a few hours north of Knoxville, where my grandmother was located, and I needed to be near my grandmother.

So I went to Cincinnati for an interview and to Knoxville afterwards, saw my grandmother, and I'm in Knoxville Airport, ready to fly back to San Antonio and put in my separation papers, and it's the fall of 1978. And I was going through the metal detector and going up to the gate and there was this beautiful woman coming through the detector with a good friend, and something was in her purse and it caused them to check and stop her.

I was almost going to go back and help, but she got through and it turned out later these were dumplings that registered a black shape in the x-ray machine. So I go to the gate and I'm sitting there and she's coming. And I said, boy, she's beautiful, just a great-looking woman. My goodness. And what if we met? Ah, no, that's the stuff of movies.

I get on the plane, sit down on the plane, and she's coming down the aisle of the plane. You've got to be kidding me. This is a flight from Knoxville to Dallas, where I switch planes and go on to San Antonio. And she comes down the aisle and she stands right next to me here in the aisle. I had the aisle seat. She says, "I have the window seat."

Can you believe this? So I stand up, she sits down. I bought her a drink and we talked about our grandmothers. She had been in Pineville, Kentucky, visiting her grandmother, and I had been in Knoxville, visiting mine.

We hit it off, we liked each other, and she was absolutely beautiful. When we got to Dallas we switched planes as she was going on to the west coast, to Los Angeles, where she was living at that time. So we exchanged phone numbers and I promised to call. I flew to San Antonio and she flew on to Los Angeles.

I got to San Antonio, and I told the people there I was going to get out. Great consternation, but I made up my mind, and I tried to call her, Jo Ann, and no answer. I stuck this paper with her number in my briefcase.

I left the Air Force and San Antonio in November of 1978 and I went to Cincinnati. I got a little apartment and started to work for the Procter & Gamble Company in the purchasing area, in developmental chemicals. Procter & Gamble had the idea that if you were smart, a college graduate and had anything about you, they could teach you anything.

I had been a very poor science and chemistry student, and suddenly I was ordering vast amounts of toluene, which is a petroleum derivative used in foods items, traveling to Switzerland to buy a gram of this or that for the Winton Hill research facility, and going to remote places in Wyoming that had a certain type of clay, which is used in Tide, as a surfactant.

Absolutely incredible that I was doing all of this stuff, and it's January of '79 and I have a rule, every New Year's, I clean out my briefcase, because stuff accumulates. And I cleaned this out, and out popped this name and phone number, and I said, "Oh, I remember her. She was really nice. I'll try one more time."

I called up and I got her, and she remembered me, and we talked. And in March she came to see me in Cincinnati, and in June of '79 we got married.

Q: When you were at Procter & Gamble, how long were you with Procter & Gamble?

STAPLES: Well, after I was an associate buyer, I got promoted to full buyer in – let's see, it would be August of '79 or early '80, and I was switched to packaging machinery. I was the buyer for all the machinery used on the Bounty line. The Bounty material, in those days, was produced in the Macon, Georgia, facility. I got to go to Minnesota in the wintertime. P&G likes to find one supplier who does one thing right. They help them improve the plant, improve the machinery, do training, fund them, do everything they can, and they do that one thing for Procter & Gamble until they die.

Procter & Gamble is a wonderful company. They talked in those days of hiring only from within. During the Great Depression, they never let anybody go. They just reduced hours. Once you got in, you had a guaranteed career, but it was too slow for me.

Q: I have a cousin named Franklin Corbin who worked there. I don't know if you ever ran into him.

STAPLES: No, I don't know him. Anyway, I left P&G because it was a little too slow and raises would come, but they would be sort of slow and a little late. And I went down the street in Cincinnati to another completely different world, Federated department Stores, which is the corporate headquarters for Bloomingdale's and now Macy's, Sanger Harris in Texas, I. Magnin in San Francisco in those days. Great stores, and I was the buyer for capital goods, such as the vehicle fleets, light bulbs, escalators, all those things that went into high-scale, up-end department stores.

It was a great job. I was making a lot more money. I was on a fast track to break out of the corporate headquarters and maybe in a short time head a whole store division. I had very useful trips to all the Federated Divisions, and I'd always bring a little something back for Jo Ann.

But at Procter & Gamble and at Federated, something was missing, and it was the fact that I missed government service. Lots of money in the private sector, but national service, public service, is just a part of me, and I missed it. We had a nice house out in New Richmond, Ohio, near Cincinnati, but Jo Ann knew I missed public service. I'd talk about the military all the time.

We had, as you recall, the hostage crisis in Iran, and I was in the Reserves going to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio once a month, doing my Reserve stints. I called the personnel center. I said, "You can't tell me anything, but if you're going to do a rescue operation, you might want to base it out of southeastern Turkey. I speak Turkish. If you need me, call me." But they never did, and I still missed being a part of events affecting our country.

One Sunday we were reading the *Cincinnati Inquirer, the* Sunday edition, and Jo Ann said, "Look at this notice, the Foreign Service, State Department. They're looking for people. You ought to contact them. Maybe they could use you." And that's how I got to the State Department!

Q: Had diplomacy ever crossed your radar?

STAPLES: You know what, in another one of these funny stories, never. I remember being in Turkey, and I'd go to Europe for meetings and travel around, and I used to think, what if I get in trouble? What if I get injured? What if I get sick? Who would I turn to for help? And I knew immediately: the American Express office. Why would you go to an embassy or the diplomats? They're doing diplomacy. Why would you bother them?

I knew nothing about American citizen services. Your passport needs to be renewed? Well, you took it to the person in the military office and they took care of it. I knew nothing about welfare and whereabouts operations. I knew nothing about how diplomacy was done.

Treaties? Well, good, it's signed. How did that get signed, negotiated? I knew nothing. It never crossed my mind in college, never crossed my mind in the military. Never, never thought about it. I had no idea.

The Foreign Service, I started reading a little bit about it and American diplomacy, and our first diplomats. I knew the French had helped us in the Revolutionary War. How'd that happen, and Benjamin Franklin and his mission? The first time in my life I started learning about all these things. I knew nothing about it, and I found it fascinating. Diplomatic immunities and people representing a country, going to a court or a presidential palace and doing these things? I knew nothing about it. It was absolutely fascinating to me.

I had no friends who were diplomats. I don't think I'd ever met anyone from the State Department. People from Ankara who I'd meet when I'd go there were personnel from the attaché office.

Q: Going back just a bit, it's a little off the subject, but you're talking about putting people in professional schools in the Air Force. And one of the things I've gotten from people who've gone to the war colleges – these are Foreign Service officers, who do a little bit of ranking. They put the Marines, the ones who get through that, at the top, the Army next, the Navy off to one side. They do it, there's the right way, the wrong way and the Navy way. They don't really meld in. And then the Air Force, which seemed to be more involved with the technicalities and not very intellectually dealing with problems. Did you find this?

STAPLES: The Air Force people that we picked, there was a pecking order of schools. The National War College was the grand, the big one, better than Air War College, for

example, better than the Navy War Colleges. At least, most Air Force officers thought this way.

The people who you thought and the board thought were going to be the Wing commanders, the generals of the future and so forth, you sent them to the National War College, Air War College being right behind. People who were sort of different you would send to the Navy War College.

Now, it's funny you say that, because as Director General of the Foreign Service, I was a member of the board of the National War College, the board of trustees. The State Department students, and now we send 40 there a year, would tell me that the Marine Corps always sends its best, the Army, really good people, the Air Force, so forth. They Navy guys were different.

I heard that last year, talking to people when we were there. I said, "Well, what did you think of the military students?" And they said, "Well, the ones who are really sharp are the Marines."

Q: Well, I suppose. I mean, one always thinks of the Marines as being sort of ham handed and charge up a hill and all, but that's a certain type of Marine officer, but the ones who end up in high command are a different breed of cat.

STAPLES: Very different breed of cat. I dealt with some Marines on occasion in the military and in the State Department who were the take the hill, we're all going to die anyway, we're going to take that hill. The job before I became director general, I was the political adviser, or as I like to say, diplomatic adviser, to General Jim Jones, a Marine Corps General and SACEUR, the Supreme Allied Commander of Europe. I was his political adviser, and I found him to be a most thoughtful, knowledgeable person about world affairs, and a person respected by every single leader in NATO, be they a head of state, a foreign minister, or a defense minister. And it was because of his knowledge and leadership, and the way he dealt with people.

He was absolutely fabulous, and it was a pleasure to work with him. I'd tell him sometimes, "If you weren't doing this, you'd be a really good Foreign Service Officer." He'd give me this look.

Q: Well, how did you get into the Foreign Service? What attracted you towards the Foreign Service?

STAPLES: Well, I couldn't go back to the military. Remember, this was post-Vietnam. We were reducing our military strength. I would have had to come back as a junior Captain, but I wouldn't have been very successful as a non-flying officer. I couldn't have gone into the Army or the Marine Corps. You just didn't do that.

So the military was out. The State Department had one thing that always interested me, and that was travel. I love to travel, different people, places, cultures, et cetera. But also

the idea of doing things diplomatically, and I was beginning to figure out what that was, in dealing with governments and foreign leaders who were not just military members and perhaps moving along America's interests so we wouldn't have to use the military.

And the other thing that struck me was that we have embassies and consulates all around the world. In the military, you have to go where we have the bases, so all of these other countries, the whole world was out there to maybe go and travel and see and work in and live in, and not just where we had our military bases. So, putting all that together, I contacted the State Department, filled out the paperwork, applications, the test, and then came a call, you've been accepted to this point. The next step was the oral exam.

The State Department sent me to Chicago for the interview at the federal building, so I flew up there and went in, did the oral assessment with three people, and I can't remember them, except one who was Bill Bennett, a former Foreign Service Officer and a great guy who has since passed away.

I think it took most of the morning and after lunch, briefly, not the all-day assessment we have now, but I remember we had a group exercise. We also had an inbox exercise and then an individual interview. I knew I did well on the inbox part of the exam. I had everything organized just like in the military.

I knew the group exercise had gone well. Our group was very collegial and we got a lot done without interpersonal conflict or disputes. But the individual interview centered on a question about somebody arrested, and you're the consular officer, and you have go get this person out of jail. And I said, well, why would a consular officer who's dealing with visas and issues like that – I knew that much – why would they go get someone out of jail? Well, there was a pause, and they explained to me that part of the job was going to look after our citizens. And I said, "Well, if that's part of the job, I'm perfectly willing to do it and I assume there would be instructions to do so." And they said, "Well, what if that person just was a bad actor and you couldn't assist them and the parents told you that that person should stay there and face the music and on and on and on? Would you still feel responsible?" I thought about it and said, "You know, whether you're in the State Department, the military or the agriculture business, as a farmer, you can't be everything to everybody. Some people have to take responsibility for what they do in this world." I left there and I thought, that's it. And if they want me to go hold hands with the world, I'm sorry, I'm not interested. I was sure I had failed!

I got back to Cincinnati and Mr. Bennett called the next day and said, "You passed and you had about the highest score of anybody we've seen in a long time, and how soon can you come to Washington?" I said, "I've got to sell a house and give a notice and do all of these things."

Q: What was your wife's reaction on this?

STAPLES: She was pleased that I pursued it that far, and when the call came to go to Washington, she was enthusiastic. She thought, OK, let's do some traveling – at least for a little while. We had no idea we would do this work for the next 26 years!

Q: I never asked, what was her background?

STAPLES: My wife was born and raised in Pineville, Kentucky. Her dad was a coal miner, but he was killed in an auto accident when she was eight years old. She's got three brothers and a sister, and her mom raised her there, and when she was out of high school she married her high school boyfriend George Brooks and went to Cincinnati, Ohio, and worked there, got out of southeastern Kentucky and the poverty associated with Appalachia. But understand that Jo Ann's father made good money in the mines and provided pretty well for his family.

She later divorced and continued to work in Cincinnati in different jobs, and eventually lived and worked in California. She would come back to Kentucky and visit family and relatives and friends, and that's how we came to meet on the flight from Knoxville.

She too, like me, had no idea, really, what diplomacy was all about or what people did at an embassy. But she learned quickly and was always an outstanding representative of our country, understood that everything we do abroad reflects on the views that others come to hold about Americans, and eventually became an incredibly effective Ambassador's spouse and a leading, influential figure in every country where we served.

Q: All right. Well, then, the Foreign Service, when did you come in?

STAPLES: September 1981 as a member of the Sixth Class under the Foreign Service Act of 1980.

Q: Did you feel a little bit old and all, with the group that you came in with?

STAPLES: Not really. I guess I was 33, almost going on 34. We had a wonderful A-100 (junior officer) class, and I'll talk about our members. I came in as a junior officer, by the way. I was offered a chance to come in as a political officer or I could come in as a mid-level administrative officer. I came in as a political officer and worked my way up. But, in my class, there must be 15 or 16 of us now who made Ambassador. There was Maura Harty. There's Pru Bushnell..

Q: Whom I've interviewed.

STAPLES: Pru's fabulous. She's an A-100 colleague of mine. Mike Guest, who just retired; Jim McGee, who is our Ambassador in Zimbabwe. Let's see, Dan Mozena, who is Ambassador in Angola, Roman Popadiuk, who became our first ambassador in to an independent Ukraine. Roman's career is interesting. He's someone to interview. He's now the curator at the George H.W. Bush Presidential Library in Texas, and I could go on and

on and on. Clyde Bishop is Ambassadors in the islands of the Pacific, just a number of us, and I don't know how it all happened.

Maybe the answer is, we were all stars, ha, ha, but we all just did very, very well. I don't think any class in the Foreign Service has produced so many ambassadors as our class has. Let's see, there's also Wanda Nesbitt who was PDAS (Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary) in C.A. (Consular Affairs). She was ambassador in Madagascar. She's going to be ambassador in Cote d'Ivoire.

You name it, but wonderful people.

Q: That's great. Well, how did you find the class was run?

STAPLES: I found it real well. Our coordinator, who's retired and very active in DACOR House now, Gene Schmiel. He was our lead instructor who taught us about writing, life in the Foreign Service, etc. We took a couple of trips, we had good speakers. I think in our classwork there was more of a concentration on writing, and we practiced delivering demarches and so forth.

I thought it was a pretty good introduction, but more than anything, what struck me was the diversity in terms of work of the Foreign Service, the different bureaus and different regions. I didn't know about the work that was done, say, on law of the sea, refugee affairs and all of those things. I had no idea, and it was amazing to me to learn about all that was being done and the different parts of the State Department that work on such a variety of issues.

And our class was also the first one, where the Bureau of Human Resources decided to see if we would have people who would have junior officers who would volunteer to go to our then major conflict area, El Salvador.

(END FILE)

Q: So they came around and talked about San Salvador.

STAPLES: There were two positions for junior officers open and three of us volunteered, myself, Maura Harty and Kevin Brown. Kevin worked for an NGO (Non-governmental Organization) or had done Peace Corps work, and of course I was from the military and Maura was the youngest of our class, although she's done very well. We love her. Maura was right out of school so they decided to take the two more experienced people and send them to San Salvador, so that's how I got to be assigned there.

Q: You were there from when to when?

STAPLES: I was there from – just one second. I'll tell you exactly here. Let's see. Well, after the A-100 course, I went to Spanish language training at FSI and then after that to

San Salvador, so it was the spring of '82, I believe March or so of '82, until November of '83.

Q: OK. Let's talk a bit about the situation in El Salvador that you ran into.

STAPLES: Right. Well, we got there, and of course the situation was very tense. When I first arrived, my wife couldn't even join me. It was an unaccompanied assignment. The situation in San Salvador had broken down into a real civil war, with the whole eastern part of the country off-limits. Two years before, we had the murder of the American nuns, the assassination of Archbishop Romero, and the situation was not good. The main concern was whether the war would spill over into neighboring countries amid allegations of Soviet and Cuban support to part the Farabundo Marti, the rebel group,. The American embassy was a fortress.

I used to wonder as Director General, in a somewhat they-don't-get-it kind of way, when my friends in AFSA (American Foreign Service Association) would say that duty in Iraq and Afghanistan was too dangerous and we shouldn't have our diplomats in war zones. In San Salvador, we had Marines sandbagged around the roof because the embassy had been rocketed. We went to and from work in armored shuttle cars with the chase cars full of armed people behind us. My friend Al Schaufelberger, Navy attaché, was assassinated when I was there. The night he was killed, in fact, I was the duty officer. I saw him that afternoon and then later that evening I had to go to the morgue and identify him and handle burial arrangements.

So San Salvador was a very demanding place for a first assignment, and of course you never forget your first post. Well, that was burned into my memory. I had the pleasure and the good fortune during my career there to work for two great ambassadors, Dean Hinton, and he was followed by Tom Pickering. So to get started on my State Department career, I got to work for two of the best.

My first boss was Bill Wood, who is now our ambassador in Kabul. Bill Wood was my first boss and he was head of the economic section. I was there doing commercial work, I think because of my background at Procter & Gamble. My job was to try to assist the American companies that were still operating in El Salvador, Texas Instruments and others.

I had the opportunity to organize and run the American pavilion at the San Salvador International Fair. So I got to run that, and I convinced all the American companies to exhibit. Some didn't want to, like IBM and others because of security concerns. But I got them all to agree to exhibit and we had a very, very big and successful international fair, despite the trouble in the San Salvador and more assassinations. In fact, the head of the fair, who lived very close to me, was gunned down outside his home, just shortly before the fair commenced, but we went ahead and had the fair anyway. The people there had a strong determination not to be intimidated.

San Salvador, what else about it? Well I guess now when we're asking ourselves whether we ought to be talking to the Iranians or not, I think back to El Salvador when we brokered a deal between the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) and the Salvadorian guerrillas to allow an American-operated mine to keep operating in the guerrilla area.

We had a U.S. Company that owned and operated a mine that was operating there and the owners came to the embassy to ask for help in getting OPIC insurance! The initial reaction by everybody was no way in the world are we going to go to Washington and get insurance on anything operating in guerrilla territory. The United States government is just not going to do that and risk money in the middle of a conflict zone.

And I said, "Well, wait a minute now. They are operating. I bet they're paying off the guerrillas, but on the other hand it's employment in that whole area for large groups of people. You close down the mine, you're going to get more people to the guerrillas because what else are these young men going to do, and how are their families going to eat?"

So we managed to make the case to Washington, convince people, and we succeeded in getting OPIC to insure a mine, backed by guarantees from the guerrillas.

Other things in San Salvador...

Q: Go ahead.

STAPLES: San Salvador was absolutely beautiful, volcanic country. Great scenery, volcanoes everywhere. My colleagues in the embassy, people I worked with, were wonderful. In particular, John Collins, the administrative officer and his wife, Philicia. They sort of took us under our wings.

My wife was able to come down after six months. Jo Ann was the first non-working dependent to be able to come, the first spouse, and she worked very closely with Alice Pickering and the other ladies.

A thing or two about San Salvador was that, again, not the normal Foreign Service post, anybody who wanted a weapon could carry one. I was used to weapons. Jo Ann had grown up in Kentucky. She was used to weapons. All you had to do was go out and shoot at the range and the RSO (Regional Security Officer) would issue a weapon, even to family members. I carried a weapon, Jo Ann carried a snub-nose .38 in her purse. San Salvador was the only post in the world, to my knowledge, at that time, and maybe even today, where going out to the range, all the Americans and all the local staff went and qualified with the Marines.

And we all went out, we all shot all the weapons, the idea being that if we were ever penetrated and a Marine went down, a local employee could pick up the weapon and fight back. Today in Iraq we don't do that. That's how dangerous San Salvador was.

I must say, however, that we worked hard, but after work we had a good time too. Those kind of places, I think, bring people together. All the Americans from all the agencies were very close. We all looked out for each other. Everybody was a colleague and when someone asked for any kind of help, we gave it.

The other thing I remember about San Salvador were the delegations. We had all of the Senate and about 90 percent of the Congress come down on congressional visits during my time there. After working eight months in the Economic Section I moved to the Consular Section to meet the requirement that every Foreign Service Officer had to do about a year of consular work in their first or second assignment as a precondition for gaining tenure. I'd do my visa interviews in the morning and then go off and be an interpreter for one of the delegations, come back, write a summary of the meeting, give it to the control officer, go back and do visa work in the afternoon, that evening go and attend a dinner with a delegation and again be the note-taker in a meeting.

I remember one time we had 16 delegations in town at the same time, senators, congressmen. Once we even had the head of the Boy Scouts of America on a visit because there were rumors that all the Boy Scouts had been murdered in El Salvador, so we had to take him around.

The first time I met Jerry Falwell, the Moral Majority leader, was when he came to see about the status of religious groups in San Salvador. You name it, they came to San Salvador. So in many ways it was a great learning assignment. I learned how to handle CODELs (congressional delegations), how to write, how to report, and do visa and commercial work. And of course I got to see how Tom Pickering and Dean Hinton dealt with Roberto D'Aubuisson and the right-wingers who were involved with death squads.

I went to the beach. There was a black sand beach we could go to, wonderful experiences there. We had Salvadoran friends who were fabulous. But you know, Stu, the very best thing about San Salvador before we left, we had our daughter, our child. That was the very best. We only have one daughter. Her name is Catherine Staples, and just to put it on the record and let you know, Catherine came into our lives through adoption. There were just so many children here and there because of that conflict.

Q: Oh, yes.

STAPLES: And my wife and I, we felt we had to do something. My wife talked to me. I guess I was sort of enthusiastic, but I didn't know, sort of, and she went out with a good friend, named Salvador, who was a coffee grower and a lover of art. We like art, and at all our posts we've acquired good art, and we have Salvadoran art that's wonderful.

Salvador took Jo Ann around and they went to one orphanage, the Rosa Virginia Orphanage, and Jo Ann found a little girl that just seemed right. Jo Ann brought me out, and I didn't know what I felt and there were all these kids. But she took me, and then they brought down this little girl, and this little girl and I, our eyes connected and I was in the

middle of saying something, but it stopped me cold. I couldn't even speak. And she was the one.

Q: Oh, how wonderful.

STAPLES: So we received approval to bring Catherine home followed by a home study and then settled on an attorney and on and on and on, and a few others at the embassy followed our example, I'm very proud to say. In November of '83, when we left, we left with Catherine, left with our baby.

Q: That's great. Well, how about consular work? Did you have to get anybody out of jail?

STAPLES: Well, I had to deal with the Al Schaufelberger situation, the death situation. I had to deal with that, as I mentioned. I had to deal with all kinds of visa cases, bribery attempts. I never had to go get anyone out of jail, although I kept a couple of really dumb Americans from going to jail, one person in particular in a Ford – what was it, oh, an AMC Pacer that had the wraparound windshield.

But he had pitched up, wanting to know where to spend the night, because he was driving the Pan-American Highway all the way to Panama City. He just looked on a map and there was the road. And I said, "You can't do that. East of here on the Pan-American Highway, there are guerrilla bands, bombs, land mines, and you will be killed. The east of the country is off-limits. No one has been able to drive the Pan-American Highway in safety for about four years now."

So he got in a hotel and that night his windows were knocked out and the car broken into and nobody had any glass for a Pacer and on and on and on, a few people like that.

Oh, and we had mercenaries, usually unemployed Vietnam vets who'd lost their jobs and come to San Salvador to sign up, with whom they weren't too sure!. They usually ended up in a bus up in guerrilla country, taken off by the army, thank goodness, who turned them over to us and we would repatriate them.

The main thing that all of us did, one way or another, was try to encourage Salvadorans to stop the violence and build a better country for themselves, and it was difficult, because that was a country – I mean, as you know, I was eventually – later in my career, we'll come to it. I was U.S. ambassador to Rwanda after the genocide. I think Salvadorans were more bitter towards each other than Rwandans, to this day.

Rwandans are more, perhaps, ashamed of themselves that it got to that point. But Salvadorans, there was a bitterness there, a meanness, a viciousness, based on the class divide, economic divide, and it was just hard to fathom. Absolute hatred of one group for another. It was a real shame to find out that people who you liked and who'd been in your home and were, you considered, colleagues and friends of the embassy, after you left the dinner party, later that night, their death squad friends would bring people to their cellar

and there were torture chambers there. That was hard to take, when we learned about it in later years.

And then people who worked with you, women in particular, in the consular section, their husbands were involved in activities that were not good, as you found out later. But it was a great first post. You got to do it all. I'm telling you, you saw it all, everything. The work of the Foreign Service, you saw it all in San Salvador, and it was a great first post.

Q: Well, I think that's a good place to stop, and we'll pick this up the next time, whenever you're back here, in 1973, would it be?

STAPLES: No, this is '83.

Q: It'd be '83.

STAPLES: Nineteen-eighty-three.

Q: And you left El Salvador, whither?

STAPLES: Onto my second assignment, Montevideo.

Q: OK, we'll pick it up then.

STAPLES: Yes, that would be good.

Q: Great.

STAPLES: OK.

Q: That's incredible.

STAPLES: Boy, there's a lot to tell, and I've only gotten to 1983.

Q: Well, look, I'm doing Tom Pickering now.

STAPLES: Oh, really?

Q: I've done I think 30 hours and I've got a ways to go.

STAPLES: Yes. Very interesting.

Q: A lot of people. Tony Gillespie, you'll find that I did an awful lot with Tony. I think you'd find it quite interesting.

(END FILE)

Q: OK. Today is the 23rd of June, 2008, with George Staples. George, we're going to pick this up when you're off to Montevideo.

STAPLES: OK.

Q: When did you go there?

STAPLES: I went to Montevideo after San Salvador, my first post, and we arrived in January of 1984.

Q: OK, this I assume was sort of a routine assignment.

STAPLES: Not in the least.

Q: Oh, OK, then what happened?

STAPLES: After San Salvador and the violence there and the efforts to work towards political reconciliation and settlements and all the other things that we had talked about previously, the department decided in its wisdom to reward me with a nice place, not a hardship post, but a pleasant place – it was Montevideo, or so I thought.

I did not realize fully until I arrived there that Uruguay, like Argentina and Brazil to follow, was in the midst of a return to democracy from military rule. Montevideo was ruled by a military junta that had taken over the country a few years before in response to violence from the Tupamaros, and had a host of human rights problems. It was a very harsh dictatorship. We arrived shortly after the Falklands War had been concluded, only to discover that we were basically restricted on where we could go because there were rumors for the first three months of our assignment there that the Argentine secret service in revenge for the defeat in the Falklands were sending agents over to Uruguay to try to kill Americans.

So my very nice assignment in lovely Montevideo, peaceful and quiet, turned into something else. Our job there was to promote and push forward the return to democracy, so it was quite a challenging time.

Q: You were there as what?

STAPLES: I'd come into the Foreign Service as a political officer. In San Salvador, my first post, I'd done my consular work, a year of consular work, and worked as an econ commercial officer. But in Montevideo I had my first taste of political work, so I was the junior political officer in the political section, and my task – there are two main political parties in Uruguay, the Blancos and the Colorados, and my main task was to make contact with these political parties, who were operating somewhat openly, but with a lot of restrictions, to encourage them to behave responsibly and to get organized for free elections that were going to come. And then on the other side, maintain contact with

military figures to urge them to follow through on their promise to restore democracy, keep on the path of a schedule towards free elections.

Q: Now, who was our ambassador?

STAPLES: The ambassador there was Tom Aranda. Tom was a political appointee from Arizona. He had worked for President Ford and he was a Hispanic American with strong ties in the business community and he was I think a very, very good ambassador, but very cautious. The man who really moved things forward and helped us a great deal and what to do and showed me a lot was our deputy chief of mission, who was Richard Melton, who eventually became ambassador to Brazil. He also had various other assignments afterwards in the WHA Bureau (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs).

Q: How big was the political section?

STAPLES: The political section consisted of three people. The political counselor was Jerry Hoganson and there were two of us who were junior officers, an OMS (Office Management Specialist), a secretary, and a political assistant. And we had a lot of work to do.

Q: Well, now, OK, you're there. What are you – first place is brand new to a country, a political officer, how did you kind of both read and learn your way about? Because every political system is different and different personalities and all that.

STAPLES: Well, I had done some reading in the department, but a lot of the work I did in Montevideo in the section itself. We had extensive files, because Uruguay had a long history, and it was formerly known by many as the Switzerland of the Americas, very peaceful, very calm place. But then in the '70s, as revolutionary activity swept through the hemisphere and in Argentina, as well, next door, you had the military coup, the crackdown. We also lost a couple of Americans through the Tupamaros, who were one of the main leftist groups in the region, who had established prison cells in houses and at the university. They kidnapped our labor attaché and killed him.

And then the military cracked down and basically imposed a very, very harsh dictatorship, arrested all the Tupamaros they could find while their supporters among trade unions and other anti-government leaders fled abroad. When I arrived, the military had set a schedule for a free election and return to civilian rule, and the political parties were able to go out and campaign rather openly. I became eventually the main contact with the Broad Front, the Frente Amplio, a coalition of leftist opposition groups, in addition to being the embassy's human rights officer. And I got to be the main embassy contact to for the mothers of the missing, a womens group similar to that which developed in Argentina.

Q: Were there a lot of missing?

STAPLES: There were. Not like the 10,000 in Buenos Aires, but we had about 1,000 in Uruguay.

Q: Well, was this military dictatorship sort of a copycat of the Argentine one?

STAPLES: Yes, it was. Very much so, and they were very closely connected to the dictatorship in Brazil, as well, which was also under military rule. When I arrived in Montevideo, just a few months before, Raul Alfonsin had come in as president in Argentina and democracy had returned. Of course, it was helped by the defeat of the Argentine military in the Falklands War. So the policy objective (hope) was Argentina first, Uruguay second and Brazil next. And, amazingly, it worked. It was a very interesting time in Montevideo, especially in sort of two steps forward, one step back. That's how we did things there in the political section in the embassy.

We would push the military. The military would reaffirm its decision that there was a date for elections and they weren't going to change it. So the political parties would have meetings and rallies, and we would meet with their leaders to urge them not to go too far while reassuring them that we were indeed monitoring the generals to ensure there was no back sliding.

I really learned in that situation how to go out and make contacts among key decision makers. All of the political parties and the military as well wanted to know who we wanted to win the election and take power. The Colorados were a moderate, liberal party. The Blancos were the traditional farm-based party and very conservative. Who did we want? And we had President Reagan in power here at the time.

People tried to link the parties to the policies of the Reagan Administration, but we really did a very, very good job of making the point that we were only interested in the return to democracy. It was up to the Uruguayan people who they wanted to govern them, and we went out of our way not to take sides. For example, I would have a lunch with the number two or three person in the Colorado party to talk about what their leader and future President Julio Sanguinetti, was thinking of doing, what he wanted to do.

Two days later, I would meet with the Blanco party youth leader to find out what Blancos were thinking. Three days later, we would have an event at the residence, perhaps a lunch, for both groups, together. Two days after that, the ambassador would take me along and we would meet with the military leaders and tell them what we were doing, which they knew about already. We were all closely watched and every word we said was closely analyzed. But in the process we came to be viewed by all sides as an honest broker.

Q: Well, trying to understand this. I mean, Uruguay is way down geographically, and traditionally, at least Argentina has quite a European population. And I would have thought that they would have been looking more towards Europe than the United States, because I don't see why we had much influence.

STAPLES: Yes, good question. I think we had the influence because of what had happened in Argentina. The military regime had looked to the Europeans to help them with influence with Britain and to keep the Falklands War from happening, and it didn't work.

We had played a very prominent role in the return of democracy to Argentina, and the United States was still the most important power in our hemisphere. Also, the Europeans, I can't remember the leaders of Spain at the time, but they had a very hands-off attitude to a lot of things in that period. Remember that Spain was just finishing its own democratic transition following Franco's death. So Spain was not that influential. The Uruguayans are mainly of Italian and Spanish descent. Italy was not a prominent player at all in the hemisphere so it fell to us to play that leading role. I should also say that we had in Montevideo the *Alianza de los Estados Unidos* (United States Alliance), which was the USIA (United States Information Agency) operation, a very big building in Montevideo, where we ran cultural programs and offered English classes at night. It was a platform for a lot of outreach, and it still exists there today, very closely tied to the American Embassy.

All of us who were junior officers would go at night and as native speakers we would help with the English classes. What that did, all those young people who wanted to learn English and more about America, a lot of them turned out later to be representatives of the youth movements, young leftist members, et cetera, and when the leftist parties began to emerge in this broad front, the Frente Amplio, I knew a lot of these young people. They really liked me and my family, and we would have cookouts and other informal gatherings at my house.

They liked my daughter Catherine who was about four at that time. And all of that came together when about three or four months before the transition, politics was allowed to come into the open, and all of the political parties began to openly campaign, openly compete. I ended up having responsibility for covering and reporting on the leftist parties in the Frente Amplio. And the exiles returned, former Tupamaros and others who had lived for years in Europe.

I must say that I was very, very proud of Ambassador Aranda's hard work. He did not have to do this, and a lot of people urged him not to do it, but he would have former Tupamaros and former leftist exiles for drinks at the Residence. We would have these one-hour sessions where we would just sit and talk. Some of these fellows who were elderly, influential, members of the Socialist International would say that they had never met an American diplomat before, much less an ambassador, and had never been in the Residence. And what a great opportunity for us to spread the message of moderation and tolerance once democracy returned, and not to blow it this time.

It was a really good experience for me on how to bring people together, and the skills I learned in Montevideo I used later as ambassador to Rwanda, to bring people together.

Q: Well, now, let's look at the Tupamaros. Now, I realize, what were you getting, first about – it was at its height, because the papers were full of what they were up to. Who were they? What were they doing and what was driving them? And then we'll talk about how they – where they stood by the time you got there.

STAPLES: Before I arrived, back in the '70s, they were one of the most violent leftist groups in Latin America. They very much wanted to establish a socialist, communist government. They did not like democracy, and undermined the elected government at every turn. They were very much influenced by Cuba.

And what they did was to copy, in a sense, a lot of the violence that had occurred in Central America and elsewhere, kidnappings and murder and assassination of key business leaders, government figures. And basically the country, economically and politically, just imploded. What the military did was to infiltrate their ranks and locate their cells throughout Montevideo.

The Uruguayans, who had such a high standard of living and who were such a peaceful people, understood and recognized that there was this group within them that had established these detention centers and cells in homes, at the university and so forth. One of the main causes for this was throughout Latin America in the '70s, in my opinion, was the lack of employment opportunities and job opportunities for young people, which led to high degrees of frustration and anger. And you saw that everywhere. Maybe it was a part of the '60s, '70s, Vietnam. Who knows?

But Montevideo in particular is very small, and even when I was there, there weren't a lot of young people. The people who were taxicab drivers were PhDs and so forth. There were more Uruguayans in southern Brazil and Argentina than in Uruguay, and they mainly left because of employment. It was a country modeled on the state run economies of Europe, in which if you got a job you had lifetime security. It had state-run medical care. All that would work in that small little enclave, but as population pressures grew, there weren't opportunities.

Q: There was one of these things that I saw in Italy in the '80s, '70s and part of the '80s, where jobs really relied on whom you knew. It was basically family connections, and if you didn't have that, no matter what you did in the university or something, there wasn't much of an opening.

STAPLES: It was sort of like that in Uruguay. And I must say, in Uruguay it was interesting as well, because the bulk of the population lived in and around Montevideo. There were small cities in the interior in a rural area, but the agriculture, it was small scale, not open to export and Uruguayans had settled for something of a simple life.

There were a couple of American packing plants that had been there that had closed. There wasn't much of an economy. You add to that the violence and uncertainty and tourism was lost. And I'll say this, that was an interesting fact. It's a long way down in Argentina and Montevideo, whereas in San Salvador we knew key government figures,

military figures and all who had gone to school in the States, worn their high school letterman's jackets, satellite TV. They watched TV from Florida and so forth. You'd see someone and ask, "Where did you buy that?" "Oh, Florida, Miami."

Way down in the Southern Cone, in Montevideo, we had all kinds of senior leaders who had never been to the United States, could not speak English. Tourism for them meant going to Chile or Argentina or Brazil, regional tourism, because traveling to the US was so far away. Or maybe if the peso was good, they went to Europe. I came there thinking that, well, everybody knows about America, but there was a whole group of people in that part of the world who are isolated, who don't travel that much.

I would go into government offices and you'd have a world map, but it would be, in my view, upside down, where at the top was the South Pole and then Argentina and Chile and the U.S. and then Europe and all are down here at the bottom, and it just reflected the way of thinking.

Q: Well, in society there, at the time you were there, were there racial divides, Indian, black, other countries or something like that?

STAPLES: Another interesting fact that I found there, coming, again, from Central America and San Salvador, where you had this strong Indian influence, in Uruguay it was 98 percent, shall we say, white, mainly people of Spanish and Italian descent. I asked a couple of friends about it and they said, "Well, we killed them all off."

Q: Well, this was basically true.

STAPLES: It was true. The ones that are left, the big place for the Indians in that part of the world, people of that descent, is Paraguay, not Uruguay or Chile or Argentina. Also in Uruguay, if you like World War II history which I do, that's where the Graf Spee was scuttled.

Q: Graf Spee scuttled.

STAPLES: Yes, right there in the river, and you could still see it by taking little boats that would take you out there. And there were two or three places where you'd go and people would say, if you get a chance, talk to the owner. He's an elderly guy. He speaks German and he's been here for a long time.

A lot of the crewmen who were interred during the war were still there, were still running around. And I got to meet a couple of those men who just said there was no reason to return to Germany after the war so they just stayed.

Q: Oh, yes. I remember as a kid – I'm old enough to remember following by the news accounts the chase of the three cruisers going after the Graf Spee and when it finally went up and went to – it was scuttled right there, and the captain, Langsdorff, I think was his name.

STAPLES: Langsdorff, that's right. Langsdorff.

Q: Committed – can you imagine remembering that name? Committed suicide, went down with the ship.

STAPLES: World War II history in particular, the Pacific, not so much Europe, but it's a passion of mine. And so the first thing I did – well, I did two things when I arrived there. I wanted to see the remains of the Graf Spee, and the little museum and get to know some more about it, which I did. And back in those days, I guess I was unusual, too, because I was a big soccer fan, football fan.

Well, Uruguay is one of the world's, and has been one of the world's leading soccer powers. So on my first weekend there, jet lagged and all, I got my wife and daughter in a car and I took them out and we drove around in the parking lot looking at the Centenario Stadium, one of the most famous sports venues in the world of soccer. It was like going to Mecca. But my family didn't appreciate that too much. Ha, ha.

Q: Let's talk about the army. I assume it was mainly the army…

STAPLES: Right.

Q: ... that was the driving force in the military. Well, where did they come from? So often the army is used in other places as how you – if you're not in the elite, how you move up. How did this move at that time?

STAPLES: The army fellows that I knew mainly were, as you say, the ones who had not done well in the universities. They were working-class kids who had worked their way up, very resentful of the intellectuals and some of the political party leaders. And their heroes, their models, were European generals, mainly Spanish and I suspect Germans but they didn't want to talk about it much.

They liked to talk about the Spanish Civil War and how Franco had defeated the communists, very anti-communist and in many ways similar to the military in Central America. And a lot of them had gone to school – the senior officers had gone to school in Argentine military academies or in Spanish schools, which meant Falange schools, the Franco schools.

Q: The School of the Americas had not penetrated there?

STAPLES: I didn't find anybody. Maybe there were some, but I never found anybody. I think the School of Americas focused mainly on Central Americans and maybe Colombians and so forth, maybe Argentines that went there, a few, but Uruguayans, I never found anybody.

Q: What sort of a role did, first, Brazil play there?

STAPLES: Brazil was a big trading partner, a big giant to the north. I didn't sense any kind of close ties between Brazil and Uruguay. The Uruguayan military rulers were tied to the Argentines, and that was their...

Q: Of course, there's a linguistic barrier, too, as well.

STAPLES: Yes.

Q: Was there a sort of smugglers' haven? Small countries like that...

STAPLES: Yes, there was, especially southern Brazil. We took just little trip on our own as a family up into southern Brazil, which I found fascinating. You cross the border and there were little German communities, right out of Bavaria. Ten miles further up the road was a small Japanese community. Ten miles up was a Slavic community.

Southern Brazil had nice ski resorts. The whole idea of regional tourism and how they developed it and supported it on their own, without a lot of Europeans or Americans or foreigners coming to tour, was a study in and of itself.

But there was definitely smuggling on the border, cigarettes, contraband and so forth. But the Uruguayans, to digress a minute, they were terrible businesspeople, but in that kind of statist society, I guess it worked. They didn't bargain, unlike in Central America. Things would be on the shelf and they would just sit there. Whenever it sold, it sold.

I guess men had status because when had a store, even if it wasn't profitable. No sense of inventory cost, so it just stayed there. But I will say this as well. We also hit it right in this time of transition, which was a time of great uncertainty for local people. When we arrived it was extremely expensive, and even our drivers were taking trips to Europe.

Well, things balance out and after we were there five or six months the highly over valued peso just collapsed. And then, with the uncertainty surrounding the election and transition, the Uruguayans started selling their valuables. You would have roll-top desks from 19th century Europe that sold for $300 and $400, baby grand pianos that had come from Spain and Italy, etc., that were available for a few hundred dollars.

Q: Well, what about the role of Argentina?

STAPLES: Argentina, when the military there left power, ceased support for the Uruguayan military. President Alfonsin was not in a strong position at that time, because he had just been elected. And there were rumors, of course, of counter-coups coming soon in Argentina. The Argentine government established close relations with Uruguay in anticipation of democratic elections and a transition to a civilian government. The Argentines also pushed the government to follow through on the transition to democracy, knowing it would be good for regional stability, good for trade, etc.

Q: Did you have much contact with our embassy, particularly in Buenos Aires? It was right across the river, practically.

STAPLES: We did. We coordinated closely on ideas as to how to support the democratic processes that were developing. And out diplomats would go to Buenos Aires to relax, shop, and attend cultural events. Our colleagues in Buenos Aires would come our way quite often. To give you a flavor of the atmosphere, we would go to Buenos Aires whenever we could to enjoy the big city, and it was wonderful. There was the opera, there was shopping, there were the parks. There were hundreds of things to do. And our colleagues at the embassy in Buenos Aires would come to Montevideo and they'd say, "Ah, it's so quiet here. It's so peaceful. It's so wonderful to get away from the large city."

We had a lot of filmmakers who would come and make movies at the Punta Del Este resort area. And in Uruguay I had my first experience with summer hours. In the summertime, the Uruguayans would work from 8:00 in the morning until 12:30, and they were gone. They love their beach time.

Q: This is, of course, Southern Hemisphere summer.

STAPLES: Southern Hemisphere summer, that's right. So that's November, December, January. And we had this rule where we had to work the full eight-hour day like in Washington, and so we would be sitting around the embassy until 5:00 with no one to talk to. And if you did need to meet with someone, it was a junior person because the Ministers and the senior people were out at the beach at Punta del Este. So we used to have vehicles that would take you the hour and a half out to the resort area to do meetings.

Q: Well, what about the university or universities? I mean, as a junior officer, I would imagine this would be part of your beat.

STAPLES: It was. There was one university, but it was very tightly constrained by what was going on there, because, you see, up until the last six months of my assignment, it was run by the military. It had been a hotbed of revolution, as most universities were in Latin America. But, when I was there, they had regular classes. The classes were monitored. A lot of the professors were government professors. If you wanted to get a job, you had to graduate, and, if you wanted to graduate, well, you had to do what the military told you to do. No dissent, none whatever.

If a diplomat wanted to visit, you had to have permission from the authorities, so there was not a vibrant intellectual life at the universities. And the newspapers in Montevideo, there were dailies and weeklies. And the weeklies were a vibrant source of information, because some were tied to certain parties, some were tied to people from the past. Some published weekly, some published quarterly.

There might be 30 things to read, 30 papers to plow through in a week. But if they got a little bit out of hand, the military would shut them down for a while, then after a few days

allow them to publish again. If an editor said something that wasn't quite on track, he or she might be arrested for two or three days.

Q: Well, would you have much contact with the – I mean, the professors. Would they unburden themselves at home, or not?

STAPLES: Not the professors, because they were government appointed, government approved. But the leaders of the various periodicals, writers and so forth, they would meet with us. And they would talk about what they wanted to do and they would always push us to do more, of course, to speed up the democratic transition.

They also would, in private, tell me as the human rights officer about someone still in jail who had even mistreated, or someone that the government said was in jail but had been killed. That would help us in what we would try to do to get people out or get people released or ensure better care for people.

Q: Well, were we keeping track of missing, possibly dead? In other words, I would imagine that it would be a little bit difficult for a human rights organization to exist in Uruguay, but sometimes the human rights officer can sort of perform this function.

STAPLES: We had a couple of international human rights organizations that would send people to Uruguay. But the government had to allow them in and they were monitored, et cetera. As things got looser and looser, as we headed towards the election, they would make statements and so forth, one of which managed to get me in a lot of trouble.

One of the activists said, "You know, we have a human rights officer at the embassy named George Staples, and anybody with a complaint can go see him." That was put in the paper. I always wondered why the Ambassador and DCM put me in charge of the leftist groups and so forth. I think I was the youngest and expendable.

My immediate predecessor was Bill Wood who later became our Ambassador to Afghanistan. Bill's predecessor was Jim Cason, who the military government PNGed (persona non grata). Jim's been our ambassador in a couple of countries now, but Jim was PNGed from Montevideo by the military, and everybody thought the military was going to throw me out at some point to show that they were still in charge until the election. Some of my colleagues told me on occasion to tell Jo Ann to start packing.

Well, the military didn't do it, but I would go down into the lobby of the embassy and meet with human rights representatives to review our lists of missing persons and exchange views on the human rights environment. We could try to track people. The one thing we didn’t' have in Uruguay as in Argentina, to my knowledge, were hundreds of children who were seized and then spread around and adopted by military families.

Q: Yes, that was horrible.

STAPLES: We didn't have that. There may have been a case or two, but we didn't have that horror to deal with during my time in Montevideo.

Q: Well, did you get the impression, were the military people in the Uruguayan army – were they really bloody minded?

STAPLES: They were very hardheaded, but realistic. They were extremely proud of what they had done to break the back of the Tupamaros and end the kidnappings and assassinations. And I think if Argentina had not had its war with Britain and the military forced to give up power, the generals in Uruguay might have never have let go. I really believe that.

Q: What was the connection? Was this that Argentina was their supporter?

STAPLES: Argentina was the supporter, and while we were doing what we were doing in Uruguay, Brazil, which was under military rule at the time, was moving right along smartly to its first democratic election in a while. So everything was – the ground was just shifting in the whole Southern Cone. These were major countries, and to bring back democracy and see the end of military rule was one of our major foreign policy achievements during that period.

I'll never forget, when we had the election, Julio Sanguinetti won it, and...

Q: He was a Blanco?

STAPLES: A Colorado, the leader of the Colorado party. And for the inauguration, Secretary of State George Schultz came down with a large delegation. We had a great experience when the came to Montevideo, and that sent a huge message that was very warmly received. And he himself, personally, spent time at the embassy, thanked everybody, all of our local people.

The military government welcomed him, and then after they said their welcomes and so forth, they left and then the civilian government coming in had to do the same thing, and that was the transition. But it went very well.

And one sign of how well we succeeded, I was told that before I had arrived, the previous year or two, for the ambassador's July 4 reception at the Residence, he had separate rooms for the military government, the business community and the political party leaders. They would not even talk together, even though they came to the Residence.

That last year, right before the election was held, things had progressed to a point where in the Residence they were all together, mingling and talking, the leaders from the Broad Front including people who had come back from exile from Europe, the Colorados and Blancos, all the business figures and they were all in the same room, all mingling, all talking about the future and how they were going to work together. And, you know, the interesting thing, Stu, is that it's a small country. They all knew each other.

They had gone to school with each other. They all had lived together and their families were related. They all knew each other and were ready to turn the page. And I thought looking at the different groups together at that reception that it really signified that we had done our job.

Q: Well, this is a story that I've heard in a number of countries, where the American embassy or the American consular general – this is true in South Africa, but many other places. This is the one place where all sorts of people can all get together.

STAPLES: Exactly.

Q: Because, otherwise, everything else was tainted sort of. How did we avoid being seen as, particularly Ronald Reagan who is perceived, probably unfairly, as being such a right winger.

STAPLES: Well, I really again go back to the key role that Tom Aranda carried out as our ambassador. Tom was a little concerned when I said, "You know, the next group you're going to meet with and have at the Residence need to be returned exiles and leaders of the leftist groups" The DCM and Pol Counselor were concerned how that might be viewed in Washington. But I said, "We're going to be do an up front reporting cable and we're going to tell Washington we did it, right?" And we did it and it proved to be no problem.

The press and political leaders would say, "But we know, you're really supporting the Colorados, you're really supporting the Blancos." And I would say, "Oh, really? Who'd we meet with last week?" And you'd tell them who you met with and who you had lunch with. We really went out of our way to talk to everybody, and our message was the same. We only wanted democracy to return. It was up to the Uruguayan people who they chose as the next leaders of the country. And we were truly the honest broker in this sense.

Q: Now, was everybody sort of on the country team, including the attachés, the station and labor, the other people on the country team, did you feel that you were part of a team, or were there ones that had favorites or not?

STAPLES: No, we had a very good country team and everybody was on board with the policy. We were going to talk to everybody, our message was the same. We wanted the election to take place as scheduled. Democracy's coming back. Whoever the Uruguayans pick, that's fine. The military is going to go.

There were some differences amongst certain organizations as to whether the military would really let it happen, and those of us who thought they would were right and another organization or two, who were on board, but they were sending messages back to Washington, as we found out later, saying it wasn't going to happen. But, in the end, we were right.

Q: Well, what was your impression of, let's say, the Colorado types?

STAPLES: The Colorado types were sort of like modern Democrats today, if you will, if you can think of it that way. Very open, very gregarious, very much wanting things back the way they had been before military rule, but they knew they had to modernize a bit. And very – I don't know, probably social democrats would be something, a way to describe them, if you're thinking about – if you want to label someone.

But the Blancos were a different sort. They were very conservative. They were historically representing the farming classes, conservative ranchers. They thought that there ought to be some changes to the way the state had been run and that there ought to be more restrictions on who could vote, that people should be property owners and that people with better educations should be in leadership positions.

They were also very much tied to a father figure on their side, long time politician Wilson Ferreira. His word was law. The Blanco youth leaders sort of chafed at this. They wanted change, but things move slowly in Uruguay.

The Colorado Party leader was Julio Sanguinetti. He and his senior colleagues agreed not do anything stupid, no demonstrations to give the military an excuse to cancel the elections. And the one thing they didn't want was to have the Frente Amplio, the leftists, the folks with links to exiles and Tupamaros to win this thing, because that for sure would have given the military perhaps an excuse to lose it.

It was interesting, too, you remember hearing about the pot banging of the ladies in the evening?

Q: Well, I heard about that in Chile.

STAPLES: In Chile. Well, we had a few of those in Montevideo, too, a couple of nights when the military would close a newspaper for a few days or imprison an editor or somebody would come on and say, "If things don't change, we may have to rethink the election date." Well, that night, the ladies would all get out and bang their pots for about 30 minutes all through the city, and the next two days later after we talked to people and so forth, someone would come out and say, "Well, he didn't really mean that. The election date is set and we're going forward, but we have to do it responsibly."

Q: Well, I would think that sort of the left-wing students would be chafing at the bit.

STAPLES: Were chafing at the bit, but they were being held down by their leaders, and no violent demonstrations, because everybody understood, and that was my message to the students and the radicals, who I met with. I met with them and would say, "I understand what you're saying and you're angry about the arrests that have happened. And your brother, your brother's been missing. He's probably dead, isn't he? We know that. But is the way to honor him, is the way to get what you want, to do something that causes the military to cancel the election?"

A lot of them got it. A lot of them wanted to hear us say it again and again and again. A lot of them knew it very well.

Q: I found it sort of astounding that this country, way down the line, had basically European ties and not American ties. It's so easy to say American, but that's what we are. Did you run across that problem?

STAPLES: Oh, I did.

Q: When people say, why do you call yourselves American? I mean, we're all American.

STAPLES: Oh, yes, or people would say, "Oh, I'm an American." And they'd say, "Well, so am I."

Q: But, anyway, did you get from any elements, "What the hell are you talking about? This is our country and why are you interfering and all that?"

STAPLES: No, no. I never did, because most people honestly thanked us, because we were the only ones with influence to pressure the military, to make sure that the transition to democracy would happen on schedule.

Q: Well, I mean, was it sort of the feeling that they'd tossed a date out sometime before and sort of, well, we can negotiate and all that. In other words, we were holding them to a promise that they probably hadn't taken very seriously.

STAPLES: I think that initially that may have been true. The military rulers probably put it out there so there wouldn't be any pressure after what happened in Argentina. And then we praised them for this and welcomed their decision and there were messages from Washington and from the Ambassador. The local press would interview the Ambassador and he would say that we now have a date for the transition. It gives the political parties time to come back to life and reorganize and to hold a responsible campaign, to think about how they're going to reenter politics. It gives the military time to work with the parties so everyone can come together, etc.

And, before you knew it, that date was in stone, and that was good. That was very good.

Q: This is often very important, just to take what may be a pie-in-the-sky promise and hold them to it.

STAPLES: Hold them to it, yes.

Q: Let's talk about the Europeans. They had embassies and all, and the exiles as a group basically headed to the – Scandinavian and other countries, particularly the socialist left in that area was always very supportive.

STAPLES: Some were in East Germany and other places, too.

Q: So what were they doing?

STAPLES: The other embassies in Montevideo, I must say, from my memory, were doing nothing. I don't know how many times I've served in countries where the European embassies were just missing in action, very small or inactive, and that was the case in Montevideo.

They were not big players at all. They were never in the press. They never said much. I can't remember meeting many other diplomats. They just weren't there. They just weren't around.

Q: This is sort of a theme, as I've been doing these interviews – I've done probably over 1,000 now. The question always comes up, and I can't help coming away with the impression that sort of the United States is really an indispensable country. I mean, there are plenty of things we do wrong, and our blunders are well publicized and all. But when you try to think about what would the world be like if the United States was out of the picture, blunders and all, I mean, it's kind of horrible.

STAPLES: Exactly. The United States is without question an essential country, and not just because of our perceived status as the superpower. But in Uruguay, it was driven home again to me the importance of how we are perceived in terms of our values. We are a country that stands for decency, that democracy is not just a word. We mean it. That people have suffered or been under a dictatorship and we say we want to help them and have them have a say in their lives, have a democratic kind of life, a better life. We mean it and we back it up. That message was really driven home by what we did in Montevideo.

Q: What was the role of USIA?

STAPLES: USIA had a huge role. The PAO (public affairs officer) there was a man named John Graves.

Q: Public affairs officer.

STAPLES: Public affairs officer was John Graves. I liked him a lot, and he along with his Cultural Officer Pamela Corey Archer, did outstanding outreach by having events that brought people together, where they reinforced our policy messages. They were really excellent with the editors, as well, saying, look, you're trying to play the game like they play in Africa, the got-you game, looking for the one quote to show the U.S. really is taking sides. And they made it clear, as we did, we're not playing that game. We mean what we say. And if you want to have continued access to us, if you want that interview with the Ambassador, quite trying to plant something, trying to foment something. It's pointless.

USIA also ran and managed, as I said, the Alianza, the big building downtown with the cultural outreach, the media training and also the English language program. If there's one thing that we could do today to reassert and strengthen our influence in the world, we ought to start teaching English again, around this world. Because that was the best program I've seen and all over this world, and when we stopped that, when we did with USIA and we cut down or contracted it out to like AMIDEAST (America-Mideast Educational and Training Services) and companies like this in the Arabian Gulf, it's not the same.

But the chance for these people to come and learn, I remember the stories, the news on the recent crisis in Cote d'Ivoire when it melted down, and people outside the French embassy saying, "We want to learn English." And in Montevideo, it was essential, because all those people who you sort of had to be careful with around the military, they would come in the evenings to our Alianza and we could talk to them.

Somebody who had a brother who was tied to a former Tupamaro leader, that brother's sister was an English student and you'd tell her about our policy and hope for the return of democracy – she'd say "Thanks a lot," and you'd say, "How's your brother?" "OK. You know, he wants to talk to you. Is that OK?" "Yes." For us, those were great ways to make contacts.

Q: What about the visitors program, student exchange, that whole thing, of getting people sort of to get away from Europe and take a look at the United States?

STAPLES: Well, we did some of that, but, regretfully, we couldn't do a lot and get the people we wanted to go a lot because the military government wouldn't let them go. Remember that we were working in a country ruled by a military dictatorship. They carefully vetted who they wanted to go, and a lot of people who you might want to identify to visit the US, it would immediately have made them suspect in the eyes of the military.

Sometimes you'd sit down with the members of the military-controlled foreign ministry and say, for example "We have slots for a media training program. Who do you suggest?" Boom, up would come five names tied to a right-wing publication. But these weren't the people who were going to be important to the future of the country. So you ended up picking a couple because you had to and then convinced the government to accept three others you really wanted to go, and those were your five. You had to walk a fine line.

Q: You were there now – well, first place, how did you find social life?

STAPLES: Social life was limited, and that's because Uruguayans are a private people, in that atmosphere. It got better our last six months, after the transition to democracy occurred. But a lot of people didn't want to invite or be seen to be too close to foreigners, especially Americans. Under military rule you had people who denounced their neighbors. You had to be careful.

The big icebreaker, if you will, for us, and the way into somewhat of a social life was through our daughter, because the people at her school – she went to a little Montessori school. You'd get to meet the teachers and some of the other parents, and the Uruguayans love children. The kids would go out on street to play and a parent would come out to watch, and then two or three others, and pretty soon, the parents would all get together and talk, keep an eye on the kids. So that's where there would be social opportunities.

The other aspect of social life I found interesting for the first time was, again, the Spanish tradition, If we wanted to go out to a restaurant, they opened up about 10:30 at night. We did things the European style.

I remember when I first arrived, David Nelson, the officer I was replacing said, "You're in for a treat." Julio Sanguinetti, the leader of the Colorado Party, who may be the next president, wants to have a dinner and he wants to invite you so he can get to know you. I said, "Great," so he said, "I'll pick you up tonight and take you." I said, "Great, what time?" He said, "I'll pick you up at eleven-thirty." Oh, really? And he did, and we ate about one o'clock in the morning! So we had to adjust to that.

Uruguay has, interestingly enough, Stu, a very small black community from Brazil, I guess, former slaves, who are still there, with a rich culture tradition. They kept a very low profile during the military years, and I didn't get to know any of them. They were keeping their heads down. Some of them were linked to trouble in the '70s and had had their citizenship canceled, or had been expelled to Brazil. Only one person in our mission got to know some of them. But now I hear that their community is flourishing again, in Montevideo, and most people don't know that. Not an Indian community, but a small community, historically, of former slaves, and I found that to be extremely interesting, in Montevideo.

Q: Bring me up to date, what's the history of Uruguay. How did it come about?

STAPLES: Oh, gosh. Settled by Spanish and Italian immigrants about the same time as they came to Argentina, the 1800s or so. Mainly farmers. At one time, Uruguay had – it was quite wealthy, because of wool. It had trading, and so forth. That market collapsed. Montevideo looks like an old European capital. There's casinos in the grand European style. You'll find pictures of people in the 1890s and in the '30s, train travel, ships to Europe and back and forth. Beef as well, like in Argentina, which was a major export. But sandwiched between the two giants, Argentina and Brazil, it's always been sort of the poor cousin. As I say, I think we had the Armour Company with a meatpacking plant there in the '20s. Very highly educated people, by the way, literacy rate 98% or better. Our maid used to ask for time off to go to the opera!

But it kept out of war. It was not...

Q: Didn't get involved in the Chaco War, and that sort...

STAPLES: Didn't get involved in anything like that. No problems with Paraguay or anything like that.

Q: I think Paraguay – I mean, it's way up the river, but did Paraguay – I mean, was Montevideo sort of the entrepot for Paraguay or not?

STAPLES: Not really, not really. More the way Paraguay is more tied closely to Brazil and Argentina, I think, not so much Uruguay. No. But Montevideo was a quiet place, and a place of apartments, and so forth, and people like to stroll on the rambla, drink mate, which is sort of a tea drink.

Q: The one with the straw?

STAPLES: The metal straw, and they hold it under their arm this way. A place of great literary tradition. A lot of writers and artists have been produced in the past. Many of them had, of course, gone into exile during military rule.

Q: Let me just stop here, for just one second. Well, George, by the time you left, the new government was in?

STAPLES: Yes. We had elections in November of '84, and the actual inauguration of the new president, the actual transition was March 1, 1985, with Secretary Schultz's visit. And as I remember, I left that summer and we had – it was quite a year, one that was very good.

One thing I didn't mention, here, that also helped me in my career a little later – remember, in San Salvador I had worked as the econ commercial officer for a little bit of time. Trade fair, and all that. When I got there, we had – shortly after I arrived there, we also had our econ counselor, a senior person, became very ill and left the country. So I did all the things I'm telling you about and for some few months, I went and headed the whole Economic Section. Even doing that, I wrote the human rights report while handling all the commercial work. Looking ahead at the transition to democracy, we concluded a bilateral textile agreement with the Uruguayans, and a few other trade agreements that I was very pleased with. It was my first time supervising a commercial staff. We went out of our way to make sure that Uruguayan business people were made aware of American products and American business services. A lot of that had not been done; we just had a commercial library and whoever wanted to could come in and read magazines. But we had not done extensive outreach, so I really pushed on that, and as a result we had a number of American business people who indicated willingness after the transition to democracy to come over from Argentina and consider investing. That actually happened, and our colleagues at the embassy in Brasilia looked at what was happening in Argentina and how things were opened in Uruguay, and they used that as arguments to further push along the Brazilian military rulers to follow through with their own democratic transition.

Q: Let's talk a bit about the inauguration. Was there much representation from Europe at all at that?

STAPLES: No, no. We were shocked. I think a couple of foreign ministers came, no heads of state. But Secretary Schultz – you know, it was funny, there was one, big nice hotel in Montevideo in those days, and the Uruguayans were going to give us one floor. We eventually took every floor but two. You know how US missions are with the Secretary of State. And the Uruguayans at first were quite upset that we pushed so hard, but on the other hand, nobody was really coming from Europe, so they really didn't need the extra rooms, in the end.

The big delegation was headed by Secretary Schultz. All the coverage was about Secretary Schultz. Ronald Reagan had sent a personal message, which was publicized all over the papers. There was nothing from out of Europe. I felt like you did, and I told the Uruguayans, I said, "What's going on?" and they said, "Well, we're descended from them, but we aren't really close to them."

Q: Were we doing anything military-wise?

STAPLES: No.

Q: I mean, I was wondering whether we were trying to sell them planes or...

STAPLES: No, not at all. Now, again, it was the military regime. We were not doing any military sales, not in the least. The support they had had come from the Argentine military, and that had gone away.

Q: By the time you left, had the Malvinas/Falklands thing pretty well died out?

STAPLES: Yes. That had died away, and the Uruguayans would say that – at first, when I came, they were not so pleased that the Argentines had lost. It looked like the big Western European powers had ganged up on them. By the time I left, no one was talking about it. But if they did, the theme was the Argentines were so stupid, and who did they think they were to take on the UK?

Q: All right. The new government takes over. How well would you say they got into place?

STAPLES: They got into place well. The first thing they did, which was extremely smart – Sanguinetti made it very clear that there was going to be no retribution against the military. That was part of the deal, but he did it publicly. I don't believe they pushed through – they did not push through a general amnesty law, but they just made it clear that they were not going to go after people, and in fact, there were a couple of junior people in the foreign ministry who he allowed to stay on. Some of the members of the military government they sort of took care of. He appointed, I think, one ambassador who had been an ambassador in the military regime somewhere else.

The Blancos and the Frente Amplio were so pleased to be back in the Parliament again that they didn't complain too much, and the Frente Amplio did very well in the elections, came very close to winning the mayoralty of Montevideo, which is a big deal. So they had a basis to establish themselves and go forward. And our message after the transition, " Okay, don't mess it up. Now you have to show that you can be constructive partners. You have to recognize that Uruguayan democracy is fragile, and you've got to work together to make sure that it continues, and that it's strong." That message was well received.

Q: Did you find that when the new government took over, that you were kind of the repository of an awful lot of missing and other elements of stuff? If nothing else, sort of turning your files over to anybody?

STAPLES: No, we didn't do that. They established, as I recall, a commission to look into human rights issues, and that commission not only knew what I had, or what we had, so to speak, but now that the military government was gone, a lot more people who had been afraid started to come forward, and the word out of Argentina by that time, now, Alfonsin had been in almost two years. That's when we first really started hearing about up to 10,000 missing, and the mothers were starting to first begin to march. And that's when, shortly before I left, they were starting to put out word in Uruguay that up to a 1,000 people had been missing, the first stories of some of them, who had been pushed out of helicopters over the water, and that kind of thing, was coming up. And not then – I can't remember, Stu – but then, or shortly thereafter, there were arrests of one or two military people who were known torturers, and so forth. But the new government didn't go after the senior people.

I remember that we had, about that time, too, after the inauguration, I think, a visit from the Spanish Prime Minister and a visit or two from some senior people in Europe. Some trade talks, and so forth. They weren't there as the big guys pushing with us, before the transition. So these were just sort of nice visits. They weren't really too important.

Q: Starting from when you arrived through the whole thing: how would you describe the role of the Church, and did we get involved? Of course we're talking of the Catholic Church.

STAPLES: Yes, and I asked that question as well, when I first came, because of course, the role of the Church was so important in Central America. So I got to Uruguay and I said, "Well, who's in this with us?" Well, some of the students, especially the news media, the newspapers and the editorial writers and so forth, intellectuals, the political parties. And I said, "What about the Church?" Uruguayans, to my surprise – and they're again, unique in this way – are very, very secular people. Supposedly Catholic, but very few people go to church. And in fact, Christmas, they call it something else. They call it the *dia* of something else, and you don't find Christmas lights or Christmas trees or displays. Those who are really Catholic have those such things in their homes. No decorations in the street, nobody gets off for Christmas, it's the *dia* de la familia. Very,

very anticlerical, in a sense, which was unusual for me, I couldn't get used to it. Uruguay is one of the most secular nations in the world.

Q: It sounds like a happy hunting ground for the Pentecostal churches, because they're all over Latin America and winning hands down, usually.

STAPLES: Yes, Mormons, or whatever. But yes, not then, of course, because in light of the so many military dictatorships there. A small group of Jehovah's witnesses were very persecuted, arrested, thrown out. But not a Catholic country. On paper, maybe, but not a Catholic country at all. The Church – I don't remember ever meeting anyone from the Church. We didn't go and call on Church leaders.

Q: The papal nuncio was not a figure?

STAPLES: No. I don't even think there was a papal nuncio. Uruguayans like their beaches, and they like their life and they don't spend much time on religion. You don't find crucifixes or anything for sale. You don't find people wanting time off to go to Mass. Not in Uruguay. Again, what a change from Central America, where I served.

Q: Well, then, you left there in the summer of – what was it – '87?

STAPLES: I left there in summer of '85.

Q: So where did you go?

STAPLES: Well, I went to another country where Spanish was spoken, Equatorial Guinea, off the coast of West Africa.

Q: Oh, boy, so all you had to is skip across the Atlantic.

STAPLES: It's right across the water. It was one of those things where I got this call from Washington, and somebody said, "You know, you've seen two posts in the WHA and Latin America and you've done real well." Oh, and Montevideo was also quite important because I got tenured. That meant the State Department decided I could stick around. But the HR assignment officer said, "Well, how would you like to go to a place where you could be the number two at a little embassy and the people speak Spanish? I said, "OK, where's that?" And they said, "Malabo." And I said, "Where's that?" "Equatorial Guinea, off the coast of West Africa, Central Africa." I said, "Really?" And they said, "Yes, and your family can come and there's no political violence and you might find it interesting." So I talked it over with the family and we said OK.

We looked it up, and it seemed to be have beaches and a was in a nice little part of Africa. I told Rick Melton, the DCM who later became Ambassador to Brazil, what I was doing, and he said, "Why do I know that name?" He said, "Wait a minute. Is that where those two guys killed each other in the vault?" I said, "What?" Well, I did a little research

and yes, that's where one of the more infamous State Department crimes had happened, but before my time.

Q: I mean, we've had several accounts of people who have investigated it, there have been books written on it.

STAPLES: Oh yes. Well, it happened, and the interesting thing was John Graves, who was the Public Affairs Officer in Montevideo, was in Cameroon at the time when it happened, across the water, and they got the frantic call from the guy who had murdered the other person. So John and two other people went over to the island to check it out, and of course, were immediately arrested by then President Macias's thugs. John's stories are legion about how they finally found the body after the other person fled to the hills before he was eventually tracked down and arrested. Well, that's where we went next, to Malabo, Equatorial Guinea.

Q: OK. You were there from when to when?

STAPLES: I was there from September of 1985 until – let me refresh my memory – the summer of 1987. Two years.

Q: Describe where it is and all.

STAPLES: Equatorial Guinea – Malabo, the capital, is on an island, Bioko island, off the coast of Cameroon, and there's a land mass to the part of the country that's to the south of Cameroon. So there's a continental part of the country, and part of the country is an island, where the capital, Malabo, is located. A very interesting history there. Back in the 1800s it was ruled by the British for a little while who based their anti-slavery ships there, but the malaria was so bad, so many of them died, they gave it up, and then the Spanish got it, and they gave it up for a little while, I forget to who. The Portuguese had it for a little bit, and then the Spanish took it back. Until independence in 1968 it had been a Spanish colony. The official language was Spanish.

There were two ethnic groups, the Bubis, who were from the island, and the Fang, who were part of the larger Fang subculture in the continental part of Central Africa.

Q: The Fang is one of the major tribes.

STAPLES: One of the major groups in all of Central Africa. At independence, a terrible man named Macias had been elected in the U.N. sponsored election as the President, but Macias, after taking over, brought in the Russians and the Cubans and the North Koreans and ran a brutal dictatorship. I think he may have killed 30,000 or 40,000 people. He was famous for throwing Cabinet Ministers out of windows if they didn't present the right kind of report, and he established a really hard-line Marxist, Leninist regime. He was killed by his nephew, President Teodoro Obiang, who rules the country to this day. It's one of the more interesting dictatorships, hard-line authoritarian governments in all of

Africa, with a fascinating history, memorialized by our good friend and former Harvard Professor Bob Klitgaard who wrote the book *Tropical Gangsters*.

We were there from ’85 to ’87, when the country was one of the poorest in the world. Per capita income was $100 a year or less. It had a mini-market and a restaurant run by a Lebanese couple. No food in stores, but there were warehouses full of booze. We used to fly to neighboring Cameroon for food. We had a little embassy staffed by five State Department people, and there were only about fifteen cars in the whole country. Today, the *Economist* has recently called Equatorial Guinea the Kuwait of Africa because of its oil wealth. I’ve seen it both ways, first from 1985 to 1987, and then 2001 to 2004, when I was Ambassador to both Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon.

Q: Was personnel doing its usual job on you, when they said, "Oh, it’s a peaceful country and you’ll love it," and all?

STAPLES: Yes. It was going to be a new place, going to the Africa Bureau assignment for the first time. Someone had said that you don’t want to be in one bureau your whole career, you’d be the number two in Malabo, and the Ambassador’s a political appointee and needs someone who help him encourage the government to be less authoritarian. He needs someone who knows how to work well with people, to improve morale, and this, that and the other. And Jo Ann and I agreed to go there.

Little did I know that the ambassador was someone who had been fired from USAID (United States Agency for International Development) for trying to unilaterally dismantle Congressionally-mandated population programs. He was offered Equatorial Guinea and said OK, I’ll take it. They all thought, in the administration, he would say no and go away, but he took it. He went out there and ruled with an iron fist to the point where everybody was curtailing their assignment or were in fear of him. I was sent, as it turned out, to try and make things reasonable.

Q: What was his name?

STAPLES: Frank Ruddy, and he’s still around, a lawyer here today. He had his wife Terri there, and two boys, who were quite nice. I was in essence the DCM and political chief. Frank had an OMS, a secretary. We had a communicator but did not have modern communication equipment. He had a device where you put a tape through a machine and if the signal was sent out and picked up in Liberia, it could be forwarded on to somewhere else and then to Washington. Very, very old equipment when you look back on it. We had a contract American who worked as our General Services Officer, and he was married to a Cuban who did development work with a UN agency.

There was only one bank, a Spanish bank, and half the time it had no money. The communications – we had a radio system that was supposed to link us to the consulate in Douala, Cameroon, but half the time it didn’t work. We had no television. I had my short-wave radio. If you wanted to make a phone call you had to, as my wife did for me on one occasion, pack a lunch and go down to the PTT (Post, Telephone and Telegraph)

building, where you sat the steps there, after you placed your order, and visited with people, ate your lunch, had a soft drink – a very valuable soft drink, because they all came from Cameroon – and maybe in two or three hours your call might come through. Maybe not. And as my wife said one morning, "What in the world have you done to us? Do you realize where we are?"

Being in the tropics, huge torrential rains would come very often. And it was as if you were at the end of the world. You felt that nobody knew where we were, and yet there were all these Russians running around supporting their big trawler fleet operating along the coast of West Africa. They also had a very big Russian cultural center. When the Cubans went into Namibia and so forth, to stop the South African attacks, the Cubans used the big airport in Malabo, the big runway, as a transit area. So we had a big Cuban presence. The North Koreans were there doing an agriculture project. We had, up on the mountain top, above the tsetse fly level, the Dutch, who were running a cattle project, but they weren't really Dutch, they were South Africans, masquerading as the Dutch.

Q: Oh, the good old Boers.

STAPLES: The good Boers, who were wonderful guys, and they had all this good, canned South African food that they would share with us when we would go up the mountain sometimes. The bar at the only restaurant in town, the Beirut, was something right out of the movie *Casablanca.* The one restaurant – when they had food – run by the Lebanese guy named Gabi, and his wife, who also ran the mini-market, which had soap and washcloths. There was no place else to get food locally other than the fresh meat section, the open-air market in Malabo, with rat and monkey stretched out for your viewing pleasure!. But that bar in the restaurant, you had various mercenaries who were there, from these strange, unmarked planes that would land at the airport, government Ministers, who were always trying to bum a drink, because even they were always broke in that poor country. You had the South Africans masquerading as the Dutch. You had the Americans, the Staples family, with our little daughter Catherine, five years old, who these strange characters liked to sit on the bar sometimes and offer her a soft drink. Everyone liked Catherine at the restaurant. And by the way, Catherine also had, at our house, the only swing set in the whole country, and that was marvelous, because the kids would come from school and play with Catherine, and the ministers would come and pick up their kids. But while they were playing, I could talk to them, because without permission they could not talk to anybody. So once again, my daughter played an important role in contact work and our outreach efforts. Maybe I should write a book one day about swing set diplomacy!

Malabo back in those days was a place I could not fully describe if I talked about it for the next thirty hours. People would appear at the airport out of nowhere and do deals and then suddenly you heard they were arrested, and then they were missing, and they were back again, doing more deals. It's where we had a ferry that would come in and people would put their cars on it and float over to Douala, and someone would work on your car, and it would float back and your car would run for a little while more.

We had the only swimming pool in the whole city, behind our embassy, a little pool, and our ambassador would float around in a rubber boat with these long yellow pads, writing articles for the *National Review.* And we had – I tell you, my best story of Equatorial Guinea was the night that Ambassador Ruddy got up to see if the local guards around the Residence were sleeping. You'll hear this in Africa, from people in Africa. The guards are always sleeping. Frank got up one night and he had on this white nightshirt when he went out, and of course the guards were sleeping, and he said, "Wake up, what are you doing?" And these guys woke up, thought they saw a ghost, and they took off! They took off, and unfortunately the guy who took off also had the keys to the gates and everything else in our little embassy compound, which was a converted house. The next day, we sent out a search party, couldn't find him, but Ted Nist, who was our junior administrative officer assigned to us along with his wife Sally who was our budget officer, had a bicycle lock. So until we could get to Douala again, for about two or three weeks, we locked the embassy compound with this bicycle lock.

Q: Let's talk a little bit about Frank Ruddy, I think I interviewed him a long time ago. Was he – you say he had a dispute over population – which means birth control business.

STAPLES: Yes, exactly.

Q: Sounds like – did he come out of the right wing, or what?

STAPLES: Yes, Frank was very much a political conservative, a Republican appointee, and I had heard – this didn't happen on my watch – but back in Washington, he had unilaterally done what he could to not fund, not promote, not carry out these programs, that even though they were Congressionally mandated. The Administration got in hot water on the Hill, and he had to be replaced. So they offered him Malabo, and he took it, much to everyone's surprise.

Q: How did you deal with him?

STAPLES: He and I got along very well. My wife, Jo Ann, became our GSO at a certain point, but he was very imperious sometimes in demanding this or that be done at the Residence or around the grounds. He would say, "You know, the driver is late again," which wasn't the case, "And I just fired him. I just wanted you to know that." Oh. So I'd go home that night and the driver would show up, begging and pleading, we had no other driver, no one could drive this American car except him. So I'd go back the next day with Frank and I'd say, "Just by chance I ran into him and he was late but you know, he was doing this and that for us." "Oh, I didn't know that." "Yes, so I thought I'd talk to you about it, and we really need him and we should bring him back, and I'll talk to him to make sure this doesn't happen again." Well, OK, Frank would say, bring him back.

After school was over Catherine would come down to the embassy. Everything was in a ten-block area, by the way. And he would talk to Catherine, and so forth, and I'd come in the room and he and Catherine were out on the copying machine making copies of their

hands, comparing their handprints. I mean, he was a wonderful guy like that, but something would hit him the wrong way and he'd make these abrupt decisions.

But he absolutely couldn't stand President Obiang and his government. He called them thugs, and worse, and his effectiveness was not too good. But he understood, on the other hand, how to deal with him. The President's brother, Armengol, the head of security, and two other guys, would come to the embassy and of course they're all armed, no one would take off their weapons or anything. They'd want to go up and talk to the Ambassador, they had information for him. So we'd go up the stairs in our little house that was the embassy, into the ambassador's office, sit down and these people would say, "Ambassador, we thought we'd just come by and so forth and, by the way, can we have a scotch?" And this was eight-thirty in the morning. We'd all have to drink with them. They were world-class drinkers, the Guineanos. Finally Armengol would say, "Well, we think that there may be suspicious cargo coming in on the Saturday flight from Spain, but we are watching it closely, we just wanted you to know," and then they'd leave. That was the important information! What they really wanted was a drink!

Q: Speaking of flights coming in, with Cubans doing – somebody must have been going there and writing down tail numbers of airplanes or something.

STAPLES: The Guineanos did that. The time to get information on what was really happening in the country was Saturday morning, in those days. That was when the weekly flight from Iberia came in, from Spain. And again, you could not talk to ministers, you couldn't visit anyone. The Fourth of July reception, you had to give your list of invitees to the foreign ministry, and they would tell you who you could invite, and then they saw the cards when they were made out, and you put one of their officials in the car with our driver, and together they delivered the invitations, and that way, the person who got it knew that it was OK, because they were on a list, approved by the ministry. So that meant they could show up and not be arrested. That's the way the country ran. But Saturday mornings, when the Iberia flight came in, everybody was at the airport, fighting off mosquitoes. Off came all the people, the people departing were there, the bar was open and people would drink and you could run into officials and have a chat. It was a big social event for about half of every Saturday. It was the only time when everybody got together without fear, waiting for the Iberia flight. It was quite a place to try to find out something, or to work with people.

Q: Did we have any interests there?

STAPLES: Yes. Our interests were, of course, the universality of policy, we're going to be represented everywhere. Number two, supporting American companies. Frank and others always suspected there was oil, lots of oil, in the offshore area. So we did convince the government and were successful – it didn't happen on our watch, it happened after we left – to allow American oil companies to drill. The Spaniards didn't like the Guineanos, never liked the idea of them being independent, always said there was no oil. We had some of the French companies like Total and others who had drilled a little bit, no oil. The Americans were, however, very positive, so our job, one of them, was to convince

the government to let the Americans drill, and they gave our firms concessions, especially Exxon-Mobil. And eventually, a year and half after we left, two years after we left, the oil was found. And the Americans today are the big exporters of all the oil, not the Spanish, not the French, nobody else, but the Americans. And natural gas. That was one key objective that was very important that we succeeded in accomplishing.

Our other goal was to try to influence the government to become less authoritarian, while we kept an eye on the Russians and our other cold war adversaries. The Russians had a big presence in those days. Today they're gone. But they had a cultural center, they had an Ambassador, who was a friend, as it turned out. He would invite you over to their big embassy and their residence on the water and they would start out the evening with a movie on the side of the wall as you're swatting mosquitoes, hoping to God you don't get malaria, of the Russian space program. And as I said earlier, they had a very large cultural center offering language courses, study abroad opportunities, etc.

The Chinese were very big, as well. The Chinese had a big embassy, typical block-house style, and what they were doing was mainly development work on the continent building dams and roads. The Cubans were there, and are still there today, but the big military presence was finished in the mid-80s. The Cubans were, however, still sending a lot of Guineanos to school, especially medical school.

Q: Were you getting any reflections of the almost imminent demise of the Soviet bloc or not?

STAPLES: That's a very good question. We did not. We knew the Cubans were not very influential but well liked because of their academic exchange programs. The North Koreans were what they were, but the Russians were quite active and running cultural, development, and exchange programs. The shame was the big Russian trawlers who were still quite active in that whole Gulf of Guinea area, just scooping up...

Q: Scooping up the fish, without any...

STAPLES: No controls. And we had a – and it was clearly aimed at the Cold War, countering the Russians – but we had a military assistance program with Cameroon, to provide them with patrol-boats, so they could secure their coastal borders. We had established a package to provide patrol boats and maintenance training, and as part of that, we had one boat for Equatorial Guinea. We had great support from the defense attaché Colonel Mike Ferguson in Yaoundé, Cameroon, who was also accredited to Equatorial Guinea. He would come over and we had training programs with the Guineano military, such as it was. Not large military, about a 1,000 people, if that, and the navy had about forty people, but no boats. They had a Russian boat that they didn't maintain and it was sunk in the harbor where you could see it. Really, just sunk there. But our boat was coming, and we trained them, and right before I left we actually delivered the boat and they had a crew ready to handle it.

Very interesting people, the Guineanos. They're very smart, they're the one people in Africa who I've found that are wizards with languages. They just pick up languages with little difficulty. When we arrived they were not part of the Central African Franc zone, the CFA zone, so the currency was not convertible. But they joined, and President Obiang started learning French, which really bothered the Spanish. They wanted just the Spanish influence, but they had no interest in the well being and development of their former colony. But Obiang wanted EG to join the Central African Franc zone, which it did. So Obiang started learning French. He had no money, no resources until oil was discovered. Paul Biya, the president of Cameroon, would send a plane for him when he had to travel and help EG out with a little money here and there.

The country was dirt poor, and there was no electricity. Our housekeeper said once, under Macias, the electricity went off, it never came back for 11 years. Everybody had generators, you lived with this hum of generators all through the island. Residences, the embassies, the buildings downtown. Everybody had generators, and there was just no money.

We used to get, as I say, our food from Cameroon, but we did it on a schedule. The State Department paid for charter flights during all of our time there because there was only the one airline flight from Spain each week, and Cameroon Airlines would fly in maybe once or twice a week. But we had a weekly charter flight between Malabo and Douala, Cameroon, and what we would do is we'd take turns to see who could fly. Whoever would go would take the pouch, the classified pouch, and you would be a non-pro courier, and you would take the pouch, and of course, your family, get on the little plane flown by a French pilot – sometimes they had been drinking but you still flew, or else you didn't get off the island. And you flew to Douala, and took your pouch to the consulate where your messages that were classified could be transmitted, and then you went to the Novotel, where, for a weekend, you got a nice room and a restaurant and shopping, etc. But you also flew with about five or six coolers, and at some point, during the weekend, on a Sunday or Saturday, you would go to the supermarkets and you would stock up with what you needed and what others needed, everyone placed their order, and then after a couple of days in a nice hotel you'd fly back to Equatorial Guinea, where you were always, of course, hassled by the guys at the airport wanting something. But you beat them off, and you got into town with your purchases. About once every four or five weeks you got a trip to Douala as a non-pro courier, and that is how we lived? That is how we lived.

Q: Did we have any real influence or contact with the government?

STAPLES: We did. We would meet on occasion with President Obiang, and we would definitely meet with the foreign minister and some of the other folks, and by the way, our communication problems were also the government's problems, as well. Frequently we would meet with the foreign minister downtown and we'd say, "Mr. Minister, we're glad to run into you. We need your vote on this issue at the UN," and we'd explain it to him and he'd say "OK, I agree with you. Can you tell our ambassador in New York?" So we'd get out a message or phone call to tell our UN contact and ask that he or she pass

the instruction to the EG Un Ambassador! This was a different way of doing business with a foreign ministry.

With government officials, and the treasured thing for them was if you had a meal and food and you could invite them to your house. That went a long way. But of course, they had to always get permission, and you couldn't invite the same minister twice in a row because then he might be accused of coup plotting. It was a very, very stark dictatorship in that sense.

Q: How about wives? Did they have contact with them, or did they have mistresses, or…?

STAPLES: They had multiple mistresses, multiple wives. Many of the people were polygamous, including President Obiang. But wives in a social life, no. There was nothing to do. They had nothing. We had a friend who is a Guineano, went to the States, came back and married one of the ministers she had known from school days. She brought back her American kids, who were just dying in that place. They were friends with Catherine and we would take them to the pool at the embassy sometimes but couldn't do it too much because she and her husband might be considered too close to the Americans. When we left, we gave her everything in our pantry, all of our American stuff, everything we could, from back home that people had sent us, everything. She had a little beauty shop, she did hairdressing and so forth, and she walked off into the bush and off to their home and we wondered how in the world is this woman going to survive here, who is so Americanized, with these kids who are American? How are they going to make it?

When I came back in 2001 as Ambassador to Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea, everything had changed so dramatically because of the oil wealth, and we'll talk about it later, but our friend had about eleven rental houses leased to the oil companies, a home in San Antonio, Texas, multiple homes in Spain, a Cadillac on this island that once had almost no cars, and she still had her shop. She never gave up her shop. In case anything happened, she was going to have her little shop. And it was just thrilling to see people who were so poor to now have a good life and success. To see how Equatorial Guinea had transformed was just wonderful for me. But when we were there the first time, '85 to '87, life for everyone was hard, very hard.

Q: Was this a place I used to see on the map, way back, Rio Muni?

STAPLES: Yes, Rio Muni is the continental part of the place and Santa Isabel was the Spanish capital. It had gone down a lot from colonial days. We know people who had served in Cameroon, and they would go over to Santa Isabel in those day for vacations from Cameroon, rather than go to Europe. People would skip the Spanish islands and all and go to Malabo. Spaniards would not vacation in Spain or Europe, but would go to Malabo. And in the square in the capital, even today, is this incredible Spanish cathedral and these tile mosaics, and you could see how it was just a little gem in those days, but it had gone down a long way when we were there, a long, long way.

Q: How about malaria?

STAPLES: Malaria was awful, and still is, and when we were there it was also very deadly. People would get sick and you'd hear two days later – I'm talking members of the NGO community, development experts – you'd hear they're sick and then you hear they were evacuated to Douala hospital. And then you'd hear they're dead, just like that, four or five days. Deadly, deadly strains of malaria. We wore long sleeves, we used sprays, we used screens, our home was screened, we took our pills daily as prescribed and the most disturbing moment of my life was when was my wife had traveled to visit friends in Germany. I was still in Malabo with Catherine. Catherine got sick, and then got a fever. Let me tell you how bad this place was. At the international airport, with this huge runway, this runway was an alternate space shuttle landing site because of the runway. It had no electricity and no lights. There were some Spanish cocoa growers and two other people who had light planes. It was like the second World War, we had a call list. If someone needed to get out at night we had contracts with them to fly us to Douala. And we had a recall list of people ready to race to the airport and line up on the runway and shine headlights on it, so you could get off at night, if need be. That's how isolated we were.

Well, Catherine gets sick, she has a fever, and here we go. Is it just a cold? Is it malaria? There were two doctors on the whole island, one of whom was our contract doctor, a Guineano. She was wonderful. She's there today as the contract doctor for Exxon, in its oil compound. There was a Spanish doctor who you could find sometimes but he was an alcoholic and you never knew if he really any good because it was rumored that he had lost his medical license. We didn't know. They both came over, said it was a cold, gave Catherine some medicine and about ten o'clock at night the fever was getting worse. I didn't send her to Cameroon and it turned out to be a cold, but for about 24 hours our whole embassy was worried as to what should we do about Catherine? This fever broke and she was OK. But malaria – it was deadly, in Equatorial Guinea. Absolutely deadly and we knew people who were friends and very healthy, then a week later they were dead. It was very dangerous.

Q: What about contact or knowledge of the bloc people?

STAPLES: Contact with the bloc people. In a place like that, all the foreigners knew each other, if only by sight. I play chess, and I heard from a couple of people that the Russian ambassador played chess. So I decided we're going to have a chess night. Everybody brings a board and I'd done this one night in El Salvador. We'll provide refreshments, and we'll play chess all night. So the ambassador accepted. He brought four or five people from his embassy and we had some other people from another embassy and we had about six boards in my little house. The idea was after you played a game, you had to switch. So people would switch and switch and switch, and at one point in the evening my wife and the Russian ambassador had gone off to our pantry and were in there together, and I said, "What is that all about?" and Jo Ann told me later that he had brought some Russian vodka because she told him once at a reception she wanted to know why it was considered so strong and the best. And my wife from southeastern

Kentucky had brought over – in those days on the airlines you could do such a thing – some cough syrup, but what it really was was moonshine. Good stuff from the hills. So they were comparing Russian vodka to Kentucky moonshine!

The other contacts we had with bloc people besides the social interactions with the Russians, I'll never forget – again to show you what life was like in Malabo before oil wealth – I went to the bank to get some money to pay our FSNs and the Spanish bank had no money. The Iberia flight had come and gone and had not brought any money. This is before EG joined the CFA Franc zone and there were more banks and money was more easily convertible. So we had no money, and the North Koreans were there, the Cubans were there, the French were there, we were all just looking at each other saying in effect, what can we do? So you're not supposed to talk to North Koreans, right? Well, I said, "How much money do you have?" Cubans, how much money do you have? We had a little money. We all pooled our money, all of us, the Russians, the Chinese, the North Koreans, the Cubans, and we decided how much everybody really needed, we sort of divvied it up and for a week, that's what we operated on. Everybody did this – we all shook hands – and everybody said, now, do not say anything back to our capitals. Don't anybody say a word. But for a week there, we did that until the bank had money again and we settled up between us. That was the one time I remember seeing this look on everyone's face of just despair and resignation, a look accompanied by the shaking of heads that said, "What in the world are we doing in this place?"

On a more somber note, the South Africans had a car go off into a ravine and one of their aid workers, a young woman was killed. A Guinean woman, and four or five people including some of the African embassy people from, I think Nigeria, got together and provided some medical assistance and an injured South African was flown off without fanfare to Nigeria for treatment, to a Nigerian hospital. This was during the apartheid era. And by the way Nigerian and Equatorial Guinea had a very bad relationship. Very bad. The Guineanos had this policy where, if they believed there were too many foreigners around, especially other Africans like Cameroonians and Nigerians, they would go around in trucks and round them up and take them up to the cocoa fields and work them like slaves. Well, they did that once too often and the Nigerians sent about two warships into the harbor. One day, they appeared, and some Marines offloaded onshore. The whole EG government fled. We never knew where they went. They all disappeared. And for about six hours the Nigerians ran things. They got all their citizens they could find, put them on the ships and sailed off, and told somebody to tell President Obiang if it ever happened again they'd be back. That would happen – or something like that would happen, or tense messages – about twice a year.

Q: Were you getting any stories or reflections of the murder in the vault?

STAPLES: Some people knew about it but a lot of people didn't. The old vault, the old embassy such as it was, was, and now is, a warehouse, a small warehouse on the grounds of the Nigerian embassy. This was not where our embassy was located.

Some people, some of the Guineanos, did know about it. But it happened under Macias's rule. Our biggest challenge with the Guineanos was to try to get this place that was so backward, to get them somewhat educated. Macias had banned people from going to school. On the island, he had burned all the fishing boats so people couldn't escape. We had all these people on an island who couldn't fish. We would have people who were 28, 30 years old, we were sending to the States on a special program, so they could get, basically, a high-school education or perhaps attend some kind of junior college work. You had people who were very, very backward. Remember we were in a country where there were nothing but generators running. That was at the UN compound, our compound, our homes, government buildings, etc. There were a couple of places where generators would provide enough light for a streetlight to operate, and you'd have forty people standing under it trying to read anything. You had to be careful with your trash, because not like people trying today to perhaps steal your identity, you had people looking for something to read, anything to read. Just so they could read words. It was that kind of place. It was absolutely incredible.

We had gone from Central America and South America, Uruguayans with 98% literacy, going over to Buenos Aires for the opera, etc., to being in Equatorial Guinea, where there were no phones, no communication, no TV, no power. What we did have – again to show you what life was like – we went to the Peter Justesen catalog, the European catalog you can order duty free. We ordered two movie projectors, and we somehow got on the Navy film circuit, where they would send around the big reel-to-reel films, and what we did at our little converted embassy house was on Friday evenings we'd have movie nights. We would invite others in the diplomatic corps to come and people would bring popcorn, whatever they could, or drinks, and bake cookies and things like that, and we'd have 15 or 20, 25 people. But Frank Ruddy had real power over the movie list. If someone at another embassy or someone bothered him he'd say, "Take him off the list!" And that was serious, because that was good entertainment and for many the only way to see a movie.

We'd set up the movie projectors and we'd run the movies and we would take turns running them, except Frank. So I learned how to operate a movie projector and we had these competitions like who could make the best transitions from one reel to the other without a break. If you did it the right way people would vote later, who was the best projectionist. Training not offered at the Foreign Service Institute!!

Q: You have that little thing up in...

STAPLES: Oh, yes. We'd learn how to manage that in the sprocket and people would say, "George was better here but Ted was good that night and so forth. We had some pretty interesting movies. We had some real winners and we had some dogs. But that was entertainment, the movie night.

Q: How did you find being DCM?

STAPLES: Well, it was good, because Frank let me do things pretty much as I wanted. We had some work with the government on developing its investment code, because we figured that there would be something coming, more trade or even oil discoveries. He let me help them do that. Basically, I wrote it and told the finance officials that this is what one looks like, but I can get you some others from the rest of Africa to show you what's wrong with them which I did. I said, "Here's what you need to do," they said all right. The next thing you know, it was done.

We also had US Navy ship visits. The ships would come on West African cruises as they call them. The sailors would come ashore and we'd have them paint some of the school buildings. The Catholic church was important in Equatorial Guinea. They would paint some of the nun's quarters in the school buildings and do some work like that. They would play basketball with the Guineano basketball team, such as it was. We had a couple of people who taught tennis. There were about two tennis courts on the island, and people would sometimes play despite the humidity and the mosquitoes.

We always seemed to be in a fight with the government over taxes or fees. At the port they always wanted – they had no money so they always tried to get something from you. Regretfully, today, when they have this incredible oil wealth, the mentality is the same, to try to make it difficult so you pay off to do something. I always had to go down to the port and deal with officials who tried to delay releasing our shipments. I also had to write all the required reports, the commercial report, the human rights report and things of that nature. Human rights was very sensitive because they had the infamous Black Beach Prison, a prison where water would actually rise up and come in on the prisoners to a certain level. Something like out of a pirate movie in the Caribbean. But Ambassador Ruddy let me do all of those things, and basically he let me run the show, so I got to do a little of everything and Jo Ann had the opportunity to gain GSO experience. She did an outstanding job in very difficult circumstances. Work for family members is vital, especially in an isolated place like EG was in those days.

Q: The human rights report, particularly in a small country, I would think it would be difficult because it goes back to Washington, there's no doubt about who wrote it, and then it's published.

STAPLES: That's right. The reports were always very negative, and the government always blamed Frank Ruddy. They basically tried to shut him out of things wherever they could. But you raised a good point, because those were the times, I think, when the human reports really mattered. I don't think they do today.

In the '80s, countries really cared about that report, and for E.G. which was so dependent on foreign assistance – they had an IMF (International Monetary Fund), World Bank agreement and donor/NGO assistance – they had to keep their noses kind of clean, and they wanted to show in their own way that the Macias years were over. It really mattered. I remember that after the second human rights report we published, Foreign Ministry officials came to the embassy, which was very unusual. What they had done was write the report that they thought should have been published, just so we would know. And of

course, it glossed over all the abuses carried out in a dictatorship. But the human rights report was significant and governments paid attention to it. But today I think that if every year you hit a country again and again and again and again, at a certain point, it knows it's never going to stop, so you shrug your shoulders and you just don't care. I think that's where we are today, people really don't care. I don't think it's much of a report in terms of effectiveness, but I doubt people have the guts to go tell the Congress it ought to be stopped or modified. So you're on this treadmill, never ending. It's too bad.

Q: You said that the place is a divided place, it's an island and a wedge in the continent. How did that work out for you in the embassy, and sort of in general?

STAPLES: Well, first of all, we had a small AID program, a chicken project, on the island, so I had to manage that, and work with the aid contractors who did that, and a transportation project involving trucks that we had provided to the Guineanos. The chicken project, like every chicken project, failed eventually, because the chickens got sick and died. I always used to tell my AID directors, later, "Don't ever talk to me about a chicken project, because they fail." The birds get sick and the birds die. And the other problem in Equatorial Guinea, of course, was if you had chickens or cattle or anything like that, the ministers would show up and want one, or two, or four, or something. So you're always being pressured for food.

We also had, in Equatorial Guinea during my time there, a small Peace Corps program. They were active on the continent, which brings us to the continent. The continental part of Equatorial Guinea is completely different than the island, completely different. The feeling is different, you feel like you're on a beach in West Africa, you're not closed in on this island with the malaria. You can hear the ocean. It's completely different, and our Peace Corps team was doing some agricultural projects. But the continent was poor, even worse than the island. No power whatsoever. Back under the Spanish it had a conference center and the main town there, Bata, had its own airport but it was badly maintained. To get there, you had to fly with the Spanish, they had these mini-C130s called Cazas that we flew on. We went there a couple of times. The one we flew on – excuse me, right after us – crashed and killed people, but you never knew if you could get a flight, you never knew if you could get back. You'd stay with Peace Corps volunteers.

The roads through the interior were almost non-existent. Myles Frechette, who was the Ambassador in Cameroon, and the Defense Attaché made a road trip through Cameroon down through the continental part of Equatorial Guinea and on to the coast, and it took them almost seven days. Today there are superhighways. But then, seven days. It was like going through a Humphrey Bogart movie, slashing your way to the ocean. But the continent, it was very famous in Equatorial Guinea because it had hardwood, these incredible hardwood trees, and they were being taken out of the country by the Europeans, mainly Italians. The Guineanos were basically taking their cut. I don't think any money ever went in the national treasury.

The continent had little communications capability, very little food. The only education was done by the Spanish, Spanish religious schools, Spanish nuns and NGO workers. The

continental part of EG was very, very poor, but with tons of potential. You would see these beautiful beaches and you would say to yourself, "If there were a way to bring in European tourists, and there were beach resorts along these beaches, they'd be some of the finest in the world." But it wasn't going to happen while we were there. And the Spanish had no interest in development, the French were only interested in a small concession or two, looking for oil and gas, but not finding anything. The continent was just going along with people trying to survive. Probably the life expectancy in Equatorial Guinea in those days was maybe 40 years?

Q: I take it you didn't have any state visits or the equivalent thereof?

STAPLES: No, no, we didn't. In fact, it was so bad I remember we had a couple of American tourists come once, and they came on a boat from Cameroon, and what they had was an old guidebook for Santa Isabel, they had the old Spanish guidebook. They found the embassy and I think they said that nothing is right in this book. We said, "You're right! Things changed." We gave them a little history lesson and a couple of people gave them some food to eat, gave them a lunch, and it was so interesting having tourists that a lot of us got out front by the gate and got our pictures taken with them, I mean, it was just, strange people appearing out of nowhere.

No, we had no official visits. We had absolutely no one.

Q: Did you have problems getting local staff there?

STAPLES: No, oh, no. To work for the embassy was an honor. We had one woman named Theresa who was fluent in Spanish and English; she did our diplomatic notes and our translations. The maintenance staff – my wife was our GSO, and Jo Ann had a policy that anybody she hired had to be able to do multiple things. So she would hire a guard, for example, but he also knew plumbing and maybe electricity, or somebody else for a job, but he also knew how to paint, or knew about vehicle maintenance. So we had a lot of people who could do a lot of things on some of our equipment, and be able to maintain things that way. There was no problem hiring local staff to do anything like that.

Q: You left there in '87?

STAPLES: 1987. We left there right after the attempted coup by the North Koreans, which was interesting.

Q: What was that? We didn't talk about that?

STAPLES: We didn't talk about that. We were out on an airport on a Saturday and the President's nephew pulled me aside and said, "After this is over, can I come by your house and see you?" And he came to the house, afterwards, and I poured him a scotch, you know, scotch-drinkers in the morning, everybody drank. He said, "Just thought you ought to know, we had a coup attempt this morning." I said, "Oh? Really?" It turned out the defense minister, who was the president's cousin, had been in league with the North

Koreans and they had launched – the defense minister with some soldiers – had tried to carry out a coup d'etat. Basically the country shut down for two or three days. The defense minister and those around him were arrested and put in Black Beach prison. A couple people were shot and killed, in fact. The North Koreans had their embassy surrounded, and eventually the decision was not to shut it. We had urged – what an opportunity. We urged Obiang to shut the thing, but he didn't. He had them just reduce the staff. That was their penalty.

For some weeks thereafter things were quite tense. There was a curfew in effect. People were picked up and arrested, mainly people who knew somebody who was connected to somebody. People were put in jail, and I heard later that some of them were released because family in Africa trumps everything. A lot of these were relatives and Obiang's clan and his family is quite a study as to the inner relationships there. The Defense Minister and others were released but watched carefully, never to have a job again. Some of them then fled to Europe and elsewhere in Africa. But we did have a coup attempt, and we were on Washington's radar for about a week or so.

Q: What were the North Koreans up to?

STAPLES: They thought that Obiang was getting too friendly with the Americans and that they wanted, basically, a hard-line sort of leftist Marxist government reinstalled that would be more amenable to the traditional Soviet style of doing things. But Obiang was protected by a large number of security personnel from Morocco. He was always and remains today worried more about efforts from his clan and family members to unseat him.

Q: Well, then, I think this is probably a good place to stop for now, we want to take off for lunch. We'll pick it up in '87 and I imagine you're back to Washington, now, aren't you, or not?

STAPLES: No, I'm not.

Q: Good heavens!

STAPLES: No, they sent me to another good place, they rewarded me, because I couldn't put in a bid list, I couldn't make a phone call. I had to go to Cameroon to make a phone call. I couldn't campaign for myself. So in their wisdom I did manage to send in a bid list and number 20, the last thing I put down, I said, "If nothing else is available, then send me to a nice place like the Bahamas." So the Department sent me to Nassau.

Q: Aha!

STAPLES: Which was my least favorite assignment!

Q: That often happens, these so-called 'great places.'

STAPLES: Yes, they sent me to the Bahamas.

Q: All right, well, we'll stop here.

(END FILE)

Q: OK, today, this is the second part of an interview with George Staples on the 23rd of June, 2008. George, we're off to the beaches of Nassau.

STAPLES: Sounds good, doesn't it?

Q: Yes. OK, well tell me, you were there from when to when?

STAPLES: I was there from August of 1987 until the summer of '89. Another two year assignment.

Q: All right. Where do the Bahamas fit into our foreign policy? At that time, what were the major…?

STAPLES: At that time, it was very important, mainly for one reason, and that was the Drug War. The Bahamas, as you know, is very close to the US, a close relationship with the US, but that string of islands were being used as transit points by Colombians and others bringing drugs into the US. All through the Bahamas there was a serious interdiction problem you would find on some of the outer islands or "family islands," as they were called. Crashed airplanes, and corruption was rampant. A lot of local policemen were paid money to be at the other end of the island at a certain time, when a plane would land, and so forth. So we had lots of issues there.

It was a unique assignment for me because I was head of the political-economic section. There was no pol-econ work in the traditional sense. There wasn't traditional economic reporting; the whole economy had the under-the-table aspect of the drug money, but above the table it was tourism. Two million plus tourists a year were coming to the Bahamas, and that's what the whole economy was based around, support for the tourist industry. On the other side, whenever anyone needed anything, everyone went to Florida. We used to joke, if you wanted to know where to shop in Florida, ask a Bahamian, because they would go all the time and they loved to talk about how there's no taxes and they're so much better off than the US, but they put heavy import duty on everything. For my daughter it used to cost about a dollar and a half to get an apple, to go to school. And so that was quite a challenge.

The whole emphasis of our policy with the Bahamas was to maintain good relations with them. We needed their support in the UN, but also in counter-narcotics. For me, it was my first introduction to being able to work with our Customs Service, Coast Guard, and the DEA.

Q: Let's talk first a bit about the government of the Bahamas.

STAPLES: As a former British colony, the government was modeled on the British parliamentary system and judicial system, with a Prime Minister who was Sir Lyndon Pindling, who was not liked by our government. He liked Castro a lot, and the Bahamas in those days besides Mexico was a place where Americans could go and fly off to Cuba without getting the passport stamped, no questions asked. But Pindling thought that we meddled too much in his local affairs, in particular in trying to get his government to be more proactive in the counter-drug struggle. He had a rough relationship with our ambassador at the time. She was a political appointee, Carol Hallett, who later became head of the Civil Aviation Agency. She was a pilot, a legislator from California appointed by President Reagan, and she was very effective. She really pushed Pindling and pressed him for support on major policy matters. Most American ambassadors to the Bahamas, they've always been political appointees and they go and sort of relax and go out to the Lyford Key area where the ultra-rich live, the John Templetons and people like that, or they go fishing or flying around the islands, but Carol worked everybody in the government really hard about support for the counter-drug effort and she was very visible and public about things, and she named names. A couple of times was close to being PNGed.

Q: Was there a political element, I mean, were governments changing, or was it a one-party system or what did we have?

STAPLES: No, it's a two-party system, mainly two parties, and they've always been that way. One is more Socialist and leftist-leaning in a way, and the other is more pro-business. All the parties in the Bahamas, all the key leaders, are usually attorneys, with the bank secrecy laws and all, the attorneys play a prominent part in that. Or they seemed to be medical doctors, all professionals, and it's exactly like the British parliamentary system. Everyone had constituencies, including the Prime minister, and parliamentary elections decided who would rule.

For me, it was quite a boring time in that sense because I arrived right after parliamentary elections had been held and they weren't scheduled again for five years. So I would go to the Parliament and listen to these great debates and nothing happened, because everyone lined up and held the party line. There were no changes there, although I did get to learn about the system, but that was that.

Q: Let's talk about the drug thing. What was sort of the situation, both what were you all doing, the drug smugglers were doing, what the government was doing, and sort of the embassy's effort and all?

STAPLES: The embassy in Nassau, the old embassy building – and unless the new one was ever built it's probably the same building, right off of Bay Street, downtown – the entire top floor of the embassy was like an operations center, where the DEA, Customs and Coast Guard were headquartered.

Q: The DEA is…

STAPLES: The Drug Enforcement Agency. They had satellite coverages, various US controlled balloons were in place above the Bahamas to do air surveillance, and they had a way to monitor everything passing through Bahamian airspace and Bahamian waters, where the Coast Guard was active. They also had various people who ran confidential informants or CIs, who would come to the embassy, supposedly to see me or other people, but after we got them in we'd funnel them to the right people to talk to, and things of that nature. They had a lot of agents coming in and out, who had to have diplomatic cover and were accredited. We also had, with the customs service, because of the tourism – if anyone's ever gone to the Bahamas, you can go through pre-screening right there in Nassau and just get on the plane go right into the States. So it made it easy for tourists so they wouldn't have to jam up in Atlanta or Fort Lauderdale or somewhere else. But what that meant was that a lot of those planes weren't being screened, so we always had a tension between random checks of passengers and the need for expeditious processing.

The drug traffickers were very, very smart. We used to have heated discussions in the embassy because the DEA in particular, they had this profile, and the profile was a single black woman who had come down supposedly to gamble, and would be turned into a mule to carry back drugs. So in all these checks they always would check single black women, and about 90% of the time didn't find anything. I would say, if everyone in the embassy knows this profile do you think the bad guys might know it, too? And I upset some people one time because I said, "Just once, just once, let's check college students coming back from spring break," and so forth, and let's go outside the profile. They did that on two planes and found all kinds of drugs, but then they claimed it was the college students, and on and on, and no one wanted to change the profile. And as I found out, that was because it would require meetings and a big report in Washington and the Congress would know and no one wanted to really change the profile and possible admit they were wrong. So we had that issue to overcome and it was very contentious in that sense.

Q: Why would Congress, I mean, was it a matter that we were goring the ox of Congressmen whose sons and daughters were being caught or was it – I mean, what was it?

STAPLES: No, it's because people had gone on the Hill to testify and put up charts and statistics and made a case that they were doing a really, really good job, but it wasn't what we could have been doing. Some people don't like change. They didn't like to think that maybe they were wrong. That's what happens sometimes.

Q: How about the role of the ambassador in something like this?

STAPLES: Ambassador Hallett was really good. She insisted on these things being done on occasion, but she also had very close relations with the heads of the Customs Service in particular, Coast Guard and all. She'd recognize those were not her resources being used. In a sense, they were using space in our embassy and she had to keep them on

board. Sometimes she had to battle competition and rivalry between the different services that came into play. Overall, she did a good job, I think.

Q: What was your impression of, let's say, the Drug Enforcement Agency and Customs, because they're both working the same side of the street?

STAPLES: Yes, but very different people. The Drug Enforcement Agents were real cowboys. They like to carry their weapons and run around and play games, and didn't like diplomatic niceties, so to speak.

Q: They, like, kicked down doors.

STAPLES: Oh, yes. They were cops. The head of it, he said, "Hey, I'm a cop." They had to be kept on the reservation sometimes. The Customs Service is very procedural-oriented. You have your instructions, you follow them to the letter, you do things step a, b, c, and d. Meanwhile, the Coast Guard was sometimes like that, sometimes sort of out of control. There are different cultures at work in organizations and you sure saw it there.

Q: What was the Coast Guard doing?

STAPLES: Interdiction of ships. Searching ships. Like the *Miami Vice* fast boats and those kinds of things, but also bigger ships. Because the Bahamas is a series of islands – people think about Nassau and Grand Bahama Island, but further south there's Georgetown, the Exumas, and I mean, it's just a whole series of islands there. Beautiful to fly through, but there's hundreds. Little ones and big ones and some are, even for mail, they had to – in fact, if you wanted to go into the outer islands to do a report or something, a nice way to do it is to take the mail boat, which floats along and stops at different places.

Q: How badly was the authority penetrated by drug money?

STAPLES: I would say there was, in my view there was, especially in the Pindling government at that time, a lot of corruption. Not so much government ministers but people right below them, in the police, the regional governors on the islands, a lot of them. A lot of money flowed into the Bahamas because of the bank secrecy laws. A lot of the banks were flush with drug money.

Q: Could you explain a bit why the bank secrecy law was so important?

STAPLES: Well, yes. I mean, the Bahamas was, to a lesser extent today, an off-shore banking haven with a reputation like Switzerland, where you could have an account set up, or an offshore entity set up, a couple of guys that would sign to be the board members and those would be two lawyers. I think it cost about $20,000 or $30,000 to set up an entity, and you had a numbered account and it was against the law to give out that information to any foreign government. So it was a pretty good place, in those days.

Q: What about extradition and all? Was there much in the way of – were we going after bad guys?

STAPLES: We were, but they weren't in the Bahamas. There was an extradition treaty, and when I was there one of the things I finished off was negotiations for a mutual legal assistance treaty, or an MLAT, with the Bahamians, which provided for things like extradition. The Bahamas was so close to the US and so dependent that they turned over people if you provided enough proof. So most people didn't go to ground in the Bahamas. You didn't see that.

Q: What about – if you saw a suspicious plane, if your balloons picked up a suspicious plane, what could you do?

STAPLES: You mainly followed it to where it was going to land and alerted local authorities, and if we had our agents on the ground they would join them and then try to make an arrest. There was no authority to shoot down planes, which is what the media reported there, that we would just shoot down these planes. We didn't. The Drug Enforcement people had their own military, their own air force, but it was for transportation. We had no fighter planes or anything like that.

Q: Did you catch much?

STAPLES: Yes, they caught a lot. Thousands and thousands of pounds of you name it was caught. The cocaine, in particular, from the ships was destroyed at sea, and we had a couple of people inhaling that stuff who became sick and had to receive medical care. There was a fair amount of capture and lots of publicity. Again, you walked the line the embassy, because you always tried to give credit to the Bahamians, and every Coast Guard ship operating out there had a Bahamian officer on board so that you had local people who could authorize the search and seizure. But a lot of times some of those folks were on the take.

Q: A thing that has often been reported is that these countries would allow their space to be used for the smuggling of drugs, with the idea of hell, we'll make some money off of this and it's all going to end up in the noses of the gringos or something like that, it's not really our problem, it's the Americans' problem. But usually, countries that do this, Pakistan and other places, all of a sudden they're developing a very large drug-addicted group.

STAPLES: That's exactly what happened in the Bahamas after I left. When I was there, that was the argument that was made by some people that, well, you know, this is not our problem and the way to stop all this is for you to stop demand in the US. And now I understand that there are very serious drug problems in the Bahamas, drive-by shootings in Nassau, which is just unbelievable. Various gangs have sprung up in the Bahamas, and a lot of it related to drugs. So you're right, nothing passes through 100 percent. Some of it always stays behind, and it affected, very seriously, the Bahamian people. We tried to tell them that it was going to happen, but they didn't believe it.

Q: Were we able to point the customs FBI to contacts in the United States and all? I mean, was there a pretty good relationship with the authorities, particularly in Florida?

STAPLES: Yes. They had lots of good relationships, especially with the authorities in Florida, because a lot of the planes and so forth were chased into the US and they crashed or they landed in Florida. Yes, there was a very good relationship with them all.

Q: What happened when a drug plane with Americans on board crashed accidentally in the Bahamas?

STAPLES: They were arrested and then the embassy would go into action as it normally does when an American citizen is arrested. Some of them were tried in the Bahamas and imprisoned but the Bahamas didn't have huge a lot of jails. So most prisoners were sentenced in the Bahamas but then turned over to serve their time in the US. But we had some Americans in jail, some traffickers.

Q: Do you have anything else to talk about on the drug side?

STAPLES: No, not on the drug side, really.

Q: OK. Let's talk about tourism. It's all very nice to have tourists coming but if you're part of the service industry you're the equivalent to running a hotdog stand or something like that. What were you all doing?

STAPLES: With the tourists, especially spring break college students, we had trouble, big trouble.

Q: By the way for whoever is reading this, we have seven potential troublemakers here, interns who are listening to this, all college students. So remember: don't go to the islands!

STAPLES: No, go to the islands, but don't, like so many of them do, become drunks in public. Every year, we always had between two to five students who died from over-drinking. We had a couple of kids who fell off balconies, you know, drunk, partying, that kind of thing. One hit by a car. And then arrest cases, usually reports of damage and so forth at the hotels. People couldn't leave until their fines were paid. Embassies overseas for Americans who are destitute sometimes provide financial assistance to get them out based on contacts with their parents and their family members, and we had that because the Bahamas is also an international gambling center, and some of the young people and regular tourists as well would go and lose all their money.

We also had other death cases. The Bahamas is a cruise paradise, and we always seemed to have, on board the cruise ships, elderly people taking that cruise of a lifetime and someone would die, so we had very good relationships with the morticians, the mortuary services that were provided in the Bahamas. It was a problem for us in the embassy

because the embassy is in Nassau but people would die or get arrested or things would happen to them all over the place. And a lot of time that means chartering a plane and flying off to the outer islands. In some local airports they don't have navigational aids, and they're difficult to get into and get out of, but we had to do all of that, and because of two million plus tourists a year, it was beyond the capabilities of just the consular section. All of the officers had to step forward and every Foreign Service officer has some background at some time with consular services. So we all had to lend a hand and pitch in as needed.

And then you have plane strikes and slowdown and bad weather. There were a couple of good storms, not a hurricane – we never had, in my time, to go through a hurricane – but you have that to deal with as well. Those things can all be challenging, with tourists.

Q: Did you have any consular stories?

STAPLES: Oh, I have consular stories. Every Foreign Service officer has consular stories, a good arrest case or a good whatever, but my favorite story in the Bahamas was once we had a strike, an airline strike of some kind in the States and we had 500, 800 tourists stranded at the major hotels in Nassau. Ambassador Hallett said, "Well, why don't you all go out there and meet with those Americans and keep them calm, tell them that things are working," because all of the travel agencies were trying to rebook them, et cetera." So I walked into this one hotel and there was this big crowd. I went up to these people and introduced myself and a very large, imposing man came over to me and said, "You're from the embassy?" I said, "Yes, that's right." He said, "Well, I'm glad to see you. I want you to go back and pick up that phone and in one hour I want a 747 on this runaway!" Those things can happen, but overall people were pretty good.

The interesting thing was, involving tourists, the attitude of the Bahamian people. What's it like to live in a place where, from the time you're born until the day you die, you're going to take care of other people? You're going to clean their rooms and their toilets and smile, smile, smile for everyone forever and serve them food and make them feel good, and you want them to come back, and so forth. Tourists came because it was close, but the return rate was something like 20 percent or 15 percent. It was really low because the Bahamians could be very rude and abrupt and sharp. If they got to know you they could be just wonderful, and away from the strip there in Nassau, in Paradise Island, there was an area called Over-the-Hill. It's probably been studied but a good researcher should look at that because that's where the local people live, and that's where the good food is, and funky little storefront restaurants and all, where the good stuff is. But you go in there and you get to talk to people with that Caribbean accent, "Yeah, mon, da-da-da-da-da." You ask them, after you get to know them, what do you really think about all these tourists? They have stories about the ugly American, the rude this, the hateful that, et cetera, et cetera. And yet for 90 percent of the people, that's their only employment. There's no fishing industry. There's no light manufacturing. It's all tourism

Q: What was you and your wife's social life like?

STAPLES: We had Bahamian friends, and my wife made two life long ones. Their daughters and our daughter went to the same girls school. My wife would go bike riding with her friends and sometimes go to the shows at the casino. There was also a yoga retreat on Paradise Island, which is part of Nassau, and she and my daughter would visit sometimes. My daughter went to an all-girls' British school, her first one of those. She went to another one in Zimbabwe.

Q: Did she wear a tie and have a hat?

STAPLES: She had her little dress and her hat, oh yes.

Q: The whole nine yards.

STAPLES: Just like little England. Yes, she loved it, had a good experience there. We got to go with the boat for the owner of Carnival Cruise lines. We got to go down to the Exumas, which is in the south, for a big regatta. I golfed a little bit but not much. My wife and daughter were at Paradise Island not knowing the many people.

We made friends, traveled around, but people would laugh and say, "How did you get the Bahamas? Weren't you so lucky!" If you noticed, I served two years there, not three, because at the end of two years I curtailed because I was bored out of my mind. I'd come to work in the mornings and read messages, have a meeting or two, and it would be nine-thirty and I'd wonder what am I going to do the rest of the day? There were no Communists, no radical students, no foreign threats, no other embassies.

Q: No coup.

STAPLES: Couldn't imagine it in The Bahamas!

Q: How about the Brits? Did it have a high commissioner there?

STAPLES: They had a high commissioner and they were not big at all. They were a very small little operation, taking care mainly of consular services, tourists. The rest of the countries had these honorary consulates who were Bahamian citizens with the right to do visa work and so forth. There was nothing to do. I was going crazy.

Q: Did the super-rich play any role or where they just off over the horizon?

STAPLES: Not with the government. The super-rich lived their lives in private and were not active in Bahamian life. The most famous one I can think of was Sir John Templeton from the Templeton Funds and all. He had an incredible estate out on Lyford Key which was at the end of Nassau Island. He would come to Ambassador Hallett's receptions sometimes and in those days he had a TV show on investing, like the one that was on for years hosted by Louis Rukeyser. But the most of the rich and famous you never saw. Some of them had big estates on some of the other islands, like the Abacos. There were

different resorts. We would go to a couple places. You'd go out to eat. Sometimes you'd run into these people.

Q: In the society there was there a color line or anything like that?

STAPLES: No, not at all.

Q: The old Brit colonial was pretty gone by then.

STAPLES: It had gone to the extent that even cricket had died out. The old cricket fields were still there but it had died out. All the Bahamians I knew had satellite TVs and they watched most of the time American sports. They were all big NFL fans, liked football. But down further in the Caribbean, down in Barbados and Trinidad you'll still see cricket. But it died away in Nassau.

Q: Is there anything else? Any occurrence or a nice disaster or something like that?

STAPLES: No, no. For the group here, I have copies of all my performance reports and I'm looking back at what they say I did. Let's see what I did, and if I've forgotten anything. Not really. The only thing is though, even though I was still, I think, and FS-2 or -3 or whatever, the ambassador made me the Chargé whenever she and the DCM had to go to Florida for interagency meetings on drug policies, for example.

Q: Why was that?

STAPLES: Well, the consular chief, who was the next senior officer, had basically retired in place. He was doing his job and going out to the cruise ships, dealing with death cases, but he wanted no part of any commercial work or drug questions that might require approaching the authorities. So I got my first experience in really being the head of a post for a while.

Q: This is a big tourist business. What about American or your economic commercial section? Was there much in the way of getting the people in the Bahamas to go out and buy American products?

STAPLES: Oh, everything they had was American. As I said, they all shopped in Florida. Everything came in from the States. There were no other foreign products or foreign competition, so to speak.

The only sort of testy issue we had with the Bahamians, besides the drug issue, was Cuba, because they did have good relations with Cuba. Friends would say, "Aw, come on, let's go to Havana for the weekend! Nobody will stamp your passport, nobody will know. Come on!" You could do that, and then the trade with Cuba, in terms of some products was carried on, mainly cigars. Some Bahamians were going over there to the medical school. The Cubans were always good at that. Some of our US ships had trouble with Cuba over drug interdictions, coastal border kind of things, coastal waters. There

were a couple of times we did get the Bahamians to intercede with the Cubans on a difficult case or two, usually involving a drug shipment or something like that.

Q: OK, we're coming up to '89.

STAPLES: That's right. July of '89.

Q: So what happened?

STAPLES: What happened, after I decided to curtail.

Q: This kind of occasion was probably fairly common, wasn't it?

STAPLES: Not really. A lot of people stayed for the normal three year tour because they liked the lifestyle and being close to the US. I must say, before I go on, that being in the Bahamas those two years was good because we bought the land for our home in Kentucky, right up from where my wife was born, and in those two years my wife was close enough to go back and forth and we built our home, where we live right now. So we were able to take care of some family issues and get our home built in those two years. And my daughter did go to a good school.

Q: Did she come away with a good Caribbean accent? No?

STAPLES: I don't think so. But she could switch over and talk it.

Q: You just got her married, didn't you?

STAPLES: Yes, she got married two weeks ago. She did. That was a job. That was – no job involving Iraq or anything else was like taking care of this wedding.

Q: Well then, '89. Whither?

STAPLES: After curtailing – the reason I curtailed is I got a call from Washington and some people were telling me when I finished my assignment in another year, would I think about as assignment to the Operations center. Well, I said, "What if I were to curtail and come back now, could you use me?" And so they brought me back in the summer of '89 to the operations center at the State Department and I became a Senior Watch Officer.

Q: You did that, what, for a year?

STAPLES: For one year.

Q: It was, of course, a critical year. You were there, you brought down the Soviet Union.

STAPLES: Yes, I saw the people dancing on the wall, and not being shot.

Q: Tell me what you were up to.

STAPLES: Well, the senior watch officer job – the watch, if you call it – is the State Department's operations center. It's on the seventh floor in the Department's main building. Maybe all of you got a nice tour of it. If you didn't, you should as part of your internship. It's where a team of officers watch the world and alert the Secretary, the Deputy Secretary, and other senior people as to what's going on, and what they might want to think about doing about it. If those people, based on what they've learned, or something else that's come up, say, "Well, I need to speak to the prime minister of Japan about that," they call the operations center and you get them through to that person.

And that's basically it. It is a fascinating job, where you have a chance, for one year, to really see how the whole department works. All of the different bureaus, the rest of the government, because you're in touch with your counterparts in the White House situation room, at the DOD (Department of Defense) op center, the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) – I didn't know the Department of Labor has an operations center – you're in touch with all of these different groups and you see what is going on in the world, especially after hours. But on the midnight shift, late at night, you have to decide if you if you ought to wake up, for example the Secretary of State or not. You get to decide who gets to know about this or can it wait until morning. So it was a great job, and one in which you really have to think on your feet, and you have to know world issues. I spent my time in Latin America and the Caribbean but I'm interested in the world, and things would come up about Saudi Arabia or Japan and Thailand or the Philippines, Northern Ireland, and you had to know about these things and what to do about it and who was handling it. So I did that job, and that was one of the great jobs in my career, being a Senior Watch Officer.

Q: I'm reminded of a story that somebody told who was a watch officer way back, I think Dean Rusk was the secretary of state and was talking about a crisis that had just happened on the Venezuelan-Guyanan border or something like that. He mentioned a place and Dean Rusk called him up in the middle of the night and said, "I think that we should move, it's getting quite serious. Again – where is this place?" As secretaries of state said, one problem with the job is some son of a bitch is always doing something 24 hours a day around the world. There's always something.

STAPLES: Always something going on.

Q: Any memorable occasions?

STAPLES: Numerous ones, numerous ones. I was the senior watch officer on shift when Commerce Secretary Ron Brown's plane crashed.

Q: Oh, yes, in Croatia.

STAPLES: Yes, in Croatia, with everybody dead.

Q: Or Bosnia, I guess Croatia.

STAPLES: We had – Secretary Baker came in, and I had to brief him, and took him back to the task force room and made sure he got his update on all that, and that was very interesting. Gosh, plane crashes – we had Gorbachev making his trip to Lithuania for the first time and dealing with that. Oh, I was the senior watch officer on shift when we invaded Panama, and people were taking down Noriega. We had the fighting going on in Panama and I was talking with Bob Kimmitt, who was the Undersecretary for Political Affairs. We had the elections in Nicaragua in which Danny Ortega and the boys lost. I told him they were going to lose and Kimmitt thanked me because I'd served in El Salvador and I knew a lot of the Nicaraguan exile figures who were organizing against the Sandinistas. Election night was a very interesting as former President Jimmy Carter saved the bacon for the US and the region. Ortega was going to do a Mugabe on us; as results began to show he was losing, Ortega was plotting to cancel the elections and hang onto power. Jimmy Carter met with him for hours that night until he talked Ortega into accepting the results. Another firestorm in Central America was prevented. That was an exciting evening on the watch as we monitored updates on the talks and kept all of Washington informed of developments.

We had, once more, evacuated our people from Beirut and there were initial reports that our helicopters were being fired upon. These reports turned out to be false but we had the Secretary and a lot of other people standing around just wondering if we were going to have a major war in the Middle East that night. There are always crises, and they can happen at any time. But the thing about the Operations Center is that it's shift work. You work two days in the morning and two days in the afternoon and then a night shift or two and you're off for two days. When your shift is over you brief the next Senior Watch Officer, you turn it over, you have to leave. That's very difficult sometimes because you are right in the middle of a serious crises with the phones are ringing and alerts going off and the secretary's calling and you're right on top of it and you have to leave. So it drove home another lesson I learned in my career, earlier on, even during my Air Force years: nobody is indispensable. Nobody is indispensable. It will go and get done without you, believe it or not. That's an important lesson to learn in this life.

Q: Then what did you, we're moving into '90?

STAPLES: Yes. Thanks to the operations center, being in Washington, you hear things. And someone came and said, "You know, they're looking for a senior desk officer on the Turkey desk, but it's above your grade." I said, "Well, you know, maybe not. I speak Turkish." I'd been in the military and I'd spent a year at the Defense Language Institute learning Turkish and two years in Turkey in a NATO job. I said, "I'll go down and talk to them." So I went down, interviewed, and I came off of the watch and landed a great job as head of the Turkey desk, a senior job. There was two desk officers, most desks just have one, but Turkey had two. I was the senior Turkey desk officer for the next two years, from '90 to '92. I was very lucky, and that's because of the ops center, where I heard it first and got to have the job.

Q: I also might point out for the assembled group here: the ops center is often a – the people who go there are usually chosen rather carefully, and it's considered a stepping-stone for people who are going to move up in the Foreign Service. It's very much sort of a trying-on period and it usually leads to bigger and better things. One it means that you've been selected, you can act fast on your feet and also you begin to develop contacts and they know who you are and often just knowing who you are and being a face is very important. This is a problem if you're doing a great job in Brazil. You're not really known to people in Washington. This is a good place to make your name.

So, you've made your name and now you're off, from '90 to '92. What was the situation with Turkey in 1990 when you took over that job?

STAPLES: Well, the situation was sort of like it is now. Turkey is a very strong ally and friend of the United States, a NATO country. We have a long history that goes back a long way. But the Turks have this kind of love-hate relationship with the US. They like us, but they're not quite sure that we're their friend. They sort of feel like if push comes to shove we'll always favor Greece. Everything involving Turkey is always Greece/Turkey. And of course, then the Cyprus situation was hot as always. The office I was in was the office of Southern European Affairs, which is Greece, Turkey, Cyprus. I was head of the Turkish desk and my colleagues on the Greek and the Cyprus desks – we all had these conflicts or issues between our three countries.

It was a very interesting time because we had, when I first got there, we had the first Gulf war. We had the first Gulf War, in which we went to war with Iraq to get them out of Kuwait and Saddam turned his forces on, his people in the north, and we had all of these Kurdish refugees flowing into southeastern Turkey, on these mountainsides, Secretary Baker flying to see about them. We also had President Bush, the first President Bush, going to make an official presidential visit to Turkey and to Greece as well, and so we had to work very hard with our Embassy in Ankara to make arrangements. We had the never-ending, even then, issues with the Armenian lobby and an attempt in the Congress to pass an Armenian genocide resolution which would have really cooked our gooses just when we needed Turkey's support in our fight with Iraq. So as the desk officer, you get involved in all of these issues, arranging meetings, recommending to senior people at the State Department what to do about the policy, what it should be, and we also had to work closely in the inter-agency community because DOD and others were very involved in every issues involving Turkey.

I must say that on my tour as the desk officer for Turkey, we had what I thought were ideal relations with my counterparts at DOD. Very, very close, to the point where we used to go every month to each others' buildings and have lunch together. We were really talking to each other, sharing information, sometimes you'd cover for each other. No secrets, no problems whatsoever. That's in stark contrast to today, unfortunately.

Q: Well, particularly at the beginning of the Bush II term, when Donald Rumsfeld was the Secretary of Defense. I've talked to the Undersecretary for Political Affairs, Marc Grossman, who was saying he, Rumsfeld, had forbidden his counterpart at the Pentagon

to talk to him. I mean, in a way we're talking about something that's almost criminal. The whole idea was Rumsfeld didn't want the State Department involved, which was crazy.

STAPLES: Yes – in fact, Marc Grossman was the DCM in Ankara when I was on the Turkish desk.

Q: First, let's talk about the Greek-Turkish thing. Particularly, for those that aren't familiar with this, next to the Jewish lobby the Greek lobby is probably the most powerfully one, because they have, actually, not the slightest regard for Turkey, it's only interesting in the furthering – I'd almost call it the immigrant cause. Immigrants who have come to the United States usually are about 50 years behind the real political movement in the country they left. But a very, very powerful group, and they really tend to screw things up with our relationship with Turkey, which is far more important.

STAPLES: Yes. Well, they've had a lot of influence, a lot of influence in the Hill, and we saw it all in that office. It was interesting because when I became the desk officer I made an orientation trip to the region and I visited Turkey and Greece and Cyprus. When I went to Turkey I met with members of the Turkish government, the foreign ministry and others in Accra and Izmir and Adana. The Turks wanted to talk about EU (European Union) entry for Turkey, NATO issues, bilateral issues with the US, economic and so forth and so on. At one point, before I left, I finally had to ask, "And what about relations with Greece?" And it was well, we work closely with the Greeks, they're our NATO allies, we have our issues, et cetera, et cetera. But I had to ask, they never even brought up on their own any concerns about Greece.

Next stop, Athens. I go to Athens, first meeting, and every meeting, all I heard about were the Turks. "We can't trust the Turks, the Turks are going to attack, the Turks want revenge for losing control of Greece 80 years ago, etc!" That's all they would talk about, and of course the next thing was blaming the US for not getting Turkey out of Cyprus. It was all Turkey's fault, it wasn't their fault at all for backing Nikos Sampson and his supporters who hated the Turks– oh, no, no, it was the US's fault.

Q: The relationship with – I mean, basically, in Cyprus was stimulated by a coup in 1974.

STAPLES: '74. When I was in Turkey as an Air Force Officer.

Q: '74, July 14th. You said Sampson became prime minister, who was a thug. A thug throughout the first war...

STAPLES: Sampson used to boast about the number of Turkish Cypriots he'd killed. He used to boast about it. I was in Izmir, Turkey at the NATO headquarters at that time and I remember on the 14th, on a Saturday, I woke up and from the minaret nearby was not the call to prayer but ancient Turkish marching music. And I said, "They've gone into Cyprus." And sure enough, the Turks did it.

Q: So the relationships – I spent four years as consul general in Athens. '70 to '74, when it occurred, so I got a bellyful of that.

STAPLES: You know.

Q: Were you always having to keep your eye on what the Greek lobby – I won't say the Greeks – but the Greek lobby might do, and how to maneuver around it, picking concords, on the desk?

STAPLES: You mean how to help the Turks maneuver around it?

Q: Well, I – as you're looking at how we were dealing with Greece on certain things, was there sort of the knowledge that, oh, the Greek lobby will cancel this, oh, let's forget it?

STAPLES: No. It's sort of like when you try to provide arms to Saudi Arabia, and we usually do it. The Israeli lobby makes a protest, but they don't go to the mat on it, most of the time. The same thing happened with the Greek lobby and the Armenians, even, because the Gulf War was about to start. We managed to get through the Congress approval for major arms shipments to Turkey, and they weren't blocked at all. I mean, there is this grudging almost recognition in the US government that Turkey is a friend and a NATO ally but that doesn't happen too often with the Greeks.

Q: Well, let's talk about the Gulf War. The president of Turkey was – what's his name? I want to say it's Ozal or something…

STAPLES: Ozal, Turgut Ozal.

Q: Many people said he was a world-class politician.

STAPLES: Very world class. Absolutely.

Q: What were you doing as the forces were gathering to go get Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait.

STAPLES: Well, first of all, as far as Turkey, we expanded US-Turkish military cooperation with various agreements plus arms shipments plus making sure the Turks agreed to let us use Incirlik air base in the south as needed, and we pre-positioned forces and troops. This was our work on the desk, along with Secretary of State Baker and Bob Kimmitt and others, and we had lots of meetings and again, the good cooperation with DOD helped a lot. This is in stark contrast to what happened, as you know, for the invasion of Iraq this time, when the Turks wouldn't let us use their territory to go into Iraq.

Q: We sent the 4th Division up through there.

STAPLES: We had to go send them all the way back around again through Kuwait and that was a real tragedy. I couldn't believe it.

Q: It showed really poor diplomatic skill.

STAPLES: Yes, it did, in my opinion, and we certainly didn't have that for the first Gulf War. We had very shrewd diplomacy, and Secretary Baker had traveled extensively building a broad based coalition to force the Iraqis out of Kuwait. We also beefed up Turkish air defense systems to protect from possible attacks from Iraqi scud missiles. The Turks know a lot about what's going in Iraq. We forget about this, and through the Kurdish population in that area, they have a lot of contacts, and we made great use of their intel capability, as well. So the Turks were our partner 100 percent in the first Gulf War and we had a lot of work to do to make that happen.

Q: I guess the Turkish involvement very quickly, after the war was over, melded into the Kurdish problem, didn't it?

STAPLES: Right, because Saddam had attacked those people and driven them onto the mountainsides.

Q: And spilling over into...

STAPLES: Into southeastern Turkey. That was a big problem for the Turkish government because, as you know, in the southeast, they have the issue of the Kurdish region and the language issue, whether they'll be allowed to use Kurdish in the schools or not. And here, all of a sudden, were influxes of hundreds of thousands more people, who, had they stayed – what if they decided, well, we're still in Kurdistan – which the Turks hate, that word, there is no Kurdistan – but what if they said that and the international community, in sympathy, went toward making it a separate entity of some kind. The Turks were frightened to death about that, but again we prevailed on them to help those people and let them flee from Iraq as needed, and we helped get those people back, as well. And that, I think, meant a lot during the '90s, the good relationship that we had with Turkey.

Q: During the time you were there, how did the – PLK or whatever...

STAPLES: PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan).

Q: The PKK, the Marxist Kurdish – well, you might explain what it was.

STAPLES: The PKK is a separatist group. It was headed by a man named Öcalan, and it advocated the establishment of a separate Kurdish state, a lot of it carved out of what is now southeastern Turkey. To achieve this goal they attacked and killed Turkish troops and burned villages. When I was on the Turkish desk we succeeded in getting them named as a terrorist organization – renamed, if you will – and by firmly opposing what they did we were able to gain Turkish cooperation for a lot of our programs. In fact, it's in the news now a lot, where the Turks going into northern Iraq after the PKK

strongholds. They were doing that when I was on the Turkish desk, and our policy at the time was that we supported Turkey's right of self-defense and we recognized they had gone into northern Iraq and we hoped that it would be for a limited duration after which they should withdraw, et cetera. I wrote that guidance with Margaret Tutwiler, who was the former press-person for Jim Baker. I did that early one morning when no one was around and she had to get something out because the Turks had gone into northern Iraq. So she used it and everybody liked it, and they used that press guidance for something like eight years after I left the desk. It made me feel good, because it was the right thing to do. The Turks had every right to go in after these guys. It was an example of how we had to deal with the Turks and to work with them.

Q: Do you want to talk about during the time you were there, your relations with the city of Glendale and the Armenian ...?.

STAPLES: Yes, I'm glad you said that, because I wanted to mention something about the whole issue of Armenia. Remember, this was '90 to '92, and we had the breakup of the Soviet Union and the establishment of the Republic of Armenia. The question was: how would the Turks react to this new independent state, and the Armenians, with their claims to reparations, or territory, for what was alleged to have happened in the First World War. And the Turkish-Armenian organizations out of California, with their representatives in Washington, would come to see me once a month.

Q: Nancy Pelosi was one of them, wasn't she?

STAPLES: No, not her. I don't know. No.

But the first man, who became the president of Armenia – what was his name, Sargsyan? He came to see me. The businessmen from LA that they made president, or foreign minister, maybe. They would come and they would want the US to back a resolution on genocide, and wanted us to support Armenia and so forth. What I did with them was to tell them that the way to work this, I said, "You're never going to get a resolution through this Congress with a war with Iraq about to begin. But the way to work this, for the benefit of this new republic, is to get the cooperation of Turkey." I said, "The Turks have the links to the Stans, the new, independent republics." Turkish businessmen knew all about that, some of those republics speak Turkish, Turkmenistan and so forth. "Why don't you get the Turks to help you establish contacts, trade links, etc, and in return, you get a cooperation with Turkey and you can build some kind of understanding and a mutual investigation of the past" By the time I left in '92, we were well on the way to making that happen. There were private, unofficial talks in Europe and in the US between Turkish diplomats and Armenian diplomats. There was even talk of border crossings and rail traffic and so forth. They were well on the way to that and there were possibilities of a gas pipeline and other business opportunities were being discussed. So I feel like we had done a lot in terms of improving relations between Armenia and Turkey. But again, that was because of Turkish President Ozal, who was able to clamp down on the hard-line Turkish elements who didn't like this new Armenian Republic.

Q: Ozal died and it's a different type of government that's there, now.

STAPLES: Correct.

Q: I don't think they have cross-border or anything.

STAPLES: No, no. Relations are awful right now.

Q: I know that – I don't know how it is right now but certainly the last few months we haven't had an ambassador there. We had a chargé there – in Armenia, because the man who was nominated to be ambassador to Armenia, the Foreign Service officer, was asked, basically, to pronounce that the genocide had happened, and of course, there's no point in sending Turkey off like a skyrocket and so he wouldn't, and they wouldn't approve him.

STAPLES: Yes, and I know about that case because when I was Director-General we put him forward. It was a shame. He was an excellent, but there was one senator who held things up and down he went.

Q: What was your reading at the time, it was early days, on the possibility of Turkey coming into the EU?

STAPLES: In those days, the US had begun to push it slightly and it was recognized, but admission was held hostage to the Cyprus issue. There was no possibility of moving it at that time because of the whole matter of Cyprus, but also, I think, the then-members of the EU had their eyes on the newly independent states in Eastern Europe. If there was going to be EU expansion it was going to be with those states first. Turkey was not as economically advanced as it is now. Turkey is far more advanced than some of the current members they're talking about bringing into the EU. Turkey today would be a natural member of the EU, but not in 1992, 1991 to '92.

Q: How did we view the more fundamentalist Islam – that movement within Turkey – in the time you were there?

STAPLES: Well, at that time it was sort of clamped down. There wasn't the headscarf controversy. Ozal hit a little bit of that, but not much. Certainly the party that runs Turkey today was, if in existence, just a minor party and its leaders had been arrested. Turkey was holding very true to the secular tradition of Atatürk. I think the leaders then could never have imagined that you would have a religious party running Turkey as you do today. That would have been inconceivable, although this party is not like any other party in the Middle East.

Q: I take it there were no particular problems at that time but I suppose there's always been, in Turkey, that political people have to keep what amounts to a barracks watch because the... You might explain what I'm talking about.

STAPLES: Yes. The role of the Turkish military. The Turkish military is a unique institution. They view themselves as guardians of the state and also guardians of Atatürk's legacy. Very independent-minded, pro-Western orientation with Western equipment. Their view is that you can't trust the politicians and you can't trust anybody but us and at the end of the day if the nation is threatened. As they see it, they are prepared to step in, and there have been coups in Turkey's post-World War II history, including one in which they killed the prime minister.

Q: Yes, they hung him.

STAPLES: They hung him. So the Turkish military will often make pronouncements in the political sphere that are worrisome to people, but during my time on the desk it was a non-issue with their military. We had close relations, good ties, our defense-economic cooperation agreement, or the DECO, was in force and doing well.

Q: Well, was it a feeling, when the Soviet Union dissolved – during your time, wasn't it?

STAPLES: Yes.

Q: Did you feel that this was a whole brand-new day?

STAPLES: Yes.

Q: Was there concern or delight that maybe the Turks might move into Central Asia?

STAPLES: There was not – the concern was, there was delight on our part, because of what Turkey did, sensing that it could make itself more indispensable was to trumpet to the US that they now were the ones with all the ties. They knew how to go into Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, and they new all those newly independent nations. They knew their leaders, the trade links, and they'd been dealing with these people for years.

They weren't worried about the new nations becoming independent in Eastern Europe. They were looking East, and we were ambivalent about that because, well, that was great, we had an ally who had links there. But on the other hand, we wanted the Turks to keep thinking about EU entry down the road and to keep looking West. We didn't want them switching around and thinking too much about the East all of a sudden. So there was ambivalence in the US government.

Q: How much did Turkey – let's see, who was, during the time was it John Kelly who was – no, Turkey was part of the European...

STAPLES: The European bureau. That was Tom Niles who was the Assistant Secretary.

Q: Did he play much of a role?

STAPLES: Zero. Tom Niles and his deputies left the office of Southern European Affairs alone. We did all we wanted to do by ourselves. The head of the office was David Ransom, who was a Middle East hand, who came to our office after the Saturday night massacre by NEA Assistant Secretary John Kelly, when he got rid of all his office directors. David Ransom was an outstanding officer and a good friend of mine and we worked very, very well together on Turkish affairs.

Over at the NSC (United States National Security Council) our main contact was Nick Burns, who, you know, later became Undersecretary for Political Affairs...

Q: I'm interviewing Nick now and I've interviewed David Ransom, who, unfortunately, is no longer with us.

STAPLES: David and I, just for the record here, after I left and I went off to Zimbabwe and so forth, David became ambassador to Bahrain. I was out at the Hoover Institution in California and I wanted to go overseas but I needed a good school for my daughter, and they had the Bahrain school, which was a DOD school, a Department of Defense school, and the DCM job was open, but it needed 3/3 Arabic, which I don't speak. But I called David anyway and I said, "You know, if it wasn't for that Arabic you and I could do it again like we did when I was on the Turkey Desk." He said, "Let me see about that." So he got the Arabic waived and I became his DCM in Bahrain. That was the link there.

Q: Is there anything else we should – how about, did George Schultz or President Bush – they dealt pretty much, I mean, they were on pretty friendly terms, weren't there? It wasn't George Schultz, it was Jim Baker.

STAPLES: Jim Baker.

Q: Were those, all in all...?

STAPLES: Oh, the relationship was very warm and very close and Secretary Baker had a great relationship with the Turks. We all did. Bush's visit to Turkey was a smashing success. We on the desk had, as I say, a great relationship with the Turkish media representatives here in Washington, with the Turkish embassy in Washington. We had very, very close, effective ties.

Q: All embassies operate differently. How did you see the Turkish embassy operating in the Washington morass?

STAPLES: Well, the Turks – and I've worked with Turkey a good part of my professional life, from the time I learned Turkish and then I worked for Turkish air force command as an Air Force officer and a NATO job, so – the Turks are quite heavy-handed sometimes. Diplomatic finesse is not their forte. It's the right thing to do, so why don't you do it? Very direct. That was their approach. But their embassy here was headed by an Ambassador named Kandemir, who was one of their most experienced people. They had excellent ties on Capitol Hill. Remember, all the names that you see now were in

Washington then for the first Gulf War and everybody couldn't do enough for Turkey. Dick Cheney and Steve Hadley, who was the assistant secretary of defense and Turkey was under him. I used to meet Steve, he would include me on some of his teams and so forth. All of them loved the Turks and the Turks loved them back. They didn't have to do a whole lot, during that period, to have a good relationship with the US. It was quite strong.

Q: Well, then, you left there in '92?

STAPLES: I left there in '92?

Q: Whither?

STAPLES: Whither? On to – back to Africa again, surprisingly. On to Zimbabwe, and thanks to the Turkish desk, because we were getting ready to send a new ambassador to Turkey named Dick Barkley.

Q: Whom I've interviewed, for the record.

STAPLES: Dick's a good guy, and I was the desk officer getting him ready for his hearings, which is another job that desk officers do, and he said, at one point, "Well, what do you want to do, George?" And I said, "Well, there's DCM in Harare open, southern Africa, sounds great." But I said, "I've looked around and looked into it and everybody says 'Ha ha ha, you don't have enough African experience and that's the most highly-bid DCM job in the world, in the whole foreign service, and nobody knows you in that bureau.'" And Dick said, "Well, the new ambassador going out there, named Gib Lanpher, he's right downstairs and we were in the ambassadorial seminar together, he's a friend. I'll go introduce you." So Dick took me downstairs to Gib Lanpher, introduced me, and Gib and I hit it off because we like the outdoors, we like to shoot, we like to hunt, and he wanted someone who was not the traditional African hand, so he picked me to be his DCM in Harare.

Q: You did that from when to when?

STAPLES: I did that from '92 to '95.

Q: Zimbabwe, which is very much in the news today about the disaster Mugabe has brought upon the state. We're probably talking about his waning days. But anyway, Zimbabwe, this would be...

STAPLES: August of '92 until about the same time in 1995. So a three year assignment and very lucky and honored to get it. We arrived in Harare which is still one of the most beautiful cities in the world, and started going to work in Zimbabwe.

I have to say, right off the bat, when we arrived there great tension in the whole area. There was still conflict going on in Mozambique between the RENAMO (Mozambican National Resistance) and the FRELIMO (Front for the Liberation of Mozambique) forces. Fighting had died down but not stopped in Namibia. The fighting in Angola, between President dos Santos and rebels led by Savimbi was still going on, and then in southern Africa the apartheid regime was still going pretty strong but there was a lot of tension beginning to really build and at any time people thought we could have a blow-up, a race war, who knows, in South Africa.

So we got to Harare, got off the plane right in the middle of what was, at that time, the worst drought of the century in the country. I couldn't believe it, everything was brown and dried out, dead animals on the side of the road, and it was the focus of a huge international relief effort. We were doing the food shipments coming in from different ports, Mozambique and South Africa, food coming up by rail. The British were doing boreholes. The French were doing something else. The UN was doing something else. The place was blanketed with aid workers doing all kinds of work because this drought had just devastated crops, there was no food, et cetera, as it is now, for political reasons, but at that time it was the drought. Our whole focus was on relief at the time.

The country itself, as I said, was just spectacular. We had a lovely DCM residence. The people were warm and outgoing. Zimbabwe was saved from that drought in '92 because Robert Mugabe went to London on a visit. While he was out of the country his vice president, Joshua Nkomo, who was leader of the other major ethnic group, the Ndebele, went, without Mugabe's permission, to South Africa, met with apartheid leaders and arranged to allow the trains to carry in relief supplies. Mugabe had prohibited it stating that he would have no dealings whatsoever with the South Africans. By the time Mugabe came back relief shipments were going well and it was too late. But if Robert Mugabe had not left the country who knows what might have happened?

My time in Zimbabwe was fascinating. Robert Mugabe, in those days – well, he was always kind of older – but he'd get up at three or four in the morning and ride his bike, his training bike, and stayed in good shape. But my own view of Robert Mugabe is that people have always forgotten that before he was a revolutionary leader he was an educator, a headmaster, in the British tradition, and in the British tradition, if you've spent any time in the UK or one of their former possessions there's two people you never question, and that's the doctor and the headmaster. Whatever they say is law. If you've ever dealt with a British doctor – Americans go in and the doctor says, "Well, you have this or that and take this," and you say, "Well, OK, for how long, what are my chances and what should I do next?" – we want to talk about it. The British doctor will think you are questioning his or her authority. You're supposed to come in, get treated, yes ma'am, thank you doctor – you leave. You don't discuss. You've been told what to do by someone who knows better than you: you should do it. Same with the headmaster. The headmaster is a god in that school. Never questioned. And that's Robert Mugabe.

As the drought wound down in '92, he would not release fertilizer on the open market. It had to be state-allocated. We went to him and convinced him to let people get the

fertilizer at whatever price they needed to pay, whatever it took to get the farms going again. He did that. Then we lucked out; we had rains. The fall rain and then the spring rain, and we had a huge maize crop. In Zimbabwe the crops all go to a grain-marketing board, a very socialist thing, where the price is set. We convinced Mugabe to agree to let the prices float based on world conditions. The price went way up. People were planting like crazy. Out of this drought the next year we had an over-abundance of corn and some of it was exported. It was wonderful. The bakeries tried to raise prices. Mugabe would stop it and say, "Nope. The price has to be controlled." We'd say, "Let it go a few days and see if some people think it's too high and prices will fall" – in other words, let the market work. He agreed, it did. But every step of the way you had to fight him.

Robert Mugabe, from my observations over three years, was a committed authoritarian ruler and a man who thought he was infallible, very secure in his place in history. He still saw himself as a revolutionary leader, and the land issue was just visceral to him. The sons and daughters of his cabinet ministers, people who'd fought with him, you'd get them in private and say, "Do you guys really want to farm?" No. They wanted jobs, they were on the internet or talking to their friends or dreaming of foreign travel. So within the ruling party within Zimbabwean society there was this huge generational shift, this gap between the elites and their children, exacerbated by all kinds of social problems which I'm sure we'll talk about, like HIV/AIDS (human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome) and other things, which has done more – that, plus Mugabe's policies, to decimate the country.

Q: When you got there, and even before, talking to people – how was Mugabe seen, sort of your initial impression on all that.

STAPLES: Mugabe was seen by many African leaders and in the international community as a leader who wasn't so bad. He was the first president elected, he'd beaten the Ian Smith government, and the economy had functioned pretty good, more or less. Everyone was more focused on South Africa and what was going to happen, how the apartheid regime would end. And the shame of it is that Mugabe – you know, with South Africa we had US businesses operating in accordance with the Sullivan principles, avoiding the apartheid practices, a presence on the ground waiting for better days. And then here they are today. If Mugabe had been any other kind of leader, all those companies could have been in Zimbabwe waiting to go into the new South Africa one day. And it didn't happen. So when things changed in South Africa and Mandela was elected and everything opened up, Zimbabwe was left behind. And Mugabe, by the way, has a very, very jealous inferiority complex when it comes to Mandela, which I got to see.

Q: Were people around talking about Mugabe being a product of the London School of Economic, Fabian Socialist, and all that, or was this something else?

STAPLES: I think it was something else and he also lusted after power. Don't forget what he did in the 1980s in the Matabeleland, the area in the central and southern part of Zimbabwe, where he sent in his soldiers trained by North Koreans. Most people say they

killed about 13,000 opponents and threw them down mine shafts, etc. He just crushed opposition, anyone who objected to what he did. So he sent a message in the '80s that he was not to be questioned; he was going to rule and he was going to do it his way.

Q: Let's talk about Gib Lanpher. How was he as an ambassador?

STAPLES: Gib was a good ambassador. What was interesting was in the mid-'80s he had been DCM in Harare, so he knew lots of the people around Mugabe, he knew lots of people there. Gib had many friends in the farming community, and he loved the outdoors, he liked to fish and to hunt. He knew the people, knew what was going on, and he and I got along very, very well.

Q: How was his (inaudible) your relationship with Mugabe and his clique?

STAPLES: He did not like Mugabe. Gib, when he was DCM and was chargé in the '80s had a Fourth of July reception and Mugabe's minister at the time, his foreign minister named Witness Mangwende gave an anti-American speech. The guest of honor at the reception was Former President Carter, and so the Fourth of July reception we hosted with Jimmy Carter there, when the Zimbabwean minister got up to speak, which should have been just a nice thing about the Fourth of July in the US – when he started attacking the US, Gib and Jimmy Carter walked out of our own reception. He never forgave Mugabe for that, and he always felt Mugabe was a Marxist and someone you couldn't trust. I think that's right. I think Mugabe's dislike of the US – and let's not kid ourselves, he doesn't like the US – but I think it goes deeper than that. I think it goes back to the Kissinger years and the Nixon era when we said the right things about the Rhodesians and we voted for sanctions in the UN, but I think Robert Mugabe never thought that the US really supported an end to Rhodesian rule. I think he just believes in his soul that we've never really favored black rule – majority rule – coming to Africa. I think he just feels that in his gut.

Q: Was there a sizable or important opposition while you were there?

STAPLES: To Mugabe?

Q: Yes.

STAPLES: No. No; in fact, while I was there he made Joshua Nkomo, the leader of the Ndebele people, a vice-president, and another vice-president from his own group of people. The Parliament – he had a vast majority in it at the time. But there wouldn't have been any real opposition and it showed in my three years there were really good years in Zimbabwe. The drought was over. When I got there I think the Zimbabwe dollar to the US dollar was 4:1; three years later it was 8:1, compared to what is it now, 100,000:1, or who knows? Everything was available in the stores, there were plenty of tourists, there were really nice things to do. And as I was saying to some of the interns here, the whole region turned right, all of southern Africa. The conflict ended in Mozambique with a UN agreement, the FRELIMO rebels laid down their arms and Chissano took over and

Mozambique was opened up again. You could drive to the coast and have lobster by the ocean in Mozambique. Then you had Mandela elected as president in South Africa, and we had some of our white Zimbabwean friends who were saying, "We're going to go to South Africa one more time before it changes." We said, "Oh, come on, what does that mean?" Well, they went, came back, nothing changed. After Mandela was elected people got up the next day and went to work.

We had the first agreement in the Angola war, the Zambian peace accords. The war in Namibia stopped. All of southern Africa was looking good. Lots of investment and business was exploding and the South African businesses, and businesspeople who had been doing business clandestinely in black-ruled Africa were out in the open now. Remember I mentioned in Equatorial Guinea they were masquerading as the Dutch. But they were everywhere and South African products everywhere and cell phones and cable TV and all these goods were all over the place. The shelves were full. Everything was going very, very well.

And you know the currency was convertible. You could convert your Zimbabwean dollars to US dollars anywhere. It was just a magical time to be there. It's a shame to see what has happened today.

Q: How did you find the post?

STAPLES: The post was OK. We had a small embassy. Good people. We got out and traveled a good bit. I really enjoyed the Zimbabwean Parliamentarians. We had easy access to them. We could travel everywhere in the country. And like the British system, they had their constituencies and they wanted you to come visit their constituencies. So you'd get on the road and go out in the countryside and you would end up at these 'bottle stores,' as they called them. These were roadside bars. You'd drink beer and talk to these guys and they'd introduce you to everybody. They really cared about the people they represented. They were really, really active Parliamentarians.

Even then, what few opponents Mugabe had – critics, if you will – the way to eliminate opponents in some countries it's poisoning, but in Zimbabwe there would be road accidents, usually involving a military vehicle. A critic would go on a trip somewhere and there would be this report on a Monday morning that, regretfully, there had been this road accident with a military vehicle and the person been killed. We would sometimes – well, I should say this, to show you how good the relationship was in those days with the US. Remember Somalia? We had the first international effort to stop the clan fighting in Somalia? We had Zimbabwean troops in Harare getting on US C-5 aircraft with Robert Mugabe and Gib Lanpher at the airport together, seeing them off going to Somalia. And the Zimbabweans got there, by the way, and took over that famous market in Somalia where they had all the arms, and cleaned it up in about two weeks. First rate soldiers.

We used to have special forces from Fort Bragg who would go to Zimbabwe for JCET exercises with their commando units and do community projects in the field. Everybody liked to come and work with the Zimbabwean military. Very professional, easy to work

with, they wanted to learn. Harare even had a staff college, its own staff college, and we used to send an American officer to spend a year there every year.

Q: Did you see the handwriting on the wall at all?

STAPLES: Slightly. The land issue. Let's talk about that. Under the Lancaster House accords, in which Zimbabwe became independent in 1980, the British were responsible for assisting the new government with land reform. There's no question that the white minority population owned vast tracts of land, the better land, and Ian Smith and the Rhodesians had moved people off that land to give it to their supporters. No question about it. Under the accord, the government was supposed to first allocate unused land to those who wanted it, and then willing-buyer, willing-seller was to take place so others would have a shot at other land, and then there would be consultations and meetings to divide up the rest of the land based on peoples' needs and what was good for the economy. And Zimbabwe is a place where it can not be run by small landowners. It's a commercial farming country, nice and flat and huge.

Well, Mugabe took over and respected that accord but when I was there the first rumblings began about land reform not in accordance with the accord, and he had his first group of people get together and they designated land and it was not unused land, it was land just taken by his cronies. Then the fighting would begin in the courts, in the news and so forth and so on. Mugabe would always try to say the US and Britain had promised to help on this issue. However, the US was not a party to the Lancaster House agreement. Never. But Mugabe tried to rope us in, and when the first land was taken that was not unused or willing-buyer, willing-seller, it turns out that the first properties were given to ministers and cronies. There was a big explosion in the media about land-grab scandals, and Mugabe's ministers exposed, and so forth. They claimed they didn't know how this had happened and they had to give it back and his first effort was canceled. But it left a bitter, bitter taste in peoples' mouths. And you could see where this was going. Anytime he had any political questioning or any hint of dispute he would always refer to the land and the former colonialists, especially Britain, and the whites, etc.

Let me say for the record, here, that white Zimbabweans also brought a lot of this on themselves, that we're seeing today. When I arrived in '92, I was shocked that in our safe, in the embassy, we were holding American passports for white Zimbabweans who had Zimbabwean citizenship. And the British were doing the same because the Zimbabweans had passed a law saying, "Look, you're Zimbabwean or you're not. What are you?" They all took out Zimbabwean citizenship, but they all kept their old passports in the old embassies, just in case they had to run for it. Well, that was known. There were no secrets there. A lot of the white Zimbabweans were unreconstructed Rhodesians, no doubt about it, and on Rhodesian anniversary day they'd get dressed up in their old Rhodesian military uniforms and have a toast to the old flag, and who's serving the wine and champagne? The black servants. That word whips around through the community. Mugabe and the intelligence guys knew all about it.

A lot of Whites lived quietly and didn't want to be involved with the Mugabe government, but they still had close ties to the apartheid regime in South Africa. All that was known. So they never fully committed, many of them, to the new government in Zimbabwe. And today they've paid a price for it because a lot of them – and I saw the names, a lot of them, I knew who they were – were the very first ones who were burned out of their homes and, in some cases, killed, when all of this really blew up three years ago now. Four years ago.

Q: OK, well, George, I think we'll stop this session now. Where did you go in '95?

STAPLES: '95, when I left Harare, I went to Stanford University on a one-year assignment, my senior training assignment. I was a national defense fellow at the Hoover Institute.

Q: OK, we'll talk about that the next time.

(END FILE)

Q: OK, today is the 24th of June 2008, with George Staples. All right. George, you had a couple points you wanted make that were forgotten, at where we were before, so go ahead.

STAPLES: Yes. OK. We were on Zimbabwe and we talked about a number of things that had gone on during my time there, from 1992 to 1995. The one thing that I didn't get to say much about in our session yesterday concerned HIV/AIDS.

Q: Oh, yes.

STAPLES: It had begun.

Q: You might sort of explain – now it's part of the vocabulary but in that time there wasn't much known about it, was it? Or not?

STAPLES: There wasn't that much known about it and when people died suddenly it was a shock. I remember we had a local employee who was very, very popular, who was our mail clerk at the embassy, and he got married and there was a big party at the embassy and so forth. Three or four months later, he just died. No one could understand it and people were shocked and people were crying and so forth. About three months later, his wife got sick and eventually she died, and the baby died all in a year.

Q: Oh, God.

STAPLES: No one could figure out what had happened, and finally one of the local employees told me that our wonderful man was also known as a ladies' man and had been this, that and the other and there was a second wife that no one knew about. And by

the way, polygamy is somewhat widespread in Zimbabwe, as elsewhere in Africa. Aids was called, 'the illness,' 'the sickness,' 'long illness,' etc.

Then there was a very famous woman who was one of the newscasters on Zimbabwean TV and we had sent her the year before on an IV, international visitor program, to visit the US. She was about thirty-five, thirty-six, one of the up-and-coming media stars in the whole continent. On a Monday she broadcast, on a Tuesday she just died. All of a sudden we were figuring out: this is really bad.

Q: You're saying this, but my impression has always been that AIDS is a fairly long-term, wasting sickness, with people. Was this a more virulent form?

STAPLES: A more virulent strain was present in Zimbabwe. People did waste away. That is true, but other seemingly healthy people died very quickly We had, in Robert Mugabe, a man who described himself as a very strong Catholic and someone that we approached and others approached as this got more serious, to begin to speak out and establish a media campaign and to warn people and to put more money in his budget for health clinics, health education, etc. But Mugabe absolutely refused to do it. His attitude was that this was like sex education in the schools, it will lead to promiscuity.

Q: I'm imagining the headmaster.

STAPLES: The headmaster. And actual fear – we would go to ministers on different programs or ideas and they would say, "OK. We'll take it to the president." And then you'd be in a reception and Mugabe would walk in and his officials would look at him and people would sort of tremble; He had this kind of malevolent presence about him, and everything you had agreed to before, if he didn't look like he approved, it was dead. And no one would re-approach him. On HIV/AIDS, as it got bad – I mentioned to some of the interns yesterday, that when I arrived, Sundays were a special day for Zimbabweans, because they would go to the cemeteries and visit graves and so forth – by the time I left in '95, they were burying, in Zimbabwe, around the clock. Twenty-four hours a day. It was HIV/AIDS.

Q: Where stood AIDS in the United States, getting a feel of the time? Because all of a sudden it became sort of front-page news and all this, starting with the death of Rock Hudson and others – but where stood it in the United States and what sort of information was coming to you, you might say, from Washington and the Congress?

STAPLES: In the United States there was a real, growing awareness. We started to have, from Washington, a lot of prevention programs, condom programs, et cetera, all focused through our AID missions to work with local health ministries and also with people. It was becoming known and we were beginning to urge governments, as he we had tried in Zimbabwe, to speak out and to have information campaigns and to try to change behavior, but it wasn't possible in Zimbabwe because of Robert Mugabe.

Q: With the AIDS program, you have two things going the same time. One was, essentially, birth control, and the other was prevention of AIDS, both utilizing condoms, distributing condoms. Did you sense any sort of contradiction – was this during the Reagan time?

STAPLES: No. Not really – '92 to '95, that would have been Clinton.

Q: The Clinton time. Was there any problem there?

STAPLES: There was no problem whatsoever. They fully supported it and pushed it. What we were able to do, in Zimbabwe, was, via the aid mission, establish, if you will, clandestine programs under the government's radar screen, mainly centered on what were known as the commercial sex workers. These were the women who hung out in the bars and at the truck stops. As I'm sure many people have heard, in Southern Africa in particular, because of the good road systems, you had these long-haul truckers and the prostitutes along the way and so forth and so on.

Q: And this goes a lot to the spread, up and down, up and down, up and down the line.

STAPLES: Yes, exactly, exactly, especially in South Africa, Botswana – which, today, has a huge prevalence rate. But we would go into these with our aid mission, go into these beer halls and work with the more senior of the prostitutes, the commercial sex workers, and we would develop plays and songs that they would sing. Couple that with thousands and thousands of boxes, across the country, of condoms to be given out, but we had to do it quietly. Even then – we're talking the early '90s – you had men who would refuse to use one because it was thought to be unmanly. You had men who thought that they could cure themselves by having sex with a virgin. We had young girls being kidnapped, the start of that, in Zimbabwe in those days.

Q: Well, this was when you started – men were pushing the age limits down farther and farther, younger women, because they were less likely to have had contact before. And of course, the guys are the guys who are spreading it anyway.

STAPLES: Exactly. You had an even worse problem because of a cultural practice in Zimbabwe and you'll find it in other countries in Africa, as well, where, if a man dies, and there's the widow, the widow goes to the brother. And if the brother is also infected, or the brother takes the woman and he already has a wife or two, he might make an arrangement with somebody else to pass her on to him. We succeeded, my last year there, in getting the Zimbabwean Parliament to pass a female inheritance law, which gave the right of inheritance to widows. Other than that, if a man died and a woman was alone, she had to leave the house because it was probably owned by someone else, and she basically took pots and pans with her. This was a very, very difficult situation, compounded with HIV/AIDS, and we saw the beginnings, in 1995, of AIDS orphans. Today, I'm told, in Harare – which was, and is, one of the most beautiful cities in the world – there are thousands of AIDS orphans on the streets, homeless, in Harare.

But the real problem was that, as people died out, these orphans and younger people would go back to villages in the countryside, where older people without resources all of a sudden had to raise children again. No educational systems to support this influx of children, no regional, local health centers. So many of the problems you find in Africa today as this pandemic has swept the continent – we saw the beginnings of it in '94 and '95, and Robert Mugabe did nothing. Absolutely nothing. Those people deserve their fate, they weren't behaving properly, that was his attitude.

Q: Well, you had some of the same thing happening later in South Africa with Mbeki, who denied that there really was a problem or, if it was, it was something that came from somewhere else. But anyway...

STAPLES: South Africa had a better health system, and they had a much better communications system and a whole lot of NGOs and private groups, and so forth, went around Mbeki and started doing what they could to educate people and to help people. But Zimbabwe, when I left, in that area – the economy was going great, there were tourists all over the place, Mugabe was still sane, in my view – but it was heading down the wrong way on HIV/AIDS.

Q: Well, OK. You're at the embassy. I would think the AIDS epidemic would make people pretty damn nervous, an American assigned to the embassy. I'm not talking about sex, I'm talking about being in an automobile accident and blood and you know.

STAPLES: Oh, yes. Well, Harare was, again, unique in this, because it had a secure blood system. We did lots of checks to make sure that the blood system was tested and safe and not contaminated. In Equatorial Guinea, with our small little place, we had what are known in our African posts as walking blood banks – in other words, NGO staff who were tested, some Africans who were tested, all the American staff, you've got to be tested before you go overseas. Those who, where we were sure about the blood, we kept supplies in the health unit in case of the need of a transfusion. The hospitals that can be used, in certain African countries, are known because a) there's competent doctors, but also the blood supply is good. Cameroon, where I was in my last ambassadorship, we had a good system as well, with local hospitals, Western-trained doctors. You could be sure of a blood transfusion in certain hospitals in Cameroon.

In Harare the blood system was fine at the time. We didn't have a walking blood bank, but people were concerned. There was a lot of ignorance among some of the American staff as well. You had people who worried that if they had a household cook and the cook cut the finger, do you fire them or not? That kind of thing, because there might be blood in the kitchen somehow. So we had a lot of educating to do. I think that still goes on everywhere in Africa with local staff, with families. You can be sure, if you go to an African post, that at least half your FSN staff, your local staff, are probably HIV positive, and you will, for sure, be asked to help with funeral expenses, et cetera. That was beginning in Harare when I left, and of course, today in Zimbabwe it's an absolute disaster. Life expectancy, I understand, today is about thirty.

Q: As we saw at that time, was this hitting at more the intellectual – no, not intellectual – the more intelligent, the more up-and-coming people, those who got out and around more, and something.

STAPLES: You would be surprised, too, because they get out and around more, meaning that they can have more prestige because they can have mistresses, and therefore they get infected and they die. So it was hitting rural areas and poor people, but also government ministers, people in the media, sports figures, sports heroes. Thirty-five, forty years old – suddenly they die, or they've gone away for treatment somewhere, and they never come back.

Q: This was not seen in Africa, at least where you were, as being a homosexual matter as it became, in the United States, for the most part?

STAPLES: No, and the Africans tells you that, but I think there is a dirty little secret in Africa that one day you will see research papers or studies, and if anyone hears this one day and wants to launch something off, I think there's also rampant homosexuality in Africa. Mugabe used to say that homosexuals, if he found them, they should be hanged. The first president, Canaan Banana, when Mugabe was prime minister, before he changed the system, assaulted two of his guards and was eventually imprisoned and charged with it because he himself had this kind of problem. But Mugabe and a lot of other African leaders will say that that's behavior of the beasts and they should be killed and so forth and so on, but underneath the surface and in the background, there's a lot of homosexuality in Africa, and in some countries these practices are used as sort of the initiation rites.

Q: You don't remember in Kenya, in the prisons. This was how you got – what was the name of the movement of Kenyatta?

STAPLES: Oh, the Mau Mau.

Q: Yes. Unless you had a sort of homosexually attacked, or not attacked but willing done – this was part of the initiation into the movement.

STAPLES: Yes, and there are rumors of that even today in Cameroon and other places. This is true.

Q: Well, let's move on. All of a sudden, from Africa and the problems of Africa, we're going to the problems of Palo Alto. You were there from when to when?

STAPLES: I was at Palo Alto after I left Zimbabwe for a year, from – let me check my notes – summer of '95 to the summer '96.

Q: How did this come about?

STAPLES: Well, I was, by this time, a FS-1, right below the senior threshold.

Q: It's about equivalent to a colonel.

STAPLES: Yes, exactly. I'd had my first DCM job, and it was time, said my career advisors, the wonderful personnel system, it was time for senior training. Now, senior training in the State Department could take a lot of forms at that time, as today. There was the senior seminar, which was run by the State Department, for senior officers, a year of intellectual training, exposure to other branches of the government, et cetera.

Q: I took that.

STAPLES: We also send officers to the National War College, where they do the one year with senior military officers who are one day pegged to be generals and so forth. But the State Department also had a program where they would send one person to Princeton and Yale and other places like this, and also the Hoover Institution at Stanford. I became the State Department's representative there for a year; the title was 'National Security Affairs fellow.'

It was a wonderful year, wonderful year. Basically, you were out there representing the State Department and there was one person from the Army and the Navy and the Air Force as well. There were four of us, and we were treated just like regular Hoover fellows, meaning that we were asked to participate in the Hoover programs, a think tank. We were asked to write something during the year, produce some kind of publication, and other than that, we could do anything we wanted to do to stretch our minds and enjoy and explore and so forth. It was a great opportunity.

I used that time to take advantage of the presence of the Hoover fellows and to get to know them and talk with them, and every day, from four to five o'clock, the fellows would sort of meet and discuss. I got to have coffee and just sit around a table just like this with Milton Friedman and talk about economic issues.

Q: He's a preeminent economist in America.

STAPLES: Exactly. George Schultz, a former secretary of state, was there as a Hoover fellow. People of that caliber, in different, different fields.

Q: Well, did you choose this or was this chosen for you?

STAPLES: No, I chose it, I asked for it.

Q: Is there any particular reason?

STAPLES: The only reason was, you know, I grew up in California. In my undergrad years I went to the University of Southern California in LA, I grew up there. Also, quite frankly, my sister lived in Sacramento, my only other sibling, and we had not been close and I wanted to use that time to try to repair, if you will, our relationship, and see her

again and help her in some ways, but I also felt there was a lot to be gained by being far away from Washington sometimes, and getting another perspective on our business.

Q: The Hoover Institute has the reputation for being sort of the intellectual bastion of conservatism.

STAPLES: It does.

Q: But not the virulent conservatism, the neocons in today's terms, but just plain bloody conservatism.

STAPLES: Exactly.

Q: How did you find that?

STAPLES: I found it, and them, very nice, but there were also a couple of really far left folks who were Hoover fellows, maybe they were the token guys. But you're right, it was rather – a former Reagan official, Ed Meese, the former Attorney General, became a friend of mine.

Q: The former attorney-general.

STAPLES: Hoover also has a lot of seminars and guest speakers. The Hoover papers are published and everyone contributes to those. The key thing, for me, at that time, was it offered a great opportunity to do public outreach. All of us, the Hoover fellows, the four of us, but me in particular, I mean, I was able to go out – I spoke at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco. Lots of foreign affairs interest in the Bay area among different groups. I spoke on the campus at Stanford and over at Berkeley. It was a chance to really talk to a lot of different people who really know nothing about the State Department. We say a lot, sometimes, that we don't have a domestic constituency. It is true. I learned that in California, because the misconceptions about what it meant to be a diplomat. The misconceptions – remember, I'd come right from Zimbabwe and people would say, "Well, what did you do in Africa? Did you go see animals?" They had no idea that we had embassies and that we dealt with serious issues. It was a great chance to really do outreach on the behalf of the department but also to have different groups in the region talk to someone from Washington.

Q: I can remember going out to the San Francisco area, recruiting for the board of examiners in the '70s, and I'd say, "I'm from the State Department," and they would say, "How are things in Sacramento?"

STAPLES: Well, yes, and I still get this today where I've retired, in Kentucky. I say, "Well, I work for the State Department," "Oh, how are things in Frankfort?" Most people don't have any idea of what we do and how we do it.

Q: Right now we have a Foreign Service officer here, , Les McBee, and Les was at Berkeley as a diplomat in residence.

STAPLES: Yes, he was.

Q: And he told me that he went to Stanford to recruit and he said basically it was a write off because at Stanford, everyone asked him, "Well, how much money do you make?" It seemed to be very money-oriented – I'm talking about career money, and not public service. I was wondering if you – not at the institute itself, because this is loaded with people who are involved in foreign affairs, but the Stanford student body – did you pick up that at all?

STAPLES: I did. The Stanford students had very little interest in foreign affairs in general. I could never talk to any of them who were interested in the Peace Corps, for example. They didn't want any part of that. Some were interested in specific issues. The Middle East, for example, the peace process, or the recent changes that had taken place in Eastern Europe and so forth. But from an academic perspective, most in the mid-'90s were not really interested in Washington. Washington was far away.

And I must say, I fault us for that. I can't remember the name of the law, but there is, on the books, something that prevents the State Department and any government officials from basically doing extended outreach domestically.

Q: It's part of the USIA business, I think.

STAPLES: Exactly.

Q: I think Fulbright wanted to make sure that our information agency didn't be turned into something to support whatever administration, internally, in the country.

STAPLES: That's right. But on the other hand, we spend very little money and very little time with our diplomats, going across America and speaking at, for example, Lion's Clubs and Rotary Clubs and student groups and high schools and so forth. We don't explain to the American people know what we do. I really understood that at Stanford.

Nevertheless, I did produce a paper that is part of the Hoover series of working papers for the year. It was about democracy, democratic growth and the issues involved in Africa, and I compared and contrasted four countries, including Zimbabwe. I took part in the world affairs seminars that were done. As I say, I spoke at the Commonwealth Club, and I also did something personally that was important to me. I volunteered and I worked as a reader at Stanford's disability research center, reading texts for the blind and helping some of them study, reading the tapes and translating, that kind of thing. I received a special recognition from the State Department for that, surprisingly. But that's the kind of thing that, again, I think we need to think about when we are here, in Washington or elsewhere in the country: as Foreign Service officers we should be doing more in the

community and trying to let people know what the State Department, and what foreign policy, is all about.

Q: Did you find more of a focus there on Asia than you did from your experience back in Washington and, obviously, in Africa, and all that?

STAPLES: Yes. You know, that's an excellent question. There was a big series on the two Koreas that were put on. It was a lot of work on Asia, maybe because of the California looking to Asia kind of a thing. The research that was being done by so many of the fellows was also centered on the Middle East, on how to integrate the newly freed republics, the countries that were springing up in Eastern Europe, into the world system. There were many other things, as well, that were going on. It was a varied activity in that area.

Also, at Hoover, they have an incredible archive system that is well-known. In particular, I think, about the finest archives that we have in the US on the Second World War and on Nazi Germany. I'm a World War II kind of fanatic, mainly the Pacific, but I also care about what happened in Europe. I had time to do some exploration and a little research in that area as well.

Q: What sparked this interest in the Pacific war – the 'Great Pacific War,' as I think it was called?

STAPLES: The Great Pacific War. Well, I like history. I always have, and in particular, the Pacific war and World War II has been a passion of mine. When we moved to California when I was five years old our next-door neighbors were the Sato family, Japanese-Americans. As I came to find out, they were third generation Americans but they looked like the enemy and in the Second World War they got shipped off to a camp in Utah. All their farms and other things were seized and never returned. So that kind of thing...

Q: A terrible blot on our history

STAPLES: Absolutely. You looked like the enemy, so. People say that can't happen in America – but, it did.

Q: My mother talks about during World War I, she grew up in a German-American family and spoke German. My grandfather was an officer with Sherman, you know. But they lived in Chicago and people threw rocks at the house sometimes. It wasn't much but there was this, you know...

STAPLES: Actually, it was very widespread in the First World War, the anti-German feeling, and in some communities, German-Americans were rounded up and kept in one part of the town. That's something that, again, isn't known very well.

Q: Sauerkraut was called 'liberty cabbage.'

STAPLES: No more French fries, either, right? No, it shows what people can do, even fairly decent people, when they're impassioned. But from that came a desire to know more about the war and in particular, my high school where I went to high school in Los Angeles – I was very, very fortunate because it was 1/3 black, 1/3 white, and 1/3 Asian-American. Everybody got along. We all, to this day, many, many, many of us are still friends and in touch and it was an unusual place, and that kind of drives home the need to learn about other people and what happened with their history and why.

Q: Well, then, so you're at the Hoover Institute. Whither? Were you able – were you out of sight, out of mind, or...?

STAPLES: Yes, and I loved it. I was out of sight, out of mind and to demonstrate how far out of sight and out of mind I was, during my year there, we had the first and only shutdown of the federal government, and no one told me about it. I heard about it on the radio. I had no word from Washington and no one said what to do, so I knew I didn't have to go to work which was going to my little office and waiting to have cookies and coffee later in the day with the fellows, so in recognition of the federal government shutdown, I went up to Napa valley and enjoyed myself for a long weekend. It was kind of far afield.

Q: How were you able to sort of troll, or somehow to get another assignment?

STAPLES: Well, again, you would think, being far from the maddening crowd, if you will, that I might be at a disadvantage, but I talked to my wife – who, with my daughter had stayed in Kentucky at our home which we had built, and my daughter went to school with her little cousins and all while I was out in California, although they came to visit.

Q: Your wife's from Kentucky, incidentally?

STAPLES: That's right.

Q: That's the...

STAPLES: That's the connection. That's right. This wonderful woman that I sat next to on a plane ride and I moved quickly and we married.

Q: I always say plane rides are dangerous.

STAPLES: Very dangerous. I didn't mention it yesterday but I will here, but yesterday was our wedding anniversary.

Q: How wonderful!

STAPLES: Twenty-nine years since the magic plane ride – well, a little before that, but anyway. So she and my daughter had stayed in Kentucky and I talked to them and I said,

"Well, what do we want to do next?" and she said, "Well, we don't want to go to Washington, so we need to go overseas." As you become more senior in our career, in this business, the job opportunities sort of dwindle. There are fewer positions. So I started looking at the bid list, the list of opportunities, and there was a deputy chief of mission job – and I needed a good high school for my daughter, too, so that further narrowed the choices. There was a good job in Bahrain in the Gulf, and I had no experience in the NEA (Near Eastern Affairs) Bureau or the Middle Eastern Affairs Bureau and if you're not known in a bureau it's very hard to break in. It required 3/3 Arabic, speaking, and reading ability. I spoke zero Arabic. But I knew the ambassador, who was David Ransom, who had been our office director, my boss, when I was head of the Turkish desk in Washington. He had gone on to become ambassador in Bahrain.

So I called David and I said, "Look, I'm out here at Hoover and I'm an experienced DCM, I just did three years in Zimbabwe. I need a high school for Catherine. I don't speak Arabic. But if you wanted to try to get all of that waived, you and I could do it again. What do you think?" And he said, "I'll call you back." To cut to the chase, David did get the department to waive the Arabic because in Bahrain, everybody in the government – and most businesspeople – everybody speaks English, just about. You didn't need Arabic in Bahrain. There were people in the bureau in Washington who had always wanted me to think about working in the Middle East bureau, so here was their chance.

It all came together and after my one year at Stanford, in the summer of '96, I went to Manama, Bahrain as the new DCM.

Q: You were there from when to when? '96 to...

STAPLES: '96 to '98. Two years.

Q: Let's talk about Bahrain. Can you tell me – what was the situation in Bahrain and its importance?

STAPLES: Bahrain is a very unique country in the Persian Gulf, although, as the Bahrainis would tell you, the Arabian Gulf. The Iranians call it 'Persian Gulf,' but the Bahrainis are not Iranians and they will let you know that very quickly.

The country of Bahrain is a little island nation right next to Saudi Arabia, connected to it by a causeway. It is headed by the Al-Khalifa family, which is an interesting...

Q: Just wanted you to point to it there.

STAPLES: Yes, everybody wants to...

Q: We're moving to a map, pointing to Bahrain.

STAPLES: Right there.

Q: Right across the...

STAPLES: Right across from Saudi Arabia, right here opposite Qatar, and the little causeway goes right over here.

Q: It's a fairly new causeway. When I was in Dhahran back in the '50s there was no causeway but it was part of our consular district. Go ahead.

STAPLES: Well, as you can see on the map it's a very strategic country. Very, very important to the United States. The Al-Khalifa family runs it. It's a longstanding trading family and they are Sunnis, but the majority of the people on the island are Shia, and the emir at the time, who has passed away, Sheikh Isa, he had, because of unrest back in the '70s, dissolved the parliament, and a lot of the Shia leaders were in jail or imprisoned.

Now, the main reason for its importance in '96 – and it had been going back some time, let me give a little bit of background about the country. On Bahrain, at the northern tip of the island, there is the headquarters for the US Fifth Fleet as a result of a base agreement that we've had with the Bahraini government for a long time, and that is, to this day, our only permanent base in the Gulf.

Q: We had something in my time, back in the '50s, COMIDEASTFOR, the Fifth Fleet, it was an outgrowth of that.

STAPLES: An outgrowth of that. So that was extremely important, to be there. Bahrainis are a very, very worldly people, and they are not at all like their neighbors, the Saudis. In Bahrain – and it's because of its location on major trade routes – so many people have traded and passed through. They're very worldly, very Western-oriented. Women can drive, there's no requirement to cover up in the chador or anything like that. The Bahrain school, which was a DOD school run by the Fifth Fleet...

Q: Department of Defense...

STAPLES: Department of Defense. It was a Western school with cheerleaders, including Arab girls. They had proms. The crown prince and his son, who is now the crown prince – the crown prince now is the ruler – but he and his son were graduates of the Bahrain school and American university. Americans had been in Bahrain as educators, health workers and whatever, since almost the turn of the century and Americans were very respected in Bahrain. The first oil well in the Middle East is in Bahrain. Not many people know that. There's a nice oil museum down in the southern part of the island where the first oil was found and the first oil well established. So it was a good place for Americans to be assigned.

Q: Well, there's a tradition, too, that the Garden of Eden was located there.

STAPLES: That's right, and the Tree of Life is there, out on the desert. This incredible tree, in the middle of desert sands, with no water around it, has been growing for hundreds of years, thousands of years, and it's something that people go to see and it's protected by armed troops, by the way. It's something to see, as well.

Now when I arrived it was very interesting because the people in Washington told me, I think I mentioned to you, David Welch, who was the former ambassador in Egypt and he was principal deputy assistant secretary in the bureau at the time and a friend of mine. He said, "George, Bahrain will be a good place to start to get to know this part of the world. Small country, and not much going on, but good introduction to you." Well, I arrived in Bahrain ten days after Khobar Towers was blown up.

Q: You're going to need to explain about that.

STAPLES: The Khobar Towers is located right across the causeway in Dhahran, which is a major oil center in Saudia Arabia , and many Americans work there. We had a military facility there that was blown up by terrorists. We had 18 people killed, if I remember correctly, and many more injured. People told me they heard the explosion and it shook windows even in Manama, it was so powerful.

Q: I think it was an oil truck.

STAPLES: A truck, yes. It was the first time anything like that had happened and it scared the Saudis to death, and it really set off concerns in the US government because, remember, we're talking '96, that's just a few years after the end of the first Gulf War. Bahrain, in the first Gulf War, had fought with the US. The Bahraini pilots had flown with us on air strikes, and Saddam Hussein had launched scud missiles into Bahrain. I think the Bahrainis – yes, Bahrain had about three or four scuds hit. So there was no love lost there at all, and then with this terrorist attack everything changed. Everything changed in the whole Gulf region.

As I say, I arrived 10 days afterwards, and we had a commission that was set up by the US government to review military security in Bahrain and to make sure that our facilities were safe; it was headed by a retired general who's just passed away, Downing, Boyd Downing. I rode around with him. That was my orientation of Bahrain, riding around with the general sent to inspect everything. Meanwhile, in Washington, there was panic, and the initial knee-jerk reaction then, as it is now, is whenever we have a terrorist attack let's pull everybody out. So the first response was to remove, from the whole region, and also for a while in Pakistan and elsewhere, all the American families, dependents, et cetera.

We didn't do that in Bahrain, because David Ransom and I, and Tom Fargo – the Vice Admiral Fargo, who later became Pacific Command commander, he's just retired, he was head of the Fifth Fleet at the time – he and his exec, we met and we sat down and we said, "In Bahrain the security is good. There is no reason for this. That school has as historic link with the US government and it's extremely prestigious, and we fought and

fought and fought and convinced Washington not to pull families out of Bahrain, not to close the school, and we all knew we were putting our careers on the line for that, because people were saying in Washington, one more attack and on and on and on. It was an extremely interesting time to arrive in that country.

Now, what immediately happened, as well, in '96 in Bahrain was that Bahrain was also the headquarters for UNSCOM (United Nations Special Commission), the UN special observer mission into Iraq, known in these days as the 'weapons inspectors.' In those days, following the first Gulf War, there was a no-fly zone that was in effect over certain parts of Iraq, and those inspectors who were on the ground in Baghdad, living in their compound but also going out checking on things, they were logistically supported by the headquarters in Bahrain. So we had a UN air fleet at the airport, UN pilots, and others accredited. It was actually run by American contractors who supported UN operations. We at the embassy had a very not-visible role if you will, in supporting that mission and we would be able to debrief all of the people coming in and out of Iraq.

Then, as you remember, the situation got bad, when Saddam wanted to kick out the inspectors, and so about six or eight months into my time in Bahrain we were getting ready to go to war again with Iraq. We had, at Sheikh Isa airbase, which is at the southern tip of Bahrain, we had multiple air expeditionary force deployments of US fighter squadrons from Mountain Home air base in Idaho and other bases. We had, by early '98, we had four US aircraft carriers in the Gulf again, just as we did for the first war. The central command commander, General Tony Zinni, would come many times.

Q: Whom I have interviewed.

STAPLES: Wonderful. He is a good friend of mine. Tony would come and he planned to basically run the war against Iraq from the Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain. We developed contingency plans to eventually remove all the families, and so forth, if we went back to war, and during this time we had – I think we had three visits, by then: Secretary of Defense Cohen, multiple visits by Secretary Albright, various Congressional delegations came through, all to talk to the Bahrainis, make sure the governments support if we had to attack Iraq. The Bahrainis were talking with the Saudis to make sure that everything was ready, and it was a time in which, basically, during my two years, we were preparing to go back to war again.

Q: Well, now, what was the relationship in Bahrain with Kuwait, Muscat, and Qatar – I'm thinking of where we had, I mean, we already had been involved in the first Gulf War – was Bahrain sort of more the administrative center, because we certainly had prepositioned stuff in Muscat by that time, I think, and I don't know about Qatar, and Kuwait, of course, was, I guess, recovering from...

STAPLES: Kuwait was recovering and there were still Kuwaitis in Bahrain who had fled the Iraqi invasion. We still had about 5,000 or 6,000 Kuwait refugees in Bahrain, that the Bahrainis had put up and housed – and by the way, the Bahrainis could not stand the Kuwaitis.

Q: Nobody could stand the Kuwaitis. Nobody in the Arab world. Everybody hated the Kuwaitis.

STAPLES: Nobody can stand the Kuwaitis. These people would arrive and instead of saying, "Thank you for taking us in and saving us from the Iraqis," it was, "Well, this is the apartment you're giving me? It's too small. Can't you do better than this?" No one likes the Kuwaitis. They're very – well, I shouldn't. Let's not stereotype here, but the Bahrainis could not stand them.

Q: It's the word I get from everybody who's served there.

STAPLES: Yes. The Bahrainis could not stand them, but Kuwait was still recovering from the war. The relationship at that time, we're talking 10 years ago, between Bahrain and Qatar was not good. There was jealousy between the two peoples, there was an offshore dispute involving islands between them that was not settled.

Q: The Hawar Islands.

STAPLES: Yes, but the relationship was not good, and we did not have – today we have this huge war-fighting center in Qatar and so forth – we did not have any of that in '96, '98. We were going to fight from Bahrain.

Q: So basically, Bahrain was going to be the central location.

STAPLES: That was going to be the central location. I don't know about Muscat.

Q: Well, I think we were prepositioning, working on developing – I'm not sure where they stood. I think we'd already had agreements, so we were putting off a lot of stuff in there, but not many people. I mean, this is where you put tanks and things of this nature. It was a warehouse.

STAPLES: And used for prepositioning stocks. We also had, at that time, as you remember, the Oil for Food program in which the Iraqis, under sanctions, were able to sell a certain amount of oil. The proceeds from that were supposed to be used to go for food and medicines and to benefit the Iraqi people, and as we know, now, the program was terribly mismanaged. A lot of money was stolen. But the Iraqis were quite clever and the Arab media, even then – I'll make a note about that, because I want to say some more about Al Jazeera in their early days. The Middle East media, even then, was playing the theme of the suffering of the Iraqi people, which resonated in Bahrain. The Bahrainis had no love for the Iraqis, but to see pictures on their TVs of these emaciated young children and so forth. We had a very able public diplomacy section in the embassy that spent a lot of time and effort pushing back, on a factual basis, as much as possible the Iraqi propaganda about the suffering of the Iraqi people.

And since we're on media, let me mention a little bit about Al Jazeera in the early days. Al Jazeera started to really reach out via satellite broadcast, when I was in Bahrain.

Q: Al Jazeera is located in Qatar.

STAPLES: In Qatar, yes. It was '96 and '97, and the broadcasts in those days were striking, just striking, and our local staff and others – and that's another thing, who works in US embassies and FSNs – the local staff that we had would come in and for the next day or two would talk about a program they had seen on Al Jazeera about Arab men beating their wives, wife-beating. They touched a lot of taboo topics, and Al Jazeera was really on the cutting edge of issues and subjects that had been taboo, and talking about democracy and the role of these kings and women's treatment in Saudi Arabia and so forth. And the Arab rulers were trying their best to shut it down and to block those broadcasts. Al Jazeera in those days was really an eye-opener and a bright light in those days.

Q: From our perspective, we thought it was great.

STAPLES: We thought it was great, and we encouraged people to watch it. We would hear what the next show would be and we would, following an Al Jazeera broadcast, bring in people to the embassy and have a round table with the Ambassador to talk about what's happening in Bahrain and how is it different here, or is it different if at all from what had been shown by Al Jazeera. We really were excited about Al Jazeera because it was getting at these traditional ideas that were limiting democratic possibilities in the region. So we were all behind Al Jazeera and what it did. But Al Jazeera, as you know, has taken a different bent these days and so it is.

Q: Our ox is being gored. Let's talk a little about the composition of Bahrain, because – who was doing what, the Sunni-Shia, the Iranian thing and then talk about Iran's relationship and all that.

STAPLES: Bahrain, as I said, is a country run by a Sunni royal family with a population that's majority Shia. In the government there were Shia ministers and Sunnis as well. I'll tell you when we get to Rwanda, the media will talk about Hutus and Tutsis – there are no 'the Hutus' and 'the Tutsis.' There are all kinds of Hutus, and all kinds of Tutsis. The same is true in the Middle East and in the Gulf. There are no Shia in a unified sense, there are all kinds of Shia, in terms of behavior, where they live, what they believe, et cetera. The same is true for the Sunni.

In Bahrain you had a situation in which, because of their cultural background and the trade links and their openness to the West, and their ability to travel because of these trading families and companies, you had people who were very, very open, both Sunnis and Shias. People who would invite you to their home – in some countries, you will never meet the wife. You'll never meet the female children in the Middle East. In Bahrain, everybody would be at the table, everybody would eat. Shia – some would be covered, some would not, and you could invite them to your home and so forth, and the same thing

would happen. People would tell me this is very unusual in the Middle East and the Gulf and in Abu Dhabi and so forth, and Dubai. We have people who have worked there for years and never met a local person, or never met their business partner's family. But in Bahrain they wanted to meet you, they wanted you in their homes. They were so open and friendly about that.

Beyond that, education was very important for the Bahrainis. The military leadership of the country had gone to Sandhurst, some to the US. Mainly the British influence, historically, was true. Many of the local people would send their kids to the US or to Europe and would vacation there. The current Emir, the current king, who was trained as a military officer, went to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to the Army Command Staff College, and he would tell me – I played tennis with him sometimes – he would tell me that he loved that because he and his wife would rent a car and just take off and drive through the middle west and drive into Utah and camp out in Colorado, so it was that kind of relationship.

The Bahrainis are also extremely hospitable people. The emir, Sheikh Isa, who died, always wanted to know if you were happy, how you were doing. I was just a number two at the embassy, although my last six months I was the chargé, but Sheikh Isa would call and say, "George, how are you?" Or you'd get an invite, even as the number two and he'd say, "I want you and your wife and daughter to come and have dinner with me next week." And you'd go out to one of his palaces and it would be just the four of us. I'll never forget – and I hope people will do some research on the Bahraini royal family and their attitudes – but at one of these dinners he put me at the head of the table, my wife to my left and he and my daughter were sitting next to each other, and Sheikh Isa was about four feet five, a little guy and my daughter about the same size, and they would sit there and they were telling jokes about short people. This is not what you would think as a ruler of a major country in the region.

The other thing that we should recognize about Bahrain at the time and its importance is that when the Lebanese civil war happened, at that time Lebanon was the banking center of the Middle East, the banks moved, and when I got there in '96 and to this day, Bahrain was a huge banking, commercial center. That meant there were a lot of expats. A lot of Bahrainis were in the banking sectors, too. A lot of people at Bahrain University were being trained for financial work in the financial sector.

Now, what about everybody else, because – and this is something that should go on the record, and I bet others have mentioned it as well – who does the dirty work in the Gulf and in the Arab world? And the answer is: not the Arabs. Not the Bahrainis. In Saudi Arabia, as I'm sure people have heard and know, and in other countries, including Bahrain, the people who clean the streets, who do the construction work, who do a lot of the manual labor, the low-level professional jobs, are from India, Pakistan, the Philippines, the maids, and so forth.

Q: Even South Korea, too.

STAPLES: South Korea? I don't remember them in Bahrain. It was mainly Indians and Pakistanis, some Sri Lankans, Mauritians, Filipinos.

Q: Well, of course, particularly the ties there – not the Philippines, but the other ones – the Persian Gulf was just full of dhows that came from India and Pakistan which all were one at one time. This was part of the trading pattern, depending on the winds.

STAPLES: Part of the trading pattern, exactly. Exactly. One thing that really bothered all of us at the embassy was sort of the treatment of people. Our friends, the Bahrainis who were so warm and welcoming, lovely people, they would have the Indians and the Pakistanis and all in these warehouses with bunk-beds, and they worked six days a week and they would make maybe $150 a month, and probably 80 percent of that they would send back, and that money would keep whole families and whole villages afloat back in India and elsewhere. Downtown in Manama in Bahrain, in the capital, Manama, you would find Citibank and Barclay's and so forth, but you would find 200 little places that specialized in wire transfers, transferring that money, repatriating you back. The people supposedly had free medical care, they had food, but you would hear these stories all the time about abuse and people who had been mistreated and it would have to come up silently, because if anybody complained – and you know when you arrive in that situation your passport's taken from you – if anyone complained, they'd just send them away. But that meant no more remittances and whole families would suffer from that.

Q: Did you feel particularly sensitive on this thing, coming, as you've said, from the African-American community and all that? I mean, did this resonate negatively, would you say, or not?

STAPLES: Well, yes, I mean, with everybody, not just with me. You just felt like the Bahraini attitude was, we need their labor, we're paying them what we think is fair, and they're not complaining. They're happy to have it. They make money go a long way. And the guy who told me that, once, urged me to come over right away, a good friend of mine from one of the trading families, because he had just gotten a brand-new Peugeot with a TV in the front seat and the back seat and he had bargained this guy down to just $95,000. He was just thrilled with his new car. It makes you just, "OK, I'm really happy for you." He said, "I've wanted this for so long, George, I'm so excited." And meanwhile my former cook in the barracks over there...

The other problem that we had, of course, was what do you do with the human rights report that is written up by the embassy? Now, if you were to write up all of that and really call it like it was, you would be offending your host, wouldn't you?

Q: Yes.

STAPLES: And that was the host with the Fifth Fleet headquarters and Sheikh Isa airbase, which we definitely needed if we were going to fight Iraq again. So what do you do? Decision time.

Q: What did you do?

STAPLES: You finesse it. You say what's wrong but you emphasize a little more strongly what's right. You hope it doesn't cause too much of a flap and your friends understand what you have to do and yet, using that, you can urge them to do better. That's about all you can do.

Q: Having served in Saudi Arabia, where the third rail there is Israel – how – I mean, you just couldn't mention it. It didn't appear on maps. How was it treated? I mean, you've got the high school, you've got what you're doing – how was Israel treated and our relationship with it?

STAPLES: For Bahrain, again, different kind of place. There were churches in Bahrain, a very tiny and small Jewish community. Israel was mentioned in the press and not denounced but treated in a somewhat hostile manner as it is elsewhere in the Middle East – in the Arab Middle East – but on the other hand, the Bahrainis received Israeli delegations. There was an effort on our part, which came close to succeeding, sort of, in which we almost got the Bahrainis to let Israel to open a trading office on the ground. We came close, but as it looked, increasingly, in 1998 as if we were going to go back to war with Iraq again – and we came within about five days of doing that – then no one wanted to touch that, because you didn't want opponents who would buy into the suffering of the Iraqi people business to seize on that and cause trouble on the ground.

In Bahrain as well – I mentioned about women driving and jogging and biking and anything else you wanted to do, golf – Bahrain also had liquor stores. You could buy booze in Bahrain.

Q: Having been one of their customers, back in my time, we used to smuggle it into Dhahran.

STAPLES: Yes. Well, you know, Dhahran is in Saudi Arabia, across the causeway. Now, things got interesting there because we had some women in the embassy who were also Air Force or Army reservists. They would go for their reserve training at US bases over the Saudi Arabia, and why not? It's convenient. Well, to get there meant they had to get a driver and by the time they got to the border crossing with Saudi Arabia they had to cover up. And of course, the women cannot speak and everything, the driver, the male driver, had to give the border guy the passport and explain and sign forms, et cetera. By the time they got to the base in Saudi Arabia they were fuming, just all of a sudden you switch from being in Bahrain where you're a partner and a first-class member of the team to you're in the backseat and keep your mouth shut and I'll take care of the paperwork and you don't say a thing. Even if you stop on the way in Saudi Arabia, at a McDonalds or a mall, there's the partitions to separate men and women.

Q: Well, that was – you're talking about – I go back to...

STAPLES: Oh, there weren't McDonalds. The fast food places with the partitions where you get out of the car and the women go to the left behind this partition and sit there and the man does the ordering and brings the food. It's different.

Q: What about the big – I mean, you had Iraq and we'll come to that in a minute – but what about Iran?

STAPLES: Let's talk about Iran. Iran – the Bahrainis detested Iran and viewed Iran as a threat, as a neighbor that had ambitions on Bahrain. They had – in fact, there was a longstanding historical claim by Iran on part of Bahrain's waters, and so forth – but Iran was also viewed as a fomenter of unrest among the Shia population back in the '70s.

Q: In my time in the '50s, too, I mean the shah was considered to be messing around there.

STAPLES: Yes, absolutely. They didn't like Iran whatsoever and the Bahrainis would play sort of a double game. They understood very well our concerns about Iraq, enforcing the no-fly zone, they understood about us bringing forces back into Bahrain and the rest of the region, preparing to go back to war with Saddam if he really did throw out the inspectors. On the other hand they would say, "But the real problem is Iran. They're the real danger in the region."

We also had, out of the Fifth Fleet headquarters, as you may remember, Stu, we had the interdiction exercise in the Gulf, where these boats that were not part of the Oil for Food program would come out of Iraq with smuggled oil and they would hug the coast by Iran and the US Navy, patrolling, would get them and we would take them to Abu Dhabi, where the oil would be off-loaded, the boats sold, the smugglers imprisoned. Sometimes there would be run-ins with Iranian patrol boats and the Iranians would say that we had entered their coastal waters, so we had some tensions with Iran that were very evident.

Q: Were we monitoring the Iranian community? Was there much of an Iranian community?

STAPLES: There was not much of an Iranian community in Bahrain. There really wasn't. Bahrain's Shia community – the younger people had leanings towards Iran but they were very well-monitored. The government in Bahrain had a former British person, and I forget his name, who was head of their security, and he had been in charge of security in Kenya at one time during the Mau Mau years. He, with the Bahraini people who worked for him, kept a really tight rein on the Shia community, especially young men. Anyone traveling was immediately suspect. Bahrain had tough laws about the importation of pamphlets, newsletters. Broadcasts were screened. The Bahrainis worried quite a bit about Iran.

Q: Was there any sign of Al Qaeda or terrorists?

STAPLES: You know, after the Khobar Towers bombing, we had all kinds of rumors of people moving in the region. Things of that nature. It wasn't called Al Qaeda, we didn't know that, then.

Q: It was just terrorists.

STAPLES: Just terrorists. Maybe linked to those who had carried out the bombing. Every embassy has an emergency action committee which meets to evaluate threats or dangers to the community. Most embassies will have an emergency action committee meeting maybe once a month, once every six weeks, or when something comes up. In my time in Bahrain in two years we had probably seventy or eighty of those kinds of meetings. They were always at the embassy; Admiral Fargo and others would come over and participate, because we would hear of people on the move and we wanted to make sure we were in lockstep on what we were saying and doing.

Let me mention that we had just an outstanding relationship with the Fifth Fleet personnel and their people. Not once did the Navy decide to do something without consulting the embassy. Not once did they go to a higher-alert level when we didn't think it was necessary. We always coordinated and we were in absolute lockstep on everything we did. It was really an excellent, excellent coordination that we had during that time. An

Q: Let me just stop here for one second. We're back, make sure we're doing this. We're back on, George. Let's talk about – what were you getting about Iraq? Because later, damn shortly about three years afterwards, we began talking about weapons of mass destruction and all that. What were you getting out of – you were sitting at this sort of center where stuff was coming in. What were you getting about Iraq?

STAPLES: Yes, let's talk about Iraq for a little bit here. We were just mentioning some of that during our break here. Out of Iraq, from what we were getting, was that the inspectors were being stymied in their effort to really inspect Saddam's facilities. Saddam, as you remember, didn't like the no-fly zone. Periodically he would shoot a SAM (Surface to Air) missile at some of our planes. He was trying to block, as I recall, the inspectors from really doing their job. He didn't give them full access. There were days when inspectors were told not to leave their compound. They were harassed and hassled. And when someone does that, your natural conclusion is that, well, the person is doing it because they have something to hide. No one said, as I recall, that they had nuclear weapons or they were back producing biological weapons or so forth, but what was said was that the inspectors were not being able – not able to do their job. They weren't able to inspect. And remember, this was just five years after the end of the war and Saddam was known to have lots of places and facilities that had never been looked at, and the inspectors were not able to get there. So no one knew what was there.

And then '98 came along, and it got to be more and more difficult for the inspectors to do their job, to the point where we began building up, and we had, as I say, the Air Expeditionary Force deployments, we had the four carriers back in the Gulf, we had General Zinni over, ready to run the war from the Fifth Fleet headquarters, we had the

troops. But we also had, at that time – all of us were confident that we were going to war, and that it would be over very quickly, because all of the assessments were that Saddam's military was quite weak, had never recovered from the first Gulf War.

Q: When we talk about war, what were we talking about?

STAPLES: We were talking about going in and basically ending Saddam Hussein and his regime. Putting an end to it.

Q: But were we talking about a massive invasions, was it air, going to be or …?

STAPLES: It was mainly going to be air but there were troop buildups as well. And there were some commitments – again, remember in the first Gulf War we had Syrians and other Arab troops who were fighting with us to liberate Kuwait. The Arab neighbors, all, were totally supportive of the inspection effort, and it was fresh in their minds. Saudi Arabia had been attacked with scud missiles, the Bahrainis were attacked with scud missiles, the Kuwaitis were eager for everybody to go in and finish the guy off so that they would never again attack Kuwait. And it just – that was the idea. And in the international community the ground had been laid very well, there was a clear record of harassment and violation of the agreements as far as inspectors, and I can't remember exactly the time but at a certain point Saddam had flat threatened to throw out the inspectors. That was the moment where we had about five days in which we were close to going back to war again.

Q: What stopped that?

STAPLES: As I recall, Saddam backed away slightly and that was seized upon by the Clinton administration to put a halt to the plans and so forth. I really think that President Clinton missed a great opportunity. Everything was in place, we had the whole of the region, the rest of the Arab world. It was very clear what had to be done. The international community was fully on board because there was great support for the inspection regime. And it would have been over quickly and with lots of support in the region, I think we would have had a very different outcome than we are looking at today.

Q: Back to oil – British Petroleum, or BAPCO, British Arabian Petroleum Company, I guess, was pumping oil in Bahrain but the feeling was this was pretty close – it wasn't going to be, this was not a huge source of oil. How was oil – where was money coming from for Bahrain? Was it coming from trading, being in a central place, was it oil, and what was happening from that?

STAPLES: Bahrain had some oil, and before I left in '98 the Saudis gave the Bahrainis an entire oil field just to help them out, because they did not have huge amounts of oil, which the Bahrainis always felt was a blessing, because they had to work. The Bahrainis worked, they were traders. The banking center, as I say, was in Bahrain, so they had lots of money from financial services. First-class hotels and places like that, but the Bahrainis mainly made their own money through trading and business, and also, of course, some

money from the United States, because we rented – I mean, we paid money for the Fifth Fleet facility.

Q: Sounds like much more, as you say, a blessing, rather than to have too much money and you end up with a spoiled youth.

STAPLES: The problems of Saudi Arabia. No one received a government stipend in Bahrain. It didn't happen.

Q: How about youth? Were they getting to universities, what were they doing?

STAPLES: They youth were – a lot of Bahraini young people did not go to university. The university was not that big. Some of the youth were training in business. Some became schoolteachers and so forth. But there was high unemployment. Regretfully, many bright young people – you know, in the Arab world, you have to have a job and some kind of future or you can't marry. That's a real problem. But the idea was, whatever it took, try to get a government job, because not just marrying but having job security would ensure that a good wife could be arranged for you. Bahrain did not have a huge government bureaucracy, so the competition was very stiff for those jobs.

Some Bahrainis made their way in the service industry, in hotel management, in some of the stores. You would not just find Indians and Pakistanis but you would find Bahrainis. Interesting to me was that you would find young Bahraini Shia women wearing the veil, partly, but working in supermarkets and other stores, and they would speak to you and give you change and sometimes in giving change hands touched, all of these things that, in Saudi Arabia, would get the religious police on you. But in Bahrain it didn't matter.

In fact – again, to show Bahrain and how unique – I remember at Christmas in the stores, you're standing there behind a veiled woman and in front of her is an unveiled woman in a miniskirt, basically, while Santa Claus is coming to town is being piped through the sound system. And you're saying, "You know, this is Bahrain."

Q: I can remember, having come from Saudi Arabia, we would come over once a month to Bahrain to Manama, and all of a sudden I'd realize that here are these women – particularly then, it was much stricter – I mean, in complete veils and all but you could sort of tell which ones were the prostitutes and which weren't. It was the way they walked. I mean, to see something – complete veil, but there was a sort of a wiggle or something there when they walked, it was the damnedest thing.

STAPLES: It was very, very interesting. Let me just mention as well that when I was there I led a team from DOD and the embassy, we renegotiated the agreement on the basing of the Fifth Fleet headquarters, and we negotiated a 10 or 15 year extension, and that's despite the suffering of the Iraqi people stuff in the media.

People ask me sometimes, what was your most favorite assignment, and I can tell you that this was definitely one of the most unique times in my career, and for my entire two

years there I never took leave. I never had a chance for leave for the whole two years. Every single day something was happening – an EAC (Emergency Action Committee) meeting, or more forces coming in or more visitors – and it was a very, very tense time as we prepared once more for confrontation with Iraq.

Q: Was there a problem – a shared problem with the Fifth Fleet and all – of troops coming in, troops coming into the Arab world and all?

STAPLES: No.

Q: This is not the easiest of relationships.

STAPLES: Except in Bahrain, which had no problem with foreigners, and I'll give you an example of how this worked. We had, on the Navy side, we had carrier visits. We had the *Kennedy*, we had the *USS Enterprise,* and it was secure enough to the point where we allowed the *Enterprise* to come in and dock, not just sit out in the Gulf, but dock. And here's 2,000 sailors who are coming ashore on shore leave.

Q: A small little island, it's not very big.

STAPLES: A small little island, and the Bahrainis were saying, "Yeah, this is going to be great! The gold souk, and the businesses trade and all this, and you would think, well, in an Arab country, what are they going to do about when they're leaving (ph), about this, that and the other, well, here's what we did. Admiral Fargo would set up these briefings for all the sailors to explain the culture, here's what you can do, what you can't do, and here's lists of places that are recommended to shop, et cetera. And places for recreation. They had nice movie theaters, which were not cordoned off, everyone could go to the movies and so forth. Again, it was a very unique place.

What they also did, in terms of the visits, was that they would assign each of the sailors to hotels because it spread the sailors around town which was good for security. So everyone was spread out across the island so that for security reasons there was no concentration of people in one building where they could be attacked with a car bomb. Everybody got business, and there was a curfew. It was a midnight, twelve o'clock, curfew. Tom Fargo had a saying that nothing good ever happens after midnight. And so it worked great, and we had multiple ship visits, we had lots of business with the Bahrainis. The sailors who had been on patrol for all these months were able to come ashore and relax and enjoy. A lot of them did volunteer projects at schools and it worked out very, very well.

Q: How did your wife and daughter find it there?

STAPLES: My wife and daughter found it to be good. My wife, in Zimbabwe, had established and run a feeding kitchen for less fortunate people. But in Bahrain, she was in a place where there was wealth, and most people she knew were middle or upper-class.

She had many, many Bahraini friends, especially among the Shia community, and she really liked it, liked the people, very, very much.

My daughter went to the Bahrain school and she liked the international aspect of the school. Catherine went through her first and second year of high school there, and had friends. They had activities. Because of the location of the school – again, and this is an advantage I think our kids in the Foreign Service have – she was able to go on a Model UN program in Cairo. She went to a theatre, a dramatic arts program, in Syria. Those kinds of things happened for her as well. They both have very, very good memories of being there.

Q: Well, '98. Whither?

STAPLES: '98, whither? Well, because I'd done, I guess, what the department considered to be a decent job in Bahrain, I got a call one day and I was asked if I'd be willing to have my name to be put on a list to be looked at to be the next ambassador in Rwanda, and I said no, at first, but I talked to people and they said – not because of Rwanda with the history – friends who really liked me said, "Oh, no, it's too small. You'll do better than that. Wait." But then, other people said, "You ought to say yes because you may not get the call again." And that's true.

Q: That's very true.

STAPLES: So I said, "OK, yes," and the process played out. I went back to Washington, had my hearings and so forth, and then late in '98 – I'm trying to remember when, I think it was October or November – I went to Rwanda as US ambassador. I was the second ambassador after the genocide of 1994.

Q: All right, well let's talk – before you went there, what were you getting about Rwanda?

STAPLES: Well, I first heard about Rwanda when I was in Zimbabwe, because in 1994, when I was there, the killing began, the genocide, in April. But all we heard about it, in southern Africa at the time, was that there's fighting in Rwanda and there's terrible refugee problems and so forth. We didn't really know much. I began to learn to about Rwanda preparing for the hearings, and this history of Rwanda is complicated and very tragic and very complex. This is a country that had been settled by peoples moving from Ethiopia who found other peoples already living in central Africa. Eventually the Belgians came in as the colonial power. The Belgians played off the two ethnic groups against each other for their own purposes, then went through this insane racial classification effort where they measured heads and noses and eyebrows and determined what somebody was and who was more European.

Q: They had some German experts coming in?

STAPLES: Like Nazis? No. But the Belgians did categorized people and gave certain privileged jobs to one group but not the other. And over time it played into ethnic conflict and hatred below the surface that, after independence, exploded into violence, eventually culminating in the 1994 genocide.

I had lots of material to read, as you can imagine, because Rwanda was, and is, still a very interesting and disturbing topic for so many people. Lots of books on the colonial history, lots of books on '94 and what happened, and it was a big job to prepare, because for the US, we were – again, and President Clinton was still president – he was viewed by the Rwandans as the leader of the free world who stood by and did nothing while people were slaughtered. As you may remember, he eventually made a visit to Rwanda and apologized.

Q: Was that during your time?

STAPLES: No. That was before I arrived.

Q: Did you find, within the State Department, people were talking about this? Was this sort of a big shadow that lay over everything?

STAPLES: Yes. Yes.

Q: Was there a feeling that we could have really done much?

STAPLES: Yes, but that we chose not to, and we chose not to because we didn't want to get involved with American forces either in an active or logistics role once again in Africa after what had happened in Somalia.

Q: Somalia really hung over this.

STAPLES: And it hangs over us today, but it really hung over us then.

Q: I've interviewed Pru Bushnell.

STAPLES: Oh, yes.

Q: She was, I think, the assistant secretary or the Deputy Assistant Secretary.

STAPLES: That's right.

Q: Dealing with this, and she talks about how she got caught in this. We really didn't want to do anything.

STAPLES: I've talked to Pru as well. We entered the Foreign Service in the same junior officer class, by the way, and she – well, of course she's still traumatized by what

happened in Nairobi, to our embassy. The bombing. But I think she blames herself – as many do in the department – for not doing more to prevent the genocide in Rwanda.

Q: Did you find yourself moving in – was there, in a way, almost a division between the activists and the let's-not-get-involved when you got there?

STAPLES: No, no. When I got there – again, this was '98, this was four years afterward, so our main focus then was how to help this country come back together and these people in this little bitty place, they have to live together. How's that going to happen? And so the challenge was to bring about and to promote the reconciliation among people, but also economic development, because it was one of the poorest countries in the region.

Q: Overpopulation is a real problem there, isn't it?

STAPLES: Yes, Rwanda has one of the highest population densities in the world, which led a lot of the decisions by people to kill their neighbors and take their land.

Q: Well, you were there from when to when?

STAPLES: I was there from the fall of '98 – I think October or so of '98 – until the summer of 2001, so almost three years. Almost three years.

Q: What, did you feel, was your main task or main tasks when you went out to Rwanda in '98?

STAPLES: First of all, to improve relations between the US and Rwanda, not the best. Paul Kagame, the president, really sort of mistrusted the West in general.

Q: I mean it wasn't us, per se, it was...

STAPLES: It was not just us per se. But he just felt the world stood by and here he was trying to rebuild this country and who could he really count on? We also had to improve and build, as I say, economic commercial ties and help the Rwandan economy grow and the people recover. But we also had to work hard to expand upon the Rwandan government's efforts to promote reconciliation, make sure that there was accountability, and that there was going to never again be something like this in central Africa.

We also had, at the time, as you may remember, the war – well, not a war, but conflict – next door in the Congo. That was flaring up and eventually became very serious. And how to keep conflict there from spilling over back into Rwanda, because remember, when the forces under Paul Kagame went into Rwanda to stop the genocide, a lot of the government troops, government leaders, et cetera, fled into the Congo. And in the Congo they talked about coming back for round two, coming back to finish the job. Rwanda was also a dangerous place, because the former government responsible for the genocide and its soldiers all felt that they had really been defeated because the US had helped Paul Kagame. They believed it was our fault they lost, and there was a standing price on the

head of the American ambassador. So Rwanda was my first time where I had to, for three years, live with and work with a security detail provided by the Rwandan government. I had guards around the residence, and I had a chase car and other agents that were with me all the time, wherever I traveled. So that was a unique experience.

Q: You might explain where the government, when you were there, Paul...

STAPLES: Kagame.

Q: Kagame, where he came from and sort of, basically, how the situation played out after the genocide and what you came to.

STAPLES: Kagame had grown up in Rwanda but was driven into exile as many, many of the Tutsis were in the '80s and the '70s, and they went to many places. Kagame and some of his followers went to Uganda, next door, where he grew up and went to school. He eventually joined the Uganda army and he was President Museveni of Uganda, he was Museveni's intelligence chief for many years until he "defected" with his followers and re-entered Rwanda in 1994. stopped the genocide and eventually became president. But there were many, many people like Paul Kagame who were driven out of Rwanda, in what amounts to basically, pogroms, over the years. Some fled to Burundi and there were large exile communities in Europe, Canada and other countries.

After Rwanda's independence – for those who don't know the history, an election was held and a Hutu named Gregoire Kayibanda was elected president. He was a decent enough guy but he made sure that things changed. The Tutsi elite were no longer the elite. He packed the government with his supporters. But then he was overthrown by Juvenal Habyarimana, who was the army commander. And Habyarimana stayed as president right up until the genocide began. Habyarimana was in the plane that was shot down, and the night that was shot down, coming back from the peace accord negotiations that were being held in Arusha, Tanzania, that very night the genocide – the elements of which had been well-prepared, months, and, in fact, a couple of years beforehand, people as planned went out, set up roadblocks and the killings of Tutsis and moderate Hutus began.

Before we talk a little bit more about that, about what we were doing there, let me just mention something I alluded to earlier, Stu, about people. About this whole Hutu and Tutsi thing. Kayibanda, the first president, was a Hutu, but he was from the south in Rwanda, an area near the national university and that part of the country. He and his people were quite different from those who are Hutus from the north, where Habyarimana was from, and they, in turn, were very different from those of a Hutu ethnicity from the east, closer to Tanzania. And they hate each other. When Habyarimana carried out the coup, Kayibanda and his supporters were imprisoned. Kayibanda himself was put into jail and starved to death over a two-week period, and Habyarimana, after he starved him to death, named the national airport after him. A typical kind of the thing that goes on sometimes. So the idea that the Hutus – as I say, there are no "the Hutus," there are different competing groups in this small country. Same with the Tutsis. There are

Tutsis who are very close to Tutsis in Burundi who are completely different from Tutsis who have grown up in the north of Rwanda and tied to those living near the Uganda and so forth – they are completely different peoples. Their food is different, they rarely intermarry. It's a completely different set of people. So researchers and others, looking at the ethnic side of conflict, in particular, Rwanda, need to look deeper, because there isn't any one group versus another group, just as in the Arab world there are all kinds of Sunnis and all kinds of Shias. That's something that, again, I don't think you really realize until you get in a place like this and see for yourself.

Q: Well, did you find people, before you went out there, who really gave you a feel for what you were coming up against? I mean, in retrospect you found you were well-briefed or not?

STAPLES: I found somewhat, but I think I learned much more in the country. Much more in the country. I don't think there were that many people in Washington who really knew enough, I don't. And I personally do not like to spend a lot of time around exile groups, which we had done that with Iraq and the...

Q: I mean, all of us have had to deal with this group or the people who have come the United States, immigrant groups. They really don't add much to the equation.

STAPLES: They don't. They're out of touch and they have pointed views. I don't ever do that. No, I learned more on the ground in Rwanda about what had happened and what people really believed happened, and more importantly what they thought should happen to move the country forward.

Q: Let me ask the big question: did we have any real interest, the United States, in Rwanda, outside of guilt?

STAPLES: Yes, and the answer is conflict resolution, in terms of the overall image of Africa, what can be done in Africa, preventing things like that from coming back again. Rwanda was also a base from which we monitored, on a humanitarian basis, some of the tragedies that were happening next door in the Congo. And many NGOs based in Rwanda were doing work inside the Congo to alleviate a lot of the humanitarian suffering.

And also it was place in which we were quite active behind the scenes in the international effort to nail down and bring to justice war criminals. Again, this is very much an African issue that the we – the United States – appeared to be much more concerned about what happened in the former Yugoslavia, than what happened in Africa, and that a more effort was made to take care of refuges from Kosovo than from the Rwandan genocide. You know, nice camps, with basketball courts and so forth. But African refuges, look how they live. And that's a big issue in Africa. A lot of concern there. And the US – we had a chance to do something about that in Rwanda by really helping this country come back together and turning it into a different kind of country.

Q: Did you feel just – it's now changed – but the fact that, sort of, the military, our military, oversight came from troops – European command covered Africa, didn't they?

STAPLES: European command covered Africa.

Q: This showed – I mean, it meant you were over the horizon.

STAPLES: Yes. Yes, there wasn't much interest. There wasn't much interest.

Q: Well, let's talk about what you did there. I mean first if you want to talk about the embassy and the composition of the embassy and its operations, and then what you were up to.

STAPLES: Yes. The embassy was very small. There's now a new embassy compound, one of the new, Inman type of secure ones, but when I was there it was still the embassy we had had from the time we opened diplomatic relations in the '60s. It was a converted butcher shop, and we had an American staff of about, I think, 12 people. We were right in the middle of downtown.

Q: That was after the bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.

STAPLES: Yes. And with the government's permission we had closed the downtown streets, which was a big source of tension, because in that one capital city, to take the main streets and block them off, for setback purposes was not that popular.

But it was a small embassy. We had good communications and we had easy access to government leaders. The main person, of course, at that time he was the vice president and he eventually assumed the presidency, was Paul Kagame, who was one of the great military strategists, I think, of Africa. A very smart man, a very bright man. Someone I got along with very, very well. His military is probably the most professional in Africa, and we are using Rwandan troops in Darfur today and elsewhere.

But Kagame had a mission, and his mission was to promote reconciliation and economic growth, and to bring to justice the people responsible for the genocide. My main job, and what I'm the proudest of, is that we really worked hard to promote reconciliation. With my Public Diplomacy Chief, Ergibe Boyd, we did a number of reconciliation seminars, traveling the country. We'd get everybody we could together. I used some of the practices we had used in Uruguay to turn my residence into a place where people could come and talk, supposedly to brief me on what was happening, but after about five minutes they started talking to each other, which was what I wanted. It was very, very good. A whole lot of people who were in their 40s and 50s who should have been going to school together, growing businesses together, they should have known each other but many had been in exile. And in the aftermath of the genocide you had so many Rwandans coming back to help, from Canada or Uganda or Burundi or wherever, and they didn't know each other. You had people who wanted to make quick investments, quick killings.

We had a lot of profiteers in a post-conflict environment. We helped the government screen some of them out.

On the diplomatic side, we helped the government rebuild a foreign ministry. The entire foreign ministry was run by the government responsible for the genocide, and many years of records were lost. So we ran a diplomatic training camp, where we taught people how to prepare documents, what a demarche was, what a diplomatic note looked like, how you answer it. And we had to basically train up the foreign ministry to get it going. No one else would or could take up this task.

Q: What was the role of the Belgians?

STAPLES: The Belgians were hated. They were there, but they had an embassy of two people. The French were absolutely despised. Absolutely despised, because they had been very close to the previous government and they had given arms to the previous government. A lot of the senior Rwandans responsible for the genocide fled to France.

Q: Why was it this relationship?

STAPLES: With the French?

Q: Yes.

STAPLES: Why was it so bad?

Q: Well, no. I mean why had the French opted for this relationship?

STAPLES: Well, language, in a word. Paul Kagame and those around him who were Tutsis had come from Uganda and they spoke English.

Q: Ah.

STAPLES: Yes, if you can believe that. The previous government and everyone around them were French speakers. And also, the French were given a lot of concessions, a lot of economic advantages and so forth. But the French – you know, the shame of Rwanda, among so many things – were these ID cards, where every citizen had to have them and they listed on the ID card if you were a Hutu or Tutsi.

Q: Oh, God.

STAPLES: Well, when the killing began, people had to produce their ID card and immediately, if it was the wrong one, they were killed. Well, that came from the French, and the Belgians. And the French blocked every effort by the UN and by others to try to remove that. Yes.

Q: What had caused the government and the French to have something like this which is so volatile?

STAPLES: They were – well, you have to understand, the whole idea of Rwanda was, in the previous government, to maintain power and influence and the money among its group of core supporters. The French fully supported that for their own advantages, mainly linguistically. Burundi, of course, next door, is French-speaking. The Congo is French-speaking. To maintain their influence in Africa – it was the French. The Belgians were mainly interest in economic things. The Belgians, when the genocide began, lost their 10 peacekeepers guarding the Prime Minister, who were murdered at the outset of the genocide. But the French, even after the genocide was coming to an end, established this zone of safety in the east where they put their troops. The Rwandans from the other regime were fleeing into it and saying things like, "Thank God the French are here. You'll save us from these Tutsi animals," and they urged women to dress themselves up so that the French would find them attractive. The French went a little deeper into the country and found all of these mass-killing sites and finally realized what was going on. But the French never took responsibility for any of their support, any of their arms supplies and today – I don't know if you've followed it – but a few months ago, Paul Kagame broke off diplomatic relations. The French – I mean, he threw them out. Threw them out.

Q: I mean, we went through a lot of soul-searching, mainly through indifference – I won't say indifference, but standing off. And the president publicly apologized, which is not a normal thing for a president to do. Clinton went there. The French never went through this.

STAPLES: Oh, no. The French to this day – and there were efforts in parliament for an investigation, et cetera, et cetera. Mitterrand blocked it. There's never been accountability or full recognition. In fact, in France, you will hear people today say that all this really happened because of the Americans and the West, because we encouraged Paul Kagame to come in and destabilize a functioning government. The reason behind it was that we wanted English-speakers to run Rwanda. Yes, it's absolutely insane, absolutely insane.

Q: Did Mitterrand's son play a role in this at all?

STAPLES: He's alleged to, in terms of arms sales, arms-dealings. Maybe that's the case. And of course, the government received a lot of financing from the French, as well as a lot of well off businesspeople. One who is still wanted by the international court, who bought the 300,000, 400,000 machetes that were brought into the country and all. He's alleged to have been helped by the French to flee. A lot of them fled and the first place they went was to France.

Q: Were we distancing ourselves from the French?

STAPLES: The French ambassador and I had a correct relationship. Their embassy was very small. What they were focused on was not helping the Rwandan people in any way

whatsoever. They were trying to reestablish a French cultural center, and there were two buildings that they had that had been burned down during the fighting, and they wanted compensation for their two buildings. I'm serious. They never did anything to try to help those people recover from their experience.

Q: What about the Scandinavians. They were big in Tanzania and all, and I was wondering whether that spilled over into...

STAPLES: The Scandinavians, and particularly the Swedes, had a couple of assistance projects but they all worked together very closely with the EU delegation to do basic assistance, but they weren't so active. They weren't very active there at all.

The main engine of growth for Rwanda was us, and what we did to promote private entrepreneurship, and also the South Africans. The South Africans, post-apartheid South Africa, very active in the rest of Africa. The former resorts at Lake Kivu – you know, Rwanda was a wonderful little country before the genocide, if you weren't a Tutsi. The little game park out in the east, beautiful beach villas and resorts on Lake Kivu, the Dian Fossey mountain gorillas up in the north, volcano-trekking, but all of that, of course, was over with. The South Africans were coming in and renovating the resorts, renovating the game park.

Q: This movie that won a lot of acclaim, Hotel Rwanda, which was on – what was it, the Hotel of a Thousand Hills?

STAPLES: *Milles Collines*, which means "The Land of a Thousand Hills," that's Rwanda. Which it is, it's true, by the way. Lots of hills. Yes.

Q: First, what about living there? You mentioned the threat to you.

STAPLES: Living there was OK. I had a nice residence. There were two hotels, the *Milles Collines* hotel, which still existed, and another one. There were a couple of restaurants to go to. Electricity was back in the city. There was tennis and some biking. You could make trips to different places. We had one big American investment in the country that still existed, a tea plantation. Rwanda is also tea country. We would go there sometimes and visit. The name was Sorwathe tea plantation, and the owners would come visit sometimes. And then up in the far north of the country by Lake Kivu I had my one special American citizen named Roz Carr, who was about 92 years old, and she had been in Rwanda for about half a century. If you remember the Dian Fossey movie, what was it? *Gorillas in the Mist*, the part where they were at this house near the mountains with the flowers and all, well, that was Roz's house. She was evacuated during the genocide, came back, and in her 90s started an orphanage for kids. She just passed away a year ago. But a very, very special woman who's written a book with an interesting history.

Living there was pleasant, most of the time. The climate is quite good. But that's the outer part of it. The other part that affects you so much is that all the time – because I believe to be effective you have to be out and about. You have to really touch people, get

out to people. You can't do the reconciliation, you can't promote US policies, if you're not on the road. I never wanted people to be inside my embassies. I wanted people out. If you're out in Rwanda you're going to go visit people, local mayors, communities, and in every single one of them in Rwanda there's a genocide memorial. Every single one of them. The Rwandans liked to do genocide memorials a certain way. They liked to line up the skulls. They like to put the heads on one area, multiple layers, and then the femurs and so forth in different areas and sections, and then around the corner somewhere there's always a children's section where the little skeletons are. And every time you visit somewhere in the countryside in Rwanda, and in Kigali itself, the capital, you will have to, as a diplomat, go and pay your respects at a genocide site. And it wears on you, after a while.

Q: Oh, yes.

STAPLES: I mean, I don't have nightmares, I don't have trouble sleeping or anything like this, but when you go somewhere and you look at about 20,000 remains and someone says, "Really, about 100,000 were killed here," or you visit one of the prisons and you see the guys and the women in the pink pajamas – the genocide prisoners wore pink – and you talk to them about what they did and this, that and the other, and you know, all of that, all the time, every week – it wears on you.

And in the embassy our local employees, some of whom were genocide survivors. At a certain point, for no reason at all, they would just break down and cry. Things had come back to them. You just had to give them that space and time. People that we knew in the business community, Rwandans who were our friends, the judges and so forth, the few that were left, they would tell you how they survived. My driver, John Charles, he and his son survived. Over 200 people in his immediate family were wiped out. He and his son hid in a causeway, a passageway, in the side of a house for thirteen days with just a little food and no water. They finally had to drink each other's urine to survive. And, you know, he's driving along and I'm having a lunch at the residence with some members of the former regime who were not implicated and you're thinking to yourself, "How can John Charles go down this road and not just want to drive into a crowd of them and take revenge?" It was so strange sometimes.

In my own household, in my own residence, I had my cook, who had been the cook for American ambassadors for fifteen years, she was a Hutu. Her husband was in jail, who had been a member of the Interahamwe, the militia responsible for killing. My housekeeper was a Tutsi who fled to Uganda and returned to the residence and John Charles, my driver, and they would be together and just talking and having a nice day and sharing a coffee before some event started and you'd say, "Ho do they do it?" I'd go to play tennis at the *Cirque le Sportif*, the French tennis club, and the head tennis pro there was a young Hutu guy. His father was in jail charged with organizing the killing of a 1,000 children. That was his father. In his home he had 13 Tutsi orphans and he was also Paul Kagame's tennis coach. So how can this be?

We had people – one of our best programs that we did with USAID was about school fees. We found money to provide school fees for young girls. Why just young girls? Because with parents dead these young girls were the ones raising children. We had homes full of 13, 14 year old girls who were raising 20 kids, because there were no parents around. There was no way in the world they'd ever go to school again, so we arranged community support and money so that they could go to school. There was no State Department training for living and working in this kind of situation.

Q: You were mentioning, I think, or talking to our intern group here, I was listening to this, about asking somebody, "Well, why did you get involved in the killing?" Could you talk about that?

STAPLES: I will, because you met Rwandans who were very well-educated. They were churchgoers, pillars of the community, and here they are in jail and, for example, convicted of killing people. And you say, "You're not one of the ones who just heard on the radio that you should go out and clear the brush?"

Q: Kill the cockroaches.

STAPLES: "Kill the cockroaches, do your duty, clean up your neighborhoods? You knew better than this. Why did you do it?" And I remember this one person who told me – he put it very clearly – he said, "You're at home, trying to stay out of it, you know it's wrong, you don't want any part of it, you're hoping help will come, you're hoping it'll stop somehow. And then there's a knock on the door, and the person stands there with four or five people behind him with machetes and they say, 'We haven't seen you out at the roadblock. You're with us, right? Well, here's what you're going to do. You're going to take that machete and in fifteen minutes you're going to be out at that roadblock and do your duty. And if you don't, we're going to come back to this house and we're going to kill every single member of your family, animals, everybody, and you, too. That little child of yours, your wife, the new baby? We're going to kill them. You have fifteen minutes.'" He says, "What would you do?" You can say, in the confines of this room, "Well, I'd never do that, that's a criminal act, that's murder, that's horrific, I'd never do that," but when it's put to you that way...

And of course, the people who did that, who went out on that roadblock, when the first chance to kill someone came along they were made to kill them, right away.

Q: What were the roadblocks? What was the...?

STAPLES: When the genocide began in '94, roadblocks went up all over the countryside, all in the cities, and the well-trained Interahamwe, plus the military that was involved, after killing those who would not participate in the genocide and so-called moderate people and others, and political leaders, they then demanded for anyone going to a shop or a store or a movement of any kind, all cars were stopped, people were stopped, their identities checked, and if they were Tutsi they were killed, right there. The idea was truly a genocide to exterminate a whole group of people. And people were hacked to death,

people were shot, people were burned alive. Whatever it took. The idea was to, neighborhood by neighborhood, block by block – and remember, Rwanda is, as I mentioned to the interns yesterday, a little North Korea. It was very highly-centralized control with the governor and a prefecture and prefect people and block leaders and so forth and Rwandans had to turn out for group lectures in the evening, block by block.

Q: This is before the...?

STAPLES: Before the genocide. If you wanted permission to travel to one area of the country to another you had to have written permission. The government media was state controlled. So all of these things were in play with people organized in a very tightly-controlled society. The word went out to kill and people did their duty, did their duty.

Q: So were we part of any – you were saying that the United States was sort of a major force in trying to put things back together again.

STAPLES: That's right.

Q: Was there an effort for "reconciliation?" I think that was the term used in South Africa. Were there any?

STAPLES: Well, what we did was to encourage the government to do everything it could to promote reconciliation. There wasn't a truth commission, like in South Africa. What the government did was put into place, by the time I left, a system called "Gacaca," which is a word describing a justice system in a village that existed in Rwanda, where, when there was a problem, people would gather together, discuss it, and agree on the solution, and if there was a crime, agree on a penalty. You see, what do you do in a country where there were 100,000 people in jail, and yet most judges had been killed? I think there were about 20 judges in the whole country left alive. There was no way to run these people through a traditional legal system. It would take 1,000 years. There were no prosecutors, there were no defense lawyers. The buildings had been burned down. We had a project with the Canadians to try to do judicial training, to basically train up lawyers and others. So the government had to find another way to bring about justice, and what they decided was to categorize criminals into certain groups. Category Ones and Twos were those who were accused of murder. And of course the leaders, government ministers and all, many of them were indicted and were being held for trial by the international tribunal in Arusha, Tanzania.

But in Rwanda the Category Ones and Twos were going to face traditional justice in a courtroom. People below that were going to be judged back in the countryside at village levels. And what that meant was, at a certain point, they would be sent back to the area where they had allegedly committed the crimes. Elders and people from that community would gather and pronounce what the sentence should be. Now, there's several problems with this. Number one, if you went back to an area where all the victims supposedly have been killed and only the killers and their relatives were still there, not much justice would be done. But number two, I faced a lot of problems from Washington because people

back there just didn't get it. They said that this village system of justice would not be in accordance with established international legal norms. You'd say, "You know, I'm in a country where there's about 25 judges left alive. There's no way to do carry out justice for the mass of these alleged criminals according to international legal norms." And then Washington and human rights groups would send people to inspect the prison, and conditions were horrific - 25 people in a jail cell with all kinds of disease and AIDS taking its toll, et cetera. And they'd say, "Well, you have to tell the government to improve the prison conditions." And this is a government where people who had been a bus driver were now a minister of transportation. People who were left alive were trying to run something the best they could with minimal resources, and yet we were insisting in Washington that international standards be met. I ignored them. I said, "Let's give African people a little credit for intelligence." It may not be a trial or a setting of justice that you and I would understand but they know what's fair. They know what's fair. Let's let people decide in their communities, if at all possible. It's still working today and doing not too badly, but I had lots of trouble from Washington wanting things done as if Rwanda were a regular little country. And it wasn't.

Q: What about in Zaire, or Congo, or whatever it's called now, you've got this Hutu army – I'm talking about the time you were there – sitting in the jungle, waiting to come back. What was happening there?

STAPLES: Well, what happened when I was there was that the Rwandans went in after them. So the Rwandans, according to international law, actually "invaded," quote-unquote, the Congo. And this caused a lot of angst in Washington. The message was to do what you can to get the Rwandans to get out of there. The Rwandans were not going to withdraw, and then the Rwandans established their own pro-Rwandan militia groups which threatening the stability of the Kabila government in the Congo. And for my entire time there, that was an issue. Kagame was not going to get out. The genocidaires in the Congo were threatening to return to Rwanda, and these were the very same people who had a price on the head of the American Ambassador, yours truly!.

Q: So how did you deal with that?

STAPLES: Well, it was difficult. We urged Kagame and succeeded in having him pull some of his forces back. We also – helping to get him out of there eventually, was, regretfully, stories that proved to be only too true about corruption among some of his officers who were involved in exploiting some of the mineral wealth in the eastern Congo. But you had a lot of military, of his military there, who would come back and would basically do the right thing and some who would not come back and who helped form these militias that carried out some of the atrocities.

I might add that the commander in the Congo, on the ground, for the Rwandan army, was a former Hutu general from the previous government whose own brothers had been killed by the *genocidaires* (committers of genocide), if you will. And in the Rwandan army, at that time, the minister of defense was a former Hutu officer from the Habyarimana regime who was not implicated in the genocide. So the media would constantly talk about

the Tutsi army and what was allegedly being done in the Congo, but it wasn't the case at all. You had many, many soldiers and military leaders who were Rwandan Hutus but not implicated in the genocide.

Q: Well, I would imagine that you would have these parachute journalists who would pop in for a couple of days and it's "The Hutu were short, and the Tutsis were tall, and they killed each other because of height," practically, or something like that.

STAPLES: Yes.

Q: It's one of the problems of embassy on the ground, of trying to explain to people who really, one, don't have time, or won't give the time, plus the fact that they've got editors who've got fixed ideas about this. This must have been quite a strain on you all.

STAPLES: We had it all the time. People who came in with exactly those preconceptions, who really didn't want to look at the complexity of the society. They just added fuel to the fire, if you will. It got to the point where Paul Kagame and other officials wouldn't talk to them, just wouldn't talk to them. They would come and want interviews with the president and so forth and he just wouldn't talk to them anymore. So they would go off and find people who would, who would trash the government, but he said, "The international community ignored us anyway. It didn't help us. So what? Who cares what they think?"

And that was something, by the way, Stu, it was something we had to work carefully with Kagame on, because a lot of times he would get this attitude, well, I'm just going to do whatever I want, no one cares about us anyway. Look what they didn't do. And we'd have to walk him back and say, "No, that's not the case. There are other implications here to be considered." And that was hard sometimes. Every year the Rwandans in April have a genocide remembrance day and the whole government, and the diplomatic corps, go off somewhere in the country to a site where terrible things happened, and there at the site the people who died are commemorated. Those who survived, by hiding, come forth and tell their stories, and then Kagame gives a speech, and by that time he's pretty worked up, and he says horrible things about everybody and attacks everybody and drives off. And about three days later you can go see him and he's calmed down again. But meanwhile, Washington has seen the reports of those remarks and they say, "Well, he's anti-US now," or "He's turned and done this," and you have to walk Washington back.

I must say, just for the record, as well, I had a lot of problems with officials from many offices in Washington. Everybody wanted to be involved in Rwanda. I had people who would call up Kagame direct from the State Department and talk to him about policy issues and not tell me what they had said. I had people at DOD who would do the same, even to the point of discussing potential military training missions. I had a very rough time with everybody wanting to go around the American Ambassador because it was Rwanda, it was hot, it was sexy. Eventually we managed to stop this, because I would tell Kagame that I don't care what someone told you, that's not US policy and then he would

tell you who had really called him from where. I had a difficult time with this, especially with Susan Rice, the Assistant Secretary of African affairs, and Gail Smith, who was the NSC Director for Africa.

Q: Well, let's talk a little about Susan Rice, because she's now being named for if Obama comes in. How did you see her?

STAPLES: Yes. I liked her. She was a very strong person, very bright. She thought that she had a very close, personal relationship with Paul Kagame, and she and I would have our little differences sometimes, but we got along very well. If I needed her to do something she would do it. But there were only a few countries that really held her attention and interested her and she was very, very involved in them.

Q: Ethiopia, I think, and Eritrea.

STAPLES: Ethiopia, Eritrea, yes. Within the bureau she was not viewed as a particularly strong assistant secretary, but she did the necessary for us with Rwanda, although there were a few times when she was not quite as forthcoming or willing to push the envelope as I was on the ground.

Q: On what sort of matters?

STAPLES: On reconciliation conferences, on some of the things I wanted to do with different groups in parts of the country. When Kagame, after the former President Bizimungu clashed and Bizimungu left and Kagame then assumed the presidency, a lot of people in Washington, Susan Rice included, did not want Kagame to be the president because then it would be clear that Tutsis were really running the country. Kagame was saying, "Well, you know, what's wrong with a Tutsi running the country? I'm a Rwandan first and look at all I've tried to for reconciliation and look at all the former members of the previous government I have in my government."

Q: Sees thing in black and white, you know? This Hutu-Tutsi thing has sort of fixated the international media.

STAPLES: It has, it has, and it's a shame. But Kagame went ahead and did it anyway, and for the record, I got a crazy message about an hour beforehand: Go in and urge him not to do it. And I threw it in the trash. They were trying – it was a CYA kind of message, for the record, in case violence had broken out.

Q: This is one of the things that comes clear, in difficult situations. This is where the ambassador tells – doesn't really tell the department, people within the department, what they're going to do. They get these instructions which they realize are, as you say, Cover Your Ass. In other words, we told them not to do this. And the ambassador rather than making either a fool of himself or being counterproductive, just ignores these instructions.

STAPLES: Yes.

Q: This happens in times of crises more often than is noted. I think our oral histories bring this out.

STAPLES: It's very true, and in my case there were four or five of these instances where there was no response or the response that was sent back to Washington is, "We informed the government and they promise to consider it carefully." End of story, because it was crazy.

I might also say besides Susan Rice we had Howard Wolpe, who was a former Congressman, worked in the Africa Bureau, and he was a special envoy on African issues. Howard was sent out frequently to travel the region and discuss Rwandan issues, conflicts in the Great Lakes, et cetera, and I want to just say that Howard was not a help. However, on some occasions he would come but not share with me completely his instructions from Washington. I've come to believe, now, looking back on things, that special envoys are a mistake. Special envoys – that's something that the State Department proposes to establish or an administration establishes to get Congress off its back. You're taking action? We'll designate a special envoy. But on the ground, if you're the host country, the American ambassador is telling you this, and next week the special envoy is coming, well maybe you should just wait. Maybe you'll hear something better that you like. So I do not think much of special envoys. I think responsibility should be fixed with an Ambassador. If the Ambassador is not doing the job, replace him or her, but I do not like the whole business of special envoys.

Q: I think this is absolutely true, it's how you conduct business. George, I think we'll stop for lunch now. And a couple of things I'd like to pick up on this: one, the role of the nongovernmental organizations there, the role of Burundi, you know, it sits down there.

STAPLES: Yes.

Q: And Tanzania, and Uganda.

STAPLES: And Uganda, yes.

Q: And also, maybe, to begin with, a little more about the background of Wolpe, and who he is and what your feeling was on how he got into this equation.

STAPLES: Yes, that would be fine.

Q: All right.

(END FILE)

Q: This is the second session of the interview with George Staples on the 24th of June 2008. George, you were mentioning – continue talking about Rwanda. Henry Wolpe. Where did he come from? What was his ...?

STAPLES: Yes, Howard Wolpe. He was an academic at one point but then he became a US congressman, and as a congressman, he had headed the Africa Subcommittee in the House.

Q: Where was he from?

STAPLES: I want to say California, but that could be incorrect. I'm not sure, I'm not sure. Howard's a very nice man. Anyway, he knew Africa pretty well but he was appointed to a position in the State Department as a special envoy and he worked directly for Susan Rice and her principal deputy, Ambassador Johnny Carson.

Q: Did he have the title of ambassador?

STAPLES: Yes, and he...

Q: It sure sounds like a political payoff.

STAPLES: Yes, well, could be. I don't think so. I mean, he was a Democratic congressman, a former subcommittee head, who needed to find something else in the administration and he wanted to work on African issues. He had a ton of contacts on the continent. He was liked and respected, and he was sent out by Assistant Secretary Rice, by Susan, wherever she wanted him to go to deal with certain issues and to represent their views. He especially became important because of the Congo issues, the conflict there and dealing with different parties to the conflict. The Congolese, the Rwandans, the Ugandans. And he would come carrying messages and leave, and so forth. And I say, sometimes I felt like, why listen to me if Howard was on the way?

Q: Yes. Well, in a way it's this overloading the system.

STAPLES: Exactly.

Q: I mean, if you've got an ambassador whom you trust and then you've got somebody else that you're, essentially, giving a job to do – what are we going to do about Howard? I mean, I can imagine it that way. Not to knock the man, but, I mean, this so often happens, or often happens in government. You've got somebody, you keep them occupied.

STAPLES: Yes, yes. And unfortunately I think what you said earlier, Stu – so many people wanted to be involved in all things involving Rwanda, plus the Congo conflict, and the whole issue of what would be done about justice for those *genocidaires* and on and on and on, that everybody wanted to be involved in that.

Q: Well, what was happening while he was involved? I mean, we talked about the Congo. Did that, outside of these incursions of Rwandan troops into the Congo, did the problem in the Congo extend to problems in Rwanda?

STAPLES: Well, on the other side of the border from Rwanda in the Congo were people, Congolese citizens, who were ethnically Tutsi. The Congolese looked on them as sort of a fifth column of people who might be favorable to the Rwandans. The Rwandans said that we're not going to let those people be murdered en masse as happened in Rwanda. So you had a lot of issues involving the treatment of civilians by these different armies. And as you remember, also, during this time, when the Rwandans went after the *genocidaires*, as they were called, and the people who supported them in the Congolese government, the first president Kabila, who was eventually assassinated, the Rwandans and their Congolese allies drove all the way, almost to Kinshasa, and were pushed back and stopped thanks to the intervention of Zimbabwean troops and other troops who came into the Congo as well to help the Congolese government.

So the situation in the Congo became very, very complicated, with a lot of governments involved, a lot of foreign troops involved. Paul Kagame pulled back his forces, mainly to concentrate on security next to Rwanda's borders, but it was a very, very difficult situation. A lot of refuges involved, you still had – remember, when the genocide ended and the former government fled, pushing people ahead of them into the Congo. We had those horrific refugee camps right there on the border, in which the international community, NGOs and others, found themselves aiding many of the people who were killers. And the Rwandans finally went into those camps and said, "We're bringing our citizens home." The people, some of whom were being held hostage by those killers, came home. About two million people came back into Rwanda, and the remnants of that military force stayed in the Congo, fled inland, attacked other civilians of Tutsi ethnicity there, the Rwandans pursued them, so all that mixture was in play along with local militia, people who were exploiting mineral wealth, Zimbabweans, Angolans, and others around Lubumbashi who were also getting their cut of mineral wealth in return for their support for the central government. So the whole situation in Congo became quite convoluted and in fact, in later years, has been referred to as Africa's First World War.

Q: Were you in touch with our ambassadors in these other countries?

STAPLES: Yes, good question. I had two great ambassadors to work with in the region. in the Congo, in Kinshasa, was Bill Swing, one of our most senior ambassadors. I think Bill was ambassador five times before he retired and then has worked with the UN on Congo issues. And in Uganda it was Nancy Powell at the time, and Nancy is a good friend, she's now our ambassador in Nepal. She left and went back to the Africa Bureau to become principal DAS (Deputy Assistant Secretary). So very good, experienced ambassadors, and I must say, I was very pleased with the relationship I had with Bill Swing in the Congo. We had both waited out the confirmation process together in Washington, gotten to know each other. Bill's wife and I played together in tennis tournament during all that interminable waiting. But Bill and I made a pact that we were going to report accurately, but not do what our predecessors had done. My predecessor in

Rwanda and his predecessor in the Congo, they did what diplomats should never do. In effect, they'd taken sides.

Q: Yes.

STAPLES: And their reporting was extremely biased as they pointed fingers in official communications at each other. It wasn't good. Bill and I never did that.

Q: What about Burundi? Did Burundi play much of a role?

STAPLES: Burundi didn't, because Burundi itself was undergoing its own conflict at that time. If you remember the history in Burundi, there you also had a Hutu-Tutsi divide, but it was different, the reverse of Rwanda. You had a mainly Hutu-majority ethnic group ruled over by a Tutsi-dominated army, and in the '90s, in the '80s, that army had carried out large-scale massacres of people anytime they felt its position was threatened. We had a separate peace initiative going on in Burundi where there was, in effect, a low-level civil war going on. We had a small embassy there, and every night they cowered in their homes under the bed because there were rocket attacks in Bujumbura, the capital. So the government was not very helpful at all, and, in fact, Paul Kagame always worried about a genocide taking place in Burundi, that the military there once again might start massacring large-scale numbers of people, and how would he react, what would he do? The Rwandans were extremely concerned because, in Burundi, if that happened, and in the Congo, if things kept getting worse, they might be overwhelmed with refugee flows. There was one small refugee camp in Rwanda with a few Congolese refugees, but they always worried about massive refugee flows and how would they cope?

Q: What was your impression about the role of the NGOs during the time you were there?

STAPLES: When I came in '98 the NGOs were all over the place. At one point it was estimated there were over 300 different NGO organizations.

Q: My God.

STAPLES: Yes. And the reason why? Well, in my view, Rwanda was sexy, it was a place where there had been a disaster and they could rush in and do projects. Some NGOs were helpful, some were there for the money, some wanted to find any genocide site or poor Rwandan orphan and put a picture on the cover of a publication to generate more donor funding. The government, in my first year in Rwanda, tried to institute a system of registration, and that's always very controversial with NGOs, when a government wants to have them register because they think, in general, that that means the government will want to control them and by controlling them, get its hands on their money. But in the case of Rwanda, we found multiple instances of duplicate, wasteful projects. People were rushing in to do all kinds of projects. In the immediate aftermath of a disaster there may be a justification. But at a certain point it got out of hand in Rwanda, and I must say the

government was able to, after a while, have all NGOs register, reassure the international community that it wasn't trying to control them or abscond with their funds.

By 2001, when I was leaving Rwanda, it was pretty clear to everyone – now, this is seven years after the genocide – that the days of massive inflows of NGO money were over. The NGOs that remained were doing specific projects coordinated by the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) and the government. We worked closely with government leaders to convince them it was time to start focusing on how to enter the period of sustained development, if you want to use the AID terminology. There was no longer assistance of just donations and NGO funding, but how were they going to stand on their own two feet? How were they going to build an economy?

To talk a little more about the NGOs, full credit for the success of the initial post-genocidal reconstruction really has to go to the UNDP. The UNDP was headed by strong people at that time, who really played the coordination role correctly. They would develop a plan and a program, convince the government to buy off on targets and strategy, shop it around to all the different embassies and NGOs and gain approval. Every actor had its own sector to work in, so duplication was minimized, if not avoided altogether. And then everyone got to work with periodic reports, oversight, and accountability. It worked beautifully. And I would often say to General Jones, later, in my NATO job, and as we were dealing with Afghanistan, "You can tell the difference," because in Kabul, you had a UNDP operation headed by weak people, and you saw confusion during the visits I made to Afghanistan. It was in stark contrast to how effective aid programs worked in Rwanda.

Q: What role were we all playing?

STAPLES: We participated mainly through our AID mission. I had a marvelous AID director named Dick Goldman who had many years of development experience. Dick went on to work in the Balkans, and his wife Heather was an AID officer. She was assigned to our regional office in Nairobi which provided administrative support and technical assistance to us in Kigali. Through our AID mission we focused on justice development, building up the legal system, training lawyers and judges, because the judiciary, as I said earlier, had been just gutted. The people who brought about the genocide wanted to get rid of well-trained, educated people, professionals who were not members of the Hutu fanatical elements. So that was one area.

The other thing that we did that was extremely good, in my view, through the AID mission, was to really work on opening up this country. I said earlier that it was a little North Korea, in many ways, where you could not travel without a pass, where you had to be registered based on your prefecture or your region, the city, right down to the commune level, and even the neighborhood level. Without approval from officials at each level you couldn't travel, you couldn't vote. You had to have this card to show to get any kind of public services. The card was stamped based on your attendance at public meetings, which were almost mandatory reeducation gatherings. Your kids had to show the parents' cards to show the parent was loyal in order to get into a better school. It was

really, really tough. One of the things we did, through our educational initiative was to put in computers at the national university, trained administrators and students, and within my first year as Ambassador we had Rwandans, taking online classes at the University of Maryland. It was just extraordinary.

They had a new university of science and technology in Rwanda that was started with a rector who had been a refugee. We got for him and for two other high schools and the national university, a VSAT, a satellite connection. They not only got online, but they also trained technicians and all of a sudden in Kigali, my second year there, we had internet cafes everywhere. The universities themselves became internet service providers. We had people showing up at night in Rwanda to listen to speakers from around the world talking on different programs. The South Africans came in and put in their marvelous satellite TV system, and people were watching news from the BBC, and so forth and so on. So just by increasing information alone we really opened up the country.

Also, with our IV grants (International Visitor Program,) we found people from all ethnic groups, genocide survivors and others, who were able to go to the US. The Rwandans who had traveled to the US, when I got there, were small in number. They were either exiles or genocide survivors. A lot of other former IV participants had been killed, they were just gone. We had to start all over again finding potential leaders we could send to the US to learn about democratic values and to gain technical expertise.

We were also doing, Stu, as I said before, reconciliation conferences. In 2000 we put on, in Kigali, a big international conference called, I believe, Women Waging Peace. And we had women who were refugees, or had been refugees at one point in their life, survivors from other conflicts, and we brought to Rwanda women from Bosnia, the Middle East, Israelis and Palestinians, and from Northern Ireland to talk about their experiences in post-conflict situations and how they were able to worked together. This dove-tailed with an initiative at that time from the UN by Secretary-General Annan, who wanted to try to get women to be more involved in the peace processes.

A third thing that we had worked very closely on, as I alluded to before, was trying to get the Rwandans to develop their economy, such as it was. It's a very highly agriculture country. Tea, coffee, fruits, and so forth. Self-sufficient in food, for the most part, with a little bit of light manufacturing here and there. But we had two big successes which really paid off. Number one, the Sorwathe tea plantation, a US company that was not destroyed in the genocide. They were able to expand operations, employ more people, and Rwandan tea is rated very highly valued in the world. We were also able to produce, with the help of Rwandans who wanted to do it, to get coffee going again, coffee production. Washed coffee, some of the best in the world. A lot of the coffee bushes had been destroyed during the genocide. And some of the Rwandans who had some business experience we got to know and were able to encourage to seek out connections not just with the French and the Belgians for renewing their contracts, but to look at the whole world. I had Rwandans that we sponsored trying to find investment supporters in Japan. Just imagine, Rwandan genocide survivors in Japan looking for business partners and for coffee production equipment. I don't know if you've heard the news but today some of

those same people I worked with have brought Rwandan coffee to the point where it was on the news a couple of months ago, they now have an agreement with Starbucks. You can get Rwandan coffee at Starbucks.

Q: Starbucks is an international American-originated, but international coffee restaurant or whatever.

STAPLES: Exactly. Also, I wanted to just say that, in regards to the people who found their way to Japan, we developed at Embassy Kigali something that was unique and that was spread all through our embassies in Central and West Africa, and despite some hesitancy by the Foreign Commercial Service. I asked myself, why do these guys who are so smart, these business people, why do they just automatically go with the Europeans, why do they automatically renew that contract with the French, the Belgians? The answer is, they didn't know what else was out there.

So I had my commercial section develop a little diskette, like so, a little diskette, and on it they put links to all the US business organizations they could think of, all the Chamber of Commerce links, all the industry organizations, all the publicans, *Fortune, Newsweek, Business Week,* all the magazines and publications that they could find. We had an English-French translator that was on the diskette and we produced it and I got a little money from the Commerce Department and from another donor, and what we did was paper the town with it. Copies went to very single company, every business person, and all the internet cafes. We made President Kagame and all of his Ministers honorary members of our commercial library. And I was interviewed on TV and the press and we told the whole country, "ideally, we would like for you to buy American products, but the bigger thing I want is for you to see what's out there in the world. Recognize that there's competition, recognize that you have other choices." And so we gave the disc, at no charge, to anyone who asked and they started using it. I had howls of protest from the French and the Belgians. The French ambassador said it was a hostile act, me providing this, because what happened was that different companies, the water parastatal, they didn't renew anymore automatically. They asked for bids for the first time. They started shopping around.

Some American business was there. Other business came in, some German firms were able to do business. All of a sudden they were getting better prices. I gave these diskettes to the universities, to the business professors at the two universities, and the commercial attaché in Nairobi liked it so much that he publicized it. I publicized it in Washington. I got a typical lukewarm reaction from the Africa Bureau, but that was expected. I contacted all my neighboring ambassadors, sent them copies, they reproduced it for free, and all of a sudden American businesses became known and mushroomed and people were in contact with these organizations and we followed it up with a little seed money to get speakers to come to Central Africa. And all of a sudden everybody was looking at alternative ways of finding suppliers, or business links, or business partners. And it was very exciting to do and something I hope that is continued in the region. You know how things are sometimes. I did it again, by the way, in Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea with the same effect.

Q: Well of course, with the speed of communications, internet and all that, all of a sudden it's easy to make contact and you can do some shopping around.

STAPLES: Exactly.

Q: Tell me, speaking of this, how about – how did you find doing business as an ambassador, with email and easy phoning and all this? Good, bad, indifferent, or what?

STAPLES: Email was pretty good. It wasn't all over the country, as you might think, although in Rwanda there were some electrification issues but it was better than most because it was small country. But we had pretty good internet service, especially at the embassy. During my time there, of course – I came in '98 and left in 2001, so I was there in 2000 and we had Y2K.

Q: Yes. You might explain what that was.

STAPLES: That was the worldwide concern that when the millennium came our computers or anything with a date that was functioning might flip over to an erroneous date, data would be lost, and the normal functioning of machinery might come to an end and the world itself might stop, et cetera. It didn't prove to be true but everyone tried to prepare for it by checking their equipment.

In Rwanda it was a godsend because the few commercial banks that operated had old equipment, and rather than try to work patches and so forth they all got together and just bought new computers. So Rwanda, all of a sudden, post-genocide, had one of the finest up-to-date banking systems in the world at that time, because they all had gone to new equipment.

Q: Well, how about the embassy and communications with Washington?

STAPLES: We had good communications systems. We had satellite systems and no problem. We were, at the time, an unclassified-only system and then we went to classified communications but we didn't have all of the systems in place to really do it because of our converted butcher building, butcher shop. So we had to – we became sort of a – it was a lock-and-leave embassy, then it became a, sort of, somebody-had-to-be-there-around-the-clock embassy. Our communications were good with Washington.

Q: Did the communications – did you find – does this screw up your work or is it good for it, or what?

STAPLES: Well, it wasn't too bad. For example, in Malabo, where they couldn't reach you, it was nice sometimes. In Rwanda where everyone wanted to play and everyone wanted to get involved in Rwanda, there were too many cooks in the kitchen and they were all easily able to contact me!. By the way, the gentleman who came back from Canada, a Rwandan refugee who had worked on their – he was a senior-executive

refugee who worked in the Canadian broadcasting system. He came back and whipped the communications and the telecommunications ministry into such shape that we had, in Rwanda of all places, state-of-the-art cell phone service, phone service. It was superb, some of the best I'd ever seen in Africa. One of the reasons was, of course, he was able to start over, because all of the communication towers had been destroyed. When everything has been destroyed you build fresh. So we had excellent communications all through the whole country.

Q: How about Uganda? Did that play much of a role?

STAPLES: Uganda was a very important player in the region and a very complex relationship existed between Rwanda and Uganda. Remember that Paul Kagame and those around him were technically officers in the Ugandan military when they entered Rwanda to start fighting for Rwandan freedom, if you will, to overthrow the Habyarimana regime and then to stop a genocide. President Museveni, the president of Uganda, never to this day has forgiven Paul Kagame for doing that without his permission. He sees himself, Museveni does, as one of the father figures in Africa, the elder statesman, and Paul Kagame, basically, was a deserter. They are cordial enough in public but there's a big rivalry there. Many of Rwanda's leaders are graduates of Makerere University, the big university in Uganda. Some of the Rwandan officials around Kagame are medical doctors, all trained in Uganda.

Then you had the Congo situation, with Rwandan troops in the Congo dealing with the people there, and the Ugandans, after the – people may not remember the Bwindi massacre, where they had the tourists at the park in Uganda. The same Rwandan former-Hutu soldiers came into that park in Uganda, killed those tourists, went back into the Congo, and at that point Ugandan troops entered the Congo.

The Ugandan troops got into certain areas where there were Rwandan troops present and in my last year in Rwanda we had fighting between Ugandan and Rwandan troops. The first time it happened, the Rwandans beat the Ugandans very badly and drove them away. There were two more occasions during my time there where conflict happened, and from everything we saw, the Ugandans started it and people just said it was Museveni, seeking revenge, and it was about Museveni's ego. But it was shocking to the Rwandans that they who had trained with the Ugandan army were firing on people that they knew, and killing them, and yet after some of these battles in the Congo, two weeks later there would be a school military graduation ceremony in Uganda and the Rwandans would go and participate. And their kids would still go to school in Uganda, but the relationship was quite tense sometimes.

On one occasion, Museveni threatened to go to war, and Kagame's answer was, well, the minute they cross the Rwandan border, they should bring shovels, to bury their dead. It was very tense. So I had post-genocide operations going that our embassy was involved in. We had the Congo conflict going on, and then in my last year we had the situation with Uganda in Rwanda, and on all of those things I had lots of issues to resolve

diplomatically, in urging the Rwandans to resolve them diplomatically. It was very difficult.

Q: In Uganda, if I have this right, what is it, the Children's Army of God or whatever it is, that was to the north?

STAPLES: That's to the north.

Q: So that didn't intrude into your...-

STAPLES: The Lord's Resistance Army.

Q: Lord's Resistance Army.

STAPLES: That was not part of – that was another whole issue that Museveni was dealing with himself, but that had nothing to do with the Rwandans.

Q: How about Tanzania?

STAPLES: Tanzania, the relationship with Tanzania was a good one, between Kagame and the leaders there, although there was a refugee camp in Tanzania, full of some Rwandans who had fled that way, a UNHCR-administered camp, the High Commission on Refugee operation there. But in that camp were allegedly people, instead of fleeing to the Congo, some of the killers involved in the genocide had fled to Tanzania. And Kagame and the Rwandans never liked that camp there. They never went into it, they never attacked it. Some arrests were made from that camp of senior people, who were shipped off to the International Criminal Tribunal in Arusha, Tanzania, but the presence of that camp was a sore spot with the Rwandans. And about once a quarter, they would make a diplomatic push with the Tanzanians to close that camp, send back people and arrest anybody who was there illegally. People in the camp would say, well, we can't come back, it's still not safe in Rwanda, et cetera. The camp was about 98 percent Hutu, and some of them undoubtedly were involved in genocide. Undoubtedly.

Q: One other element there, did the Canadians play a special role there?

STAPLES: The Canadians did not play a special role. They didn't have a large diplomatic mission at all. In fact, they didn't have one at all. They had special representatives who would come over from Kenya and cover it. They had CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency), their aid organization, was on the ground with a couple of small projects. But the Canadians had an advantage there, a strategic advantage that was useful to them and to us, and that is, as you know, Canada is French and English, the bilingual aspect.

Q: I was thinking of that, the dual.

STAPLES: The dual. We use Canadians for technical assistance on our judicial project, because the law in Rwanda that was the – I forget the right name of it, but the law that's used in France and...

Q: The Code Napoleon.

STAPLES: Exactly, the Napoleonic Code, which is in French.

Q: And quite a different – not the common law, but it's a legislative, well-formulated law.

STAPLES: Well formulated, and the Rwandans wanted to change certain aspects of it as they rebuilt the judicial system. But some of the lawyers and a few judges who survived the genocide were all trained under that system. The Rwandan government wanted, a different code with the best of that system but with additions from the British and other Western systems as well, and it had to be codified in French and English. We felt the right people to take this on and do training and translations and all the work, et cetera, were the Canadians, and they were doing a very, very good job. In fact, we had two or three professors from McGill University who had come out and they were doing very good work there.

Q: Were there any academic ties to the United States?

STAPLES: Academic ties, not really. There were a couple of American universities who went out of their way to take Rwandan students. Some links were being formed, especially with Harvard. Former Ambassador Swanee Hunt. I don't know if you talked to her. She was our ambassador in Austria for a while, a political appointee. She was very good. She was very, very strong on women's issues. She was quite active in Rwanda in supporting us with her programs out of the Harvard Center for Women's Studies. But actual linkages, when I was there, not really. Not really.

Q: Well, George, maybe this is a good place to stop, do you think? Is there anything else you want to...

STAPLES: Let me see if there's anything else I wanted to mention. We talked commercial. I'd just say that by the time I left in 2001, people who were no longer speaking to each other were speaking to each other. The country's borders were pretty secure. Commercial activity was on the rise. Rwanda had also become eligible to participate in the new African Growth and Opportunity Act, which allowed for the duty-free import of certain African goods and products to the U.S., a real win for Africa. Rwanda was involved in that. And Rwanda, Paul Kagame, wondering what to do with that huge army he had that finished the genocide off and was in the Congo, I told him, and many people told him that what he had to do was maybe think about peacekeeping operations. And Rwandans began to do that, and, as I say, even today you have Rwandans in Darfur on the ground.

The only concern that I'd like to mention about Rwanda was this issue of trust. Can you really trust one another? People can live together and say they've put the past behind them, but what about trust, which engenders real cooperation? And that was still, and remains a major concern about Rwanda.

Q: And the awful thing is that you look at country after country, people getting along very nicely and then all of a sudden you get a leader, as in Bosnia, or Kosovo. Most of the time, nobody pays any attention to the differences, unless you get the wrong leader.

STAPLES: That's right. That's right.

Q: One further question: gorillas.

STAPLES: Yes, environmental issues. The Rwandan government, much to its credit, even during all the conflict in the northwest part of the country and in the Congo remained vigilant about the Virunga National Park which has the gorillas. The government always had its park rangers and military up there to protect the gorillas because it recognized that that one day tourists might again be a source of much needed income. The gorillas there were protected and monitored very carefully. On the Congolese side of the park, that's where you see the reports about the gorillas being attacked and slaughtered, but not on the Rwandan side.

During my time there, that park was off limits, because we had concerns about infiltration of the former government soldiers. There had been some firefights up there. There were times when it became OK to visit and you were accompanied by military and so forth, but most of the time it was off limits. Regretfully, during my time as ambassador, I could not go see the mountain gorillas. Although, before I went to Rwanda, I went down to the nature store at the mall down here at the Pentagon, Pentagon City Mall, and I got myself a stuffed silverback gorilla, and I took it with me to Rwanda and had a little thing made up in the residence, to make it look like a little jungle scene. And my gorilla was there, but I never got to see a real one, unfortunately. But today, now that things are really different, the tourists are there for the mountain gorillas, it's high-scale tourism. I understand Rwanda's getting about 60,000 or 70,000 people sometimes coming through, and doing well.

Q: OK, George, we'll pick this up in 2001. Where did you go?

STAPLES: 2001, I had a choice, come back to Washington – but I didn't want to do that, with an administration changing. I wanted to be an ambassador one more time again, so I was sent as our ambassador to Cameroon, and also I was accredited as ambassador to Equatorial Guinea. So it was back to Equatorial Guinea, as well, but now a very different place, with oil wealth.

Q: OK, well, we'll talk about that next time.

STAPLES: Both countries.

(END FILE)

Q: Today is the 5th of March, 2009, and this is an interview with George Staples. George, it's been sort of a hiatus, and we're not exactly sure where we left off the last time, and I will check on that. But let's start – shall we start on the Cameroons, do you think?

STAPLES: OK, that's good.

Q: All right, when were you in the Cameroons?

STAPLES: I came to Yaoundé as ambassador in Cameroon after my time as ambassador in Rwanda, and I was there from November of 2001 until I believe the summer of 2004, so almost three years.

Q: By the way, I'm saying Cameroons. Am I being dated in that?

STAPLES: Yes.

Q: Because at one time it was the – what, the two?

STAPLES: There were two parts of Cameroon.

Q: We used to call it the Cameroons, but it's Cameroon.

STAPLES: That's right, it's Cameroon. The German part went away after the First World War and it was combined into this French territory and eventually independent, although you would still find older Cameroonians who could still speak German. And some of the local kings, who were called *fons*, would take you to their little territories, where they had administrative control. And in their warehouses, if they liked you, they would show you these old captured Mausers from their fights with the Germans in the First World War. Very interesting.

Q: OK, well, let's start, 2001 when you arrived.

STAPLES: Right, 2001.

Q: What was the situation in Cameroon?

STAPLES: Well, Cameroon – after leaving Rwanda, where of course we dealt with a post-genocide environment and rebuilding of that country and trying to put it back together and so forth, to come to Cameroon was very nice. This is a country that's not well known when you think of Africa, because it's been relatively peaceful and stable. There's about 18 million people, no population pressure. The country's about the size of California. It has two of the best deep water ports in all of Africa, in Douala and Limbe,

and self-sufficient food, in fact, a food exporter. A well-organized, functioning military, with a senior military school where we always send one U.S. officer every year. But a country with over 100 ethnic groups and a government that tries to maintain stability, and stability trumps everything.

So it's a country that could be a leader in Africa. It has bright, energetic people, and it was rolling along just fine. It's good enough. That's the attitude of the government, and it could have been so much more, but stability at all costs, that was the buzzword.

Q: Well, in a way, we're Americans, and if you can lead, lead. Did you find – I mean, did you get into decisions with Cameroonian leaders about why they didn't take a more active role and all?

STAPLES: Well, let's go back. We need to talk about two things, because I was ambassador to Cameroon and to the Republic of Equatorial Guinea, across the way, which the "Economist" magazine was calling the Kuwait of Africa. But in regards to Cameroon, what worried the government was what was going on with its neighbors. To the north was Nigeria, with all the oil, but military coups and instability. To the east, the Central African Republic, where during my time in Yaounde they had a coup, and we had to deal with our Americans and other staff who were evacuated from there.

And they just looked around the region, Equatorial Guinea, the continental part of the country to the south, where there had been troubles. And for the government of President Paul Biya and his officials, life in Cameroon was good enough. Nobody was too excited. And, of course, they had the world famous football team, which had won the gold medal at the Olympics, the Cameroonian Lions, and it's interesting, this is the first time in Africa to really see for me the real effects of tribalism, which has been the limiting factor on growth.

We talk in this country about the need for a frank discussion on race. In Africa, they need a frank discussion on tribalism, which people shy away from. The only thing that really unifies Cameroon is that football team. Traffic stops, life stops, everybody watches the Cameroon Lions. And when one of their players gets picked up by a European club, national celebration. But, other than that, right below the surface is trouble. And it's a unique country, because in the north it's very arid and the people up there are Muslims. They're French speaking, and the first president of the country at independence, was from the north.

Then along came Paul Biya from the south. These are people from the forest, a completely different group, Christians, but very insular. Cameroon has two official languages, English and French. In the middle of the country, you have this English-speaking minority, and they're known to be businesspeople. The French speakers don't like them, the English speakers always feel they're discriminated against. And down on the coast in Douala, the commercial capital, they were very much anti-government from the past elections, so the government purposely neglected its commercial capital. The roads were bad, the infrastructure was bad. No new major hotels had been built.

So you had all of these different interactions going on in Cameroon between these different groups. A country led by a president, Paul Biya, who had been in power since the early '80s, and back in the '80s I remember George Shultz coming there and Paul Biya was feted as one of the new men of Africa, a different type of person, but he's hung on and on and on, rigged election. And he just changed the constitution so he can run yet another time, and he's in his mid '70s and he shows no sign of leaving.

Q: Did you come in with – either in your official portfolio, or everybody has their own mental portfolio – instructions to get this country going? Or were we, and you, saying, "Well, I mean, in a way they're doing what really should be done. Do we need to sort of goose them on?"

STAPLES: We had to goose them on.

Q: Why did we have to goose?

STAPLES: Because we needed a country like Cameroon to take a more active role in African peacekeeping, if possible. They were very reluctant to use their well-trained military for anything other than watching the border with Nigeria. And there was a dispute there, involving the Bakassi Peninsula, where there were reportedly large reservoirs of oil. But no one would drill in the area until the dispute was resolved.

Cameroon took the issue to the International Court of Justice, and during my time there, just when I arrived, the court had decided that Cameroon was right, Nigeria had to give back this slice of territory. And so a joint commission was formed, discussions were ongoing. But until that was resolved, the Cameroonians would do nothing else because of concerns about a possible conflict with Nigeria.

Also, Cameroon had an economic problem. It was an oil state. Offshore, there were oil deposits, but they made no investment and the oil reserves were dwindling, much like Gabon. So the issue was to keep this country stable, to manage all of this potential conflict bubbling under the surface with different ethnic groups, to make sure that there would be no more regional instability, a la Rwanda's and so forth. How do we get the country to modernize, to enhance the private sector, to do the kinds of things it needs to do so there will be continued economic growth?

And the Cameroonians were interesting people, by the way – very well educated, a country with seven universities. Our US medical adviser to the embassy was a Dr. Muna, from the well-known Muna family, who was a world-renown heart surgeon, educated at Harvard. And Cameroon had light manufacturing. They had a diversified economy. They were the first country to take advantage of the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act and get their certificates in and start – this was the act under the Bush administration which provided for complete duty-free entrance into the U.S. of, say, textile materials and other stuff. So anything we could ship, it was free money, and the Cameroonians really tried to

get their industry going and take advantage of that opportunity. Very entrepreneurial people.

We didn't want to see any kind of conflict developing between the Francophones and the Anglophones, and we were worried about Nigeria. When the court decision came down, there was talk in Nigeria about we're not going to give back this part of the territory, we're going to take more of it. In Cameroon, they started – there were some flare-ups of ethnic tension. There were a lot of Nigerian businesspeople in the country, and the Cameroonians would kick them out or burn down their little shops, that kind of thing, for a little bit. But that quickly died away.

Q: Well, what about the French?

STAPLES: The French were doing their normal thing – good question – in Africa. They saw themselves as the dominant foreign power, if you will, because of the historical relationship. Paul Biya, who's a Francophone, although he can understand English, has a home in Switzerland and always goes to Paris. In the presidential palace is always a former French ambassador who is very quiet, but acts as his adviser.

I was able to break through all that very, very well, because Biya's a Francophone, the prime minister's always an Anglophone and the head of the parliament is someone from a different part of the region. The head of the senate is someone from another part of the country. I got to know them all very well. And France had been steadily losing influence in Cameroon, as well as elsewhere in West Africa and Central Africa, because its economic policies were seen to be very restrictive. There were questions about the way they always tried to tie up businesspeople so they only dealt with France.

Internet cafes were springing up all over Cameroon. We tried our best to make sure that they knew, Cameroonian businesspeople knew, that the world was open, not just the traditional European suppliers.

But there was a cloud coming, if you will, that really in my second and third year, in particular, made my time in Cameroon very interesting. In 2002 to 2003, Cameroon became one of the non-permanent member states on the Security Council in the U.N., and you know what happened in 2003 and the build-up to it.

Q: Iraq, yes, the Bush war with Iraq.

STAPLES: Exactly, and Cameroon was therefore lifted to prominence in the U.S., because we wanted the Cameroonians with us. So my last two years in Cameroon were extremely challenging. I had to go around with my staff and build support for increased sanctions and whatever we might want to do, even if it came to war. And we needed the Cameroonians to vote with us and support us in the UN. I also spent a lot of my final two years there trying to get the Cameroonians to take more advantage of AGOA (African Growth and Opportunity Act). I also had a lot of speaking to do at universities and the think tanks. Cameroon has a number of think tanks. They also have the IRIC, the

International Relations Institute of Cameroon, which is one of the chief, primary think tanks in all of Africa, and a training center where they actually take from all of Africa people who are going to work in foreign ministries and in presidencies and train them about international affairs. And, in fact, graduates of that little school right there in Yaoundé, Cameroon, have gone on to become presidents of African countries, foreign ministers, prime ministers, etc.

The Cameroon-American Business Society, which was quite large – we had frequent meetings to explain Iraq policy, to push for support for the U.S. government. And, at the same time, we had the French and others trying all they could do with the Cameroonians to keep from supporting where we were going. It was probably one of the most challenging times of my life as a Foreign Service officer.

Q: Well, what was the attitude that you were getting, say, from the Cameroonian government, but also from the think tanks?

STAPLES: They were very cautious. Cameroon is extremely cautious. They don't want to upset anybody in the world, and if they can just put things off, they'll do it. That's what the Cameroonian authorities and people are like. They don't like to make decisions. In terms of U.S. policy and where we wanted to go, they took their cue from the rest of Africa, the Non-Aligned Movement and the French, in that they were not too enthused with the idea of another conflict in the Middle East. Again, remembering that they were an oil country, but a small one, they were worried about the effect on oil prices. And they were quite reticent about really moving in lockstep with us or with anybody else.

Q: Did you feel that the French were actively recruiting them not to?

STAPLES: Oh, yes, it was absolutely clear, absolutely clear. And yet President Biya liked the U.S., he liked me. He felt that the future was with us. It was very interesting, so many of the Cameroonian leaders were educated in France or in Europe, but they made an effort to learn a little English along the way and we would find, when you get to know them, that with their children, maybe the first child had gone to school in France, or the second. All the other kids were going to the U.S.

Q: Where would they go?

STAPLES: Everywhere. We had Cameroonians at the University of Texas in Austin, in California, and for those who were involved with agriculture and so forth, to Iowa or Kansas State. Cameroonians were everywhere.

Q: So, I mean, they were picking their schools well according to really the basic industries of the country...

STAPLES: Right.

Q: ... and American culture.

STAPLES: And there's such a large Cameroonian community living overseas. You will find a large Cameroonian community right here in Maryland, especially doctors and lawyers here.

This is, again, the tragedy of Africa. So many trained people, so smart, but societies and countries without the institutions or the job opportunities, so they leave. In a lot of other African countries, they don't leave; you're trained as a doctor, but you end up driving a taxi cab. But Cameroonians left. They went to Europe or they went to the U.S., and they have these big communities that repatriate tons of money or, in the case of the medical community here up in Maryland, for example, they organize clinics and so forth and then go back every year and help people in the rural area.

It's the only group of people I've seen who in large numbers, an expat community that does more than just send back money. They actually come back and work in the country.

Q: This is one of the problems – I go back to the '60s, when I was in Yugoslavia, where we would send doctors and others to the United States, they would get trained and they would come back and their professors or the head surgeon or something who had been trained maybe in Vienna before or just after World War I or something, and wouldn't give them the time of day. They'd be frozen out. And so they'd finally say, "Screw this," and head back to the States.

STAPLES: They leave. You know, in Cameroon, interestingly enough, that happened in the military. Cameroon, again, all these wonderful facts people don't know. Cameroon in all of Africa has the most military officers who have attended U.S. service schools, a huge number. I mean scores. Every year, we send four to eight, every year, West Point, Annapolis, et cetera, and they would come back and of course the leadership in the military is Francophone. And here are these new graduates, eager to start their careers, but viewed as not being francophone but rather pro U.S. Slowly but surely, they're rising in rank. There are lieutenant colonels, a few colonels now, majors and captains, but with those who have been trained in France, you have this conflict.

Q: Did you feel the hand of François Mitterrand's son, who...

STAPLES: No.

Q: ... has sort of a portfolio of – even when the Socialists were out, he still was kind of Mr. Africa in France.

STAPLES: He was Mr. Africa in the mid to late '90s, and in particular when it came to Rwanda. He's widely blamed for just unquestioning support of the government that carried out the genocide, and much reviled for that. And, in fact, President Kagame at one point suggested that the International Tribunal look at him as a potential war crimes subject. But with the Cameroonians, no, no.

Q: What about relations with Nigeria?

STAPLES: Relations with Nigeria, strained, but cordial on the surface. Nigeria has of course the largest army in Africa, not as well trained as the South African military, but they've got the numbers. And the Cameroonians have a smaller, but well trained, force. President Biya's policy was not to provoke the Nigerians. He would go to Europe and have meetings with President Obasanjo from Nigeria, and they would have the joint commission that was working on the Bakassi Peninsula issue, on how to implement the International Court of Justice's decision, and it dragged on and on and on. But there would be cordial meetings in Yaoundé, and then in Abuja, and then in Yaoundé, and then in Abuja, et cetera. But people – I would worry about this and I'd say, "Well, it doesn't seem like they're making much progress. Do you think we'll have conflict?" And officials would say, "No, don't worry, it's the African way. You've got to deal with the villagers on the ground, the economic issues. There's compensation issues." But everybody would say at the end of the meetings, "We're committed to implementing the court's decision. The area is going to revert over to Cameroon." And, I must say, I don't know if you saw it, but a year ago it actually happened. In 2007, they signed a final agreement. Some people were moved to one area or the other, compensation to some who were losing part of their land,. And a peaceful resolution to this dispute actually happened.

Q: Well, now, Nigeria is infamous for its corruption, and particularly oil corruption and to exploiting sort of the villages around the pipelines and all that, all sorts of problems there, and it sometimes shuts down production. How about the corruption and what little oil was flowing, how was this being dealt with during your time?

STAPLES: The corruption in Cameroon's oil revenues had happened many years before I got arrived. Just prior to my arrival, for the first time oil revenues were put on the books in the national budget. They'd been off the books, handled in the presidency itself, no accountability on what had been spent. But the corruption in Cameroon was not so much the oil sector, it was other kinds, the kind of death by a thousand cuts kind that you find in Africa. To get a driver's license, you have to give a little extra. To get the better room, you give a little extra. To see where you stand on the list of people being considered for a job, a little extra. Just at every turn, there was always someone looking for a payment. And periodically within the state-run industries, some of the senior managers were arrested or fled the country.

Cameroon Airlines, which in the '80s was one of the best airlines in all of Africa, had been about run into complete bankruptcy by the time I arrived because of various cronies flying first class, never paying their bills. We had a number of incidents where the planes on the European run – maintenance is done in Paris. Well, the French would seize the plane because the lease payments hadn't been made and then there'd be a scandal and rushing back and forth to find money before the plane's released, and of course disrupting airline schedules.

The one place that we did not have a corruption problem, and one of Africa's success stories, was the Chad-Cameroonian Pipeline. Before I arrived, oil had been found in

Chad, which is to the northeast of Cameroon. Today it's in the news because refugees from Darfur are in the eastern part of Chad and hundreds of thousands are in these camps. We had a U.S. company, Exxon, with Petronas from Malaysia and a couple of other firms that were involved in this World Bank project to build a pipeline to bring oil from Chad through Cameroon to the ocean to a terminal there for export.

This has been one of the unique oil projects in the world, because all the way through Cameroon you go through the desert, the middle part of the country, the rainforest, pygmy villages, and then out to the sea. And there were complete signed off-on, agreed-upon environmental directions that had to be followed. There were issues of what villagers would be employed, employment practices, and pay.

The pipeline fees for Cameroon had been negotiated, and. I think they get $30 million a year or something like that. But this massive construction project through in some areas pristine rain forests, meeting high environmental standards, went completely to completion, without a delay. When I got there, I heard about this and I said, "Half my time is probably going to be spent with environmental activists coming to complain about something." During my entire time as ambassador, I never had one visitor come see me to complain, not one. It was extraordinary. The requirements were all met, the standards were all met, and organizations like World Wildlife Federation and others were allowed entry into the country. They could go to the east, they could see the construction. Their visits were facilitated by the oil companies. The World Bank, the international monitoring experts of various organizations would come. Everything was on track. It went well.

But they'd all meet with me and other ambassadors, and we constantly heard that their main concern was in Chad, because there were no oversight, no infrastructure, no – human capital was at a minimum. The Oil Ministry there reportedly had about 13 people at the time. How were they going to manage all this money? So the concern was in Chad. It was not Cameroon. Cameroon, to its credit, supervised and shepherded this whole thing through it's territory, to the sea, and to this day it seems to be working just fine.

Q: How did they use their ports? You said they had the ports.

STAPLES: Douala was a superb port facility, a major port. They were expanding to the north the Limbe operation, and Cameroon has – the ports were not an issue. They were run pretty efficiently. All kinds of shipping passed through there. Roads to the sea, down to Douala and so forth were an issue, although that highway down there is one of the best in Africa, but also one of the deadliest.

Cameroonians don't like to wait, and people pass on the left over a hill without seeing what's coming and you had horrific crashes. The port works fine. And, speaking of Crashes, I just want to say that also during my time as ambassador we had a horrific incident. There's an American school in Yaounde, the capital, and the kids had gone for a weekend over to climb Mount Cameroon, which is the second-largest Cameroon next to the one in...

Q: Kilimanjaro.

STAPLES: Kilimanjaro. And they were driving back to Yaoundé and it was just as I described it. A gentleman pulled out and hit the school bus. We lost three children, the son of the Moroccan ambassador, another child and the son of my defense attaché as well as an American teacher. And for the rest of that school year, it was pretty difficult. We had I think eight or nine children, as well, who were in the hospital in Yaoundé, who were being treated out in the hallways, broken limbs and so forth. And that kind of thing really just is a shock for an embassy, for a community. That was very, very difficult. My wife and I were in the hospital for days, and then we had to deal with – the whole international community came together. The Moroccan ambassador was very popular, his son was killed. His wife had a breakdown. It was very, very, very difficult.

Q: How did you find the diplomatic corps there?

STAPLES: The diplomatic corps was good, very professional. The French ambassador and the American ambassador seemed to be the most important, the ones with the major influence. The British were there and had a small embassy, but were quite effective, as well. The other major diplomatic entity was China, and there's a lot of discussion today about the role of the Chinese in Africa, and how they're everywhere and they don't care about human rights and they're out to secure resources and pumping in their imported goods and driving out African small businesspeople. In the old days, in the '80s and '70s, China built small dams and roads throughout Africa, but in Cameroon the Chinese opened a children's hospital and they had signed a contract to remodel the national football stadium.

The Chinese ambassador and I had a very good relationship, and unlike people who see China as a threat and so forth – and I tell people this. I really think we should try to partner with the Chinese in Africa. They have a lot of money, can do a lot of things. They're not going to join us on democracy projects. OK, fine. I talked to the Chinese ambassador there and he, like so many of the Chinese ambassadors in Africa, he had a son who went to college in the U.S. But I said to him on one occasion, "There's a problem here with corruption and the lack of good governance. Cameroon falls near the bottom because of the things I mentioned with Transparency International, in terms of corruption. What if I bring some people from the U.S. to talk about good governance, and how about you bring some people from China to talk about good governance, people in smaller cities and how to make things run more efficiently?" He said, "We can do that," so we did.

He brought some people out from – I forget the names of the cities in China – two different areas, and someone from their business council, like their equivalent of the Chamber of Commerce in Beijing, and I had some people come from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and so forth, and we did a joint program on how to run things more effectively, ways to combat corruption, ways to bring transparency to what you're doing.

And I think that's the kind of thing we could use as an example and try to partner with the Chinese. I was thrilled when I saw Secretary Clinton make her first trip as Secretary to Asia.

Q: Were we able to, or were we interested in, making inroads – I'm talking in a beneficial sense – into the villages and all?

STAPLES: Yes, and this is, again, even in Cameroon, which is better off than others, there were electrification problems, water issues, issues of having tarred roads and being able to move products to market. We did not have a USAID mission, by the way, and Paul Biya and others pushed me to try to bring it back. We had one, but in '94, when AID had its cutbacks, we closed the AID mission in Cameroon, among other countries. Paul Biya pushed for that to come back, very publicly and outspokenly, and the media and in direct meetings with the government, I said, "It's not coming back while I'm ambassador. No way."

I said, "This is a country sufficient in food with educated people, access to the sea, no population pressures. Cameroonians need to get to work. You need to build this country and you need to push the private sector, let loose entrepreneurs. This is not Rwanda. This is a very different place." And they seemed to like that, although some of them, they're always looking for the next donor, and this is the problem in Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa, from my experience throughout my whole career, bright young people who should be opening businesses and growing the economy and bringing things – moving things forward, instead they become experts at writing project proposals, and I don't like that. Somehow, someway, this continent full of so many millions of bright people with so much potential, has to be able to stand on its own two feet. Cameroon was such a place. And I said it just like that, publicly in the media, and people seemed to like it.

Q: Well, tell me, sort of in mega terms, you'd served in Africa, taken a look at this. What would you say is the basic problem, bright people ending up looking sort of with their hands out?

STAPLES: The problem is one of – it's one of governance, it's one of tribalism and it's one of time. Time in that while I'm a critic in many places of this, and I say this quite openly, we ought to remember still that Africa is still just 50, 60 years post-independence. The young United States was not the easiest place to live in, with not well-formed political institutions, violence, shootouts in the Congress, duels, et cetera, and issues between the rural dwellers and city dwellers, et cetera, in terms of commerce and the economy. The difference here is that Africa is out of time. It's part of this global economy, and it has to compete now and on a global basis.

The tribalism issue is a major one. When the people do not see themselves as part of a bigger whole, but only part of my region or my village or my group, then they aren't willing to really sacrifice for the better good. Their view is rather narrow. When they have someone from their region who takes over and someone who is in charge, then you have the political problems. They don't want to give up power. The transitions don't

work. Elections are rigged, which then creates the problem of political instability, economic uncertainty, investment doesn't come, and you just – all of this together is what is holding back countries.

American ambassadors in many places are invited to give speeches and so forth. I went to Cameroon University and talked to a graduating class. I believe it was 2002. And I was very open, again, about this, about tribalism, about this country with so much potential, et cetera. To those graduates, I said, "Look, how many of you are from the Douala or I forget the area going to the south," and hands went up. I said, "OK, four, five, six. How many of you are business majors?" Hands went up from within that group, the same group of people. And I said, "Look, four or five of you, if you would get together and move to Maroua in the far north, the Islamic part of the country, how many of you will go up there and start a business? I will find money to help you. How many of you are willing to do that?" Not a hand. Not a hand.

The idea that I could go as a Cameroonian to the other part of my country and live and work and start something up and be successful and be OK up there, that's a bridge way too far. I thought that was very, very instructive and very revealing. I said, "You know, why can't you live there? It's part of Cameroon. You're a Cameroonian citizen. Why not?"

And what they wouldn't say is, "Well, those people are different from me." And that is the problem. That is the problem.

Q: How did the whole Iraq business play out?

STAPLES: Yes, let's go back to that. The Iraq business played out for me in Cameroon in that it looked like we were going to force a vote in the U.N. to get final approval for an invasion. Paul Biya had gone to Paris for meetings. Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Kansteiner came from Washington, I flew up from Yaoundé, and we met with Biya in his hotel to push him right there about support. And he was very, "Well, I'll think about it," et cetera, et cetera. He wouldn't commit.

I returned to Yaoundé, and instructions came from Washington that we were going to push a UN vote to authorize armed conflict with Iraq.. We had to have Cameroon's support part of the African non-permanent security council members. And the Cameroonians hinted around that it might just happen if Paul Biya could get an invitation to the White House. Well, an invitation came, and he did not tell anybody else in the diplomatic corps, or even members of his own government. He and his party left quietly from Yaoundé, we met in Washington, and the night that we went north from Kuwait into Iraq, we were having dinner in the White House with President Bush.

The vote never came. As you remember, I guess we did the math and the Administration felt that it didn't have the votes. Secretary Powell had made the case that the authority to do this had already been done months before, but the French and others had pushed for a final vote, a U.N. Security Council vote, and I don't think the numbers were there. But we had Cameroon.

Here's the kicker on that: when Paul Biya got back to Yaoundé, the French Ambassador, on instructions from Paris went to see him and asked the Cameroonians to explain themselves, how is it that you went secretly to Washington, what did you do there and why did you do it?

Q: That's a little bit presumptuous.

STAPLES: Very much so, and for about the next six months they were shut out. A couple of pending contracts were canceled. They would request meetings. They were never answered. They got the cold shoulder, but the French were furious, just furious, that he had gone to Washington. And the argument I put to Paul Biya finally was very simple. I said, "Look, you see what's happening, you see what's said, you see what's coming. War with Iraq is going to happen. You can see it. And when it happens the Iraqis will not defeat the U.S. military, so where do you want to be when it's over?" Very simple.

The reaction in Cameroon after the war started was very interesting, too. I must have had about 50 to 60 letters from Cameroonians who wanted to join the U.S. military and fight Saddam Hussein. I was not expecting that. And not the opportunistic kind of thing that you would say, "Well, maybe if I do this, they'll let me go and I can get a visa." No, there were some very heartfelt letters stating that we have to put an end to oppression wherever it occurs, look what he did, gassing his Kurds, etcetera.

Q: Was there in Africa, at that time when you were there, an area that the Cameroonians who were reading the news and all looked upon, saying, "This is a bad setup," and maybe they weren't going to do anything, but I think an equivalent to Zimbabwe and Mugabe? I mean, were there places that the Cameroonians were looking at and thinking, "This is a bad show"?

STAPLES: Oh, sure. Oh, sure. They were shocked at the genocide in Rwanda, for example. Some of the *genocidaires* had been captured in Cameroon, arrested there, and sent off to the International Criminal Court in Arusha, Tanzania. The government looked very hard at Mugabe and what had been happening in Zimbabwe. They were quite concerned about the conflict in the Congo and the various human rights issues that had arisen there, especially in the east and the use of rape against women.

The Cameroonians had active concerns. They had a real functioning Foreign Ministry. The foreign minister had come back from Geneva, where he had been their representative there for 15 years. They were very, very skilled, educated people. They knew the issues. You could go and talk to Cameroonians and say, "You know, in Yugoslavia these kinds of things happened. I see parallels here." And they would talk to you about Bosnia and the Dayton Accords. They were very worldly, very efficient.

Q: Well, what about the plague that had hit Africa, AIDS?

STAPLES: Thank you for asking that. That's an excellent question because, again, Cameroon is unique. Cameroon had been doing the right thing for a lot of years and continued when I was there. Every single government minister in a public gathering ended the speech warning about AIDS. There was none of the practice as with Robert Mugabe, silence. The government was quite outspoken. There was a big push for everyone to get tested. The billboards, the TV ads, et cetera.

In Cameroon, there were a lot of HIV/AIDS researchers, from the U.S. side – the French side, the Pasteur Institute and so forth. We had Johns Hopkins, Walter Reed. A lot of people were there doing research. And the reason so many were there in Cameroon, which did not have a high prevalence rate overall, compared to some of the other places in Africa was twofold. In Cameroon, you would find in the countryside an area that was heavily HIV positive. Five miles up the road were a couple of villages completely negative, zero. Two miles further than that, HIV positive. Three miles from that negative. So people were trying to understand, how could that be? And there was contact, trade and commerce between these different areas, never seen anywhere else in Africa.

In Cameroon you found present just about every single strain of the virus that was known, including the ones from Asia, you find sometimes the Latin America or the Middle East, not just the normal ones in the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, and no one could understand that. So the researchers had lots to look at.

Q: Were they coming up with any particular answers?

STAPLES: Not when I was there. We had the CDC (Centers for Disease Control) out, and in fact my embassy grew.

Q: That's the contagious disease center.

STAPLES: Yes, Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta.

Q: Centers for Disease Control.

STAPLES: In fact, they were going to put permanent staff in Cameroon, so the HIV/AIDS research in Cameroon was quite extensive, because it was a unique country in that regard.

Q: Was the Peace Corps there?

STAPLES: The Peace Corps was there. And, in fact, again, the second-oldest Peace Corps operation in the world was Cameroon, and President Biya used to talk about how his mother would point out and take care of Peace Corps volunteers in the village. It was a large program, over 150 volunteers, everywhere, and we had in the north, the Islamic part of the country, we would have women volunteers. They had education projects, health projects, small business work, and the Peace Corps operation was quite large in Cameroon. Many former volunteers would come back and visit their host families.

And we had many people in the small business side, former bankers and others, U.S. folks who were there. The oldest volunteer in the world at that time, I think she was 79, she was in Cameroon. And let me say something else about Cameroon, too. While there were troubles in Nigeria with the Islamic north and the south and riots between Muslims and Christians, et cetera, in Cameroon you never had any of that. You could travel in perfect safety and be just fine up in the north, and the governors and people and the imams and others were there, would say, "Those Nigerians, they don't understand what they're doing. Don't worry. We're fine."

An issue came up about our women volunteers, Peace Corps in the north, because in another country, I forget where, some of the women volunteers had been attacked. The governor called all of the volunteers together up in that northern part of Cameroon in the Garoua/Maroua area, and he said, "I'm telling all of you right now that you are absolutely safe here, you're going to be protected here. You're our friends. We've had volunteers here for 30 or 40 years. If any of you have a problem, you come to me." And everybody was fine. People would go out of their way to welcome the volunteers.

Q: How did this translate to the Cameroonian military, because that's usually the coup point in all these countries?

STAPLES: Again, the Cameroonian military, very professional, with real bases and a lot of contact, historically, with the U.S., even though the majority of the senior officers trained in France. Back in the '80s, we had a major patrol boat project with the Cameroonians. I think we provided up to 40 patrol boats, training of crews and equipment, et cetera. Most of them weren't working by the time I got to Cameroon, but the issue was the offshore waters and not being able to protect their coastal boundaries. The Russian trawlers and others would go through with their deep-net fishing and just take all the fish.

But we had at least two to three ship visits a year in Cameroon with U.S. forces. The Cameroonians were a part of a regional military group and Cameroon had an air force and a paratroop brigade. This is why we were so frustrated in the U.S., because they were professional and well trained and they could actually deploy using some of their own resources, but they wouldn't participate in African peacekeeping operations. But the relationship was fine, very professional, and there was never any sign that they would participate in a coup. Someone might bring that up in Cameroon and there would be this silence, like, "Why would you think that about Cameroon. This isn't Nigeria."

Q: All right, well, let's talk about Equatorial Guinea.

STAPLES: Equatorial Guinea. You remember from before, I was there from 1985 to '87 as a more junior officer, my third assignment in the Foreign Service. And that was a time when it was one of the poorest countries in the world. It's a country where there's a continental part of the country just to the south, bordering Cameroon, and then there's this island offshore where the capital is located, Malabo. Again, '85 to '87, no

communications. We had to fly in small planes to Cameroon for food and bring it back. The government was run by President Obiang, who had killed his uncle, Macias, a few years before and stopped the incredible violence and viciousness that had destroyed the country.

They had cocoa and they had all these Nigerian workers who were working the fields that they'd mistreats, and then the Nigerians would send a frigate and the government would flee to the hills and they'd take the Nigerians away and then there would be negotiations and they'd bring them back. Malaria was rampant, and it was one of the poorest countries in the world. The only reason we were there in the '80s was because that big, huge runway was the jumping-off point for bringing Cubans into Angola in the old days and we wanted their vote in the U.N. and the Russians and the North Koreans and all were running around the place. But it was in terms of Foreign Service excitement, sort of this place out of a book. It was interesting, but we were glad to leave.

Well, after I left in '87, we had one more ambassador, and then relations broke down and we closed the embassy. Right after we closed the embassy in the early '90s, oil was discovered in Equatorial Guinea, and this place with 500,000 people all of a sudden became incredibly rich in terms of oil money. And so by the time I got there, at the same time I arrived in Cameroon, because I was Ambassador to both countries, I to Equatorial Guinea to present credentials as the ambassador after all these years. President Obiang was still in power, with his...

Q: You were the first one after we broke relations?

STAPLES: No, no. Well, we never had an embassy there. It was always the ambassador from Cameroon who was duly accredited, so my predecessors before me in Cameroon had had the responsibility, although I'll get to it. While I was there, we reopened an embassy permanently, and now we have an ambassador there, Don Johnson, who is accredited, and so the ambassador in Cameroon is just in charge of Cameroon.

Anyway, well, I got there and the country had been absolutely transformed. Before, there were one or two paved roads. Now, there were incredible villas and housing projects. There were oil compounds. Exxon and Marathon had these incredible compounds, American business executives all over the place. With Marathon, you had this methanol plant that was a $1 billion investment operating. Exxon had its offshore oil platforms. You had Guineanos, people who were some of the poorest in the world. Some of our staff at the embassy, we looked them up, they had gone to work for the oil companies and they had second homes in Spain. These were people who had just nothing.

One of the ladies, who was an American dual national who had married a minister back before, was a friend of my wife's and had a small beauty shop. Well, she had become a wealthy businesswoman with 32 houses she was renting out to foreigners. She had her daughters going to school in San Antonio, Texas. It was just absolutely incredible what had happened, and President Obiang and the government loved the Americans, because we had found the oil. And the oil was there all along, but back in the '80s, Total and a

couple of Spanish companies had supposedly drilled and found nothing and told the government there was nothing. So Obiang gave the concessions, the drilling concessions, to the American companies who discovered the oil.

President Obiang was convinced that the Spanish and the French knew there was oil and didn't want to find it or report it because they wanted him out. They wanted to put in one of the exiles and I didn't disabuse him of that. Not in the least.

Q: I mean, that's wonderful, the thinking of people gets so self centered.

STAPLES: It is, it is. That's the only reason. They were there, found nothing. You came, you found it, now why? So, in any event, Equatorial Guinea, this is a place of which legends were made. Back in time, and even today, it's known as – although not today, but back in time was one of the worst human rights abusers. It's a place where political opponents were taken into the jungle and disappeared, a place that came into being, the government today, as a result of a violent coup. If you want to talk about ethnic conflict, there are the Fangs, a group from the continent of which President Obiang is part of. The island people were the Bubis, and they were subjected and they could be like drivers or whatever, although for show the prime minister, of course, is always from the Bubi group, but they have no power in the little military they have, or anything like that.

But the watch word is oil, and this presented a lot of challenges for us. First of all, on the human rights side, here's a country that's a known human rights abuser with a terrible human rights record, people disappearing, people being beaten up, people being threatened, et cetera, et cetera. It is an authoritarian government, absolutely, although there's a parliament and so forth. President Obiang and his group are in charge and run it well for their purposes.

So respect for human rights, and yet here's a country that doesn't really need to listen anymore, because they're wealthy. But you had to tell them, and I did, that you need friends in this world, that the oil isn't everything. The second issue was the use of the oil money. Are you running out?

Q: We're fine.

STAPLES: The second issue was the use of all this oil money that was just really beginning to come when I got there, because so much of the initial finds, the oil money had gone to reimburse the oil companies and to pay for further exploration and so forth. I told President Obiang, I said, "You have a unique opportunity not to be like Nigeria and not to go the same route as Gabon, where it's all just disappeared." I said, "First of all, Mr. President, do not give up your agriculture. In Nigeria, they abandoned agriculture, everyone went to the oilfields, and of course Nigeria was fertile but today it imports food. Don't let this happen." The second thing I told him was to make sure that you use the money to really benefit people. Any government, any president, and Obiang is the same, they're going to buy a house here or put some money over there. That's going to happen in Africa. That's just going to happen. Fine.

But Obiang said he was really trying to control this, that he knew the money had to be used wisely. And he said, "You know, Ambassador, I handle the checkbook." Now, see, most human rights groups and other groups, you report that to Washington, which you do, and you've got to have five pages of caveats after it, because they'll say, "Aha, the president admitted corruption. He has the checkbook." But Obiang's mind was, "Most people around me are corrupt. I know that. I'm going to control it." But we don't understand that thinking.

The other thing with the money was, they were so poor, they would try to take a little money here, a little bribe here, something. I said, "You don't have to do that anymore." I said, "Mr. President, do what the Bahrainis did. Do what was done in the Gulf." And I contacted some of my friends from my time in Bahrain in the Gulf, and I sent the Guineanos to Dubai, into Bahrain, to talk to some of the companies. What they did in the Gulf was that the money came all of a sudden to these people who had just been pearl divers. And what they did was just buy what they needed, turnkey. They bought a hospital. The doctors, just pay them, just bring them. Later, we'll train up our own people, we'll sort things out, et cetera. Don't try to put something out for bid using IMF financing and then when the bids come try to get a little bit from those so they get the award of the – don't do that. Just buy what you need.

I told Obiang about the oil companies having to deal with petty little roadblocks by soldiers. I said, "These are the kind of things that were being done 20 years ago, when I was here." I said, "You don't need to do that anymore. The soldiers don't need to try to shake down a car and tell them that a headlight's not working right, that kind of thing, when they're being paid 10 times what they were paid years ago, and part of that was in food.

Now, their families have jobs on the compounds of the oil companies. The money is here to be used by people. I saw they were trying to rebuild the one school in central Malabo, and they had five people bidding for the contract and everyone was complaining about no decision being made until something was paid and so forth. I said, "You know, just pick the best one and just pay them, but why not just buy a whole school from Europe or the U.S.? Just bring in a whole school. Just don't do repairs, build a new one. Bring the best teachers and put them on contract."

This was a concept that they couldn't quite get their heads around, but I saw recently where they had put in a state-of-the-art hospital on that island, which was so malaria infested and life expectancy was probably in the 40s when I was there, in the '80s, but I hear that from the Israelis they brought in a whole huge hospital and doctors and were sending people to school and so forth. So they were starting to get it.

Q: Were they able to sit on the malaria, because malaria is a controllable disease, in a way? I mean, you spray and you do stuff.

STAPLES: The thing they do now on malaria, and it's getting really used widely in Africa are these treated nets. The best thing about malaria is prevention, wear your long sleeves, don't go outside around five o'clock in the evening, treated nets. They were doing that. They were doing that. But the island was known for a very virulent strain and they still had problems with malaria when I was there. But the country had really been transformed.

On Malabo is the Bahia Hotel where back in colonial times Frederick Forsyth would sit on the balcony, overlooking this incredible bay, and he wrote "The Dogs of War" and so forth. When I was there in the '80s, it was a shell, rat infested, destroyed, half of it destroyed. I come back in 2000, 2002, and it's back, it's built. There's happy hours and things on the veranda again. This is what was happening on the island.

There was one airport, I mean, one airport facility in the old days at the airport. It was just like a big warehouse, with people hawking goods and so forth. I arrive, and now there's this glass-enclosed, beautiful air-conditioned airport with all the vehicles. In the old days, there was just one flight, really, just the big Iberia flight on Saturday morning, and everyone would go to the airport.

And in those days, in the '80s, it was such a restricted dictatorship, really, that you couldn't talk to a minister without permission. The 4th of July list had to be vetted by the government with their people, to see who they would allow to come, to attend. Now it's open. You can go call on people, call people up for a drink, meet people up at a hotel. It had changed so much, and yet people, the mindset of the government people, they were always looking over their shoulder.

Before, they were worried about, what if I upset the president? He might make me disappear. Now, they're worried about their neighbors, because they're so rich. They had even when I was there a big roundup of Cameroonian illegals and others. People in the rest of Africa were trying to get over to the island and find a job so they could get money, and they had a very restrictive policy, tourism and other areas, as well. Why would someone want to come for tourism? There's nothing there. The government just turned them down very hard.

The Cameroonian ambassador in Yaoundé (ph) was a very close friend of mine and she was really tough. She was a cousin to President Obiang, and she, like most Guineanos, and this is interesting – I don't know why this one group of people, these Equatorial Guineans, they are linguists. They have a facility with languages. President Obiang taught himself French. Equatorial Guinea, by the way, is the only former Spanish colony in Sub-Saharan Africa. Spanish was the official language at one time.

Q: It was Spanish Guinea, wasn't it? What was it called before? Or has it always been Equatorial?

STAPLES: Equatorial Guinea, and it's Spanish there, and the Spanish is very pure, very crystal clear. When I was there in the '80s, the international schools were run by Spanish

nuns. My daughter went to one of those schools. And they had this love-hate relationship with Spain, but now Spain is just one of the many countries with sort of influence.

Even though they had this relationship with Spain, they were part of the Central African franc zone in terms of currency, which they still are. So Obiang taught himself French. The ambassador in Yaoundé I just mentioned, she spoke English and French and Spanish and German. This one group of people, they have this facility for languages, and it was very interesting to see.

Q: Was Libya or any other country messing around there?

STAPLES: No, no, no. And when I came back as Ambassador, the Russians were gone. That relationship just ended. The Russians had their economic crises in the late '80s, early '90s, and closed their embassy. The Chinese were still there. They were very active, doing work on the roads and dams, and in the continental part of the country which was very underdeveloped. A new international airport was built in Bata, the capital of the continental part of the country, and superhighways leading to the east and other parts of the country were also constructed.

The country had just been transformed. It shows you what money can do, income can do. But still political instability. When I was there, we had the famous coup attempt that failed, where the plotters were captured in Zimbabwe who were ready to fly in, Margaret Thatcher's son was supposedly involved and so forth, and these guys were arrested who were trying to bring back an exile from Spain to take over the government. And then a big show trial, preceded by vicious beatings in the infamous Black Beach Prison.

I told President Obiang, I said, "You know, I'm glad to see this, in a way, because it was so poor here 20 years ago." And he agreed that , but then said, "You should remember that, really, we're the same people. It's just the circumstances have changed because of the money." And I said, "Well, you know, I'm glad to hear that in one way, but, Mr. President, you want to become even better people and set an example, so that you don't become like the Nigerians, where billions of dollars go missing and where every part of your society is corrupt."

Q: Nigeria is so sad.

STAPLES: It's tragic, tragic. The most educated people, the most populous country in Africa, a great literary tradition, and they had wonderful universities, a country that had just absolutely everything. And then on top of that came oil, and today, I mean, my friends have told me, Lagos, one or two traffic lights in a city of 14 million. It's almost $400 billion gone missing or misused. It's just staggering, just staggering.

Q: How about Gabon? Did that play any particular role either in the Cameroons or Equatorial Guinea?

STAPLES: Yes, Gabon, which has been ruled by President Omar Bongo for about 30 years, I guess, is a place where the oil has been running out now. They're in trouble. At one time, it had the highest per capita consumption of champagne in the world. Libreville, the capital, was like a mini Paris of boutiques, Frenchmen everywhere, a very Francophone country. Gabon and Equatorial Guinea had a maritime dispute over certain areas and no drilling could be done there. I believe that continues, and President Obiang, he didn't like Omar Bongo at all.

He thought he was very pompous and arrogant and looked down on him. Obiang and Paul Biya got along great. In the old days, in the '80s, when E.G. had no money, Paul Biya would send a plane for Obiang. He would put him up at government expense in Douala or Yaoundé. He would invite him to fly to meetings in Europe with him and so forth. The Cameroonians and Equatorial Guinea had a good relationship. That's why there was some tension when illegal Cameroonians were just rounded up in Malabo, put on a ship and kicked out of the country with no warning. The Cameroonians expected better from President Obiang.

The other area where there was always trouble, and I worry about still, is the relationship with Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea. There was a maritime dispute that was resolved when I was there. That went away. But Exxon and others had their offshore wells there, and in the old days you had Nigerian citizens, like I say, who were working in E.G., but mistreated, and the Nigerians would come and take their people away.

Nigeria could still at any time just send over a couple of frigates and take over the country, and this is one of the concerns that we had to deal with when I was Ambassador there, about the security of the country. It was one thing when they had nothing. It's another thing when U.S. firms have billions of dollars of investment and there are U.S. citizens working on offshore rigs. We were worried about Nigerians from the delta who kidnapped foreign oil workers and rob the different ships, and so we were worried about them coming out and maybe attacking oil rigs. Equatorial Guineans, they had no way to protect their coastal waters, no way to protect these rigs. They don't have a Navy. We were encouraging the government to contract with the company MPRI (Military Professional Resources, Inc.), which is here in Virginia, one of these security firms, to come and do training to try to professionalize the military. The army had about 1,500 people. That was it. The navy had one patrol boat. The Russians gave them one years ago. It wasn't maintained. It sank in the harbor. And we were thinking, after 9/11, what about terrorist attacks?

1. The Gulf of Guinea area is a major area of strategic importance to the U.S. now. Over 20 percent of our oil comes from that one area, and more is going to come. The "Economist" has called that whole area the Kuwait of Africa, and E.G. in particular. And we had Hess and Exxon and Marathon operating very strongly, Hess on the continent, offshore there. And when I was there, they announced that that one area was going to be their major oil exploration focus for the next decade. That's how much is there.
2.

Marathon, before I left, I negotiated with the government on their behalf and helped them. They got an OK to do a $1 billion expansion to their existing Marathon plan, and Exxon was very heavily involved. One thing for the record we get asked about a lot as diplomats is what role did the oil companies play in these countries, and did they help you in your concerns? What did they ask you to do? This is a good time to give you my take on the oil companies in Africa and maybe elsewhere in the world, I don't know.

I found the oil companies to be very concerned about living conditions of people, human rights abuses, economic development, but they would do nothing to help me deliver those messages. When things got bad in Equatorial Guinea, people were being arrested, there were coup rumors and Obiang would round up the usual suspects, that kind of thing, I would come over and have to go in and so forth and I would talk to the different groups of executives, and I would say, "Why don't you give up this message? I'll come over and do it and you do it when you get your chances, we'll tag-team it. Why not do the same kind of thing?"

Anything that they had to do outside of the core business had to be cleared with Houston, and the lawyers would get involved and they would say, "But it might be too risky. Don't do anything." So they had to be very, very cautious in what they did, and they were in that sense very narrow. I would tell them, "Why don't you do what American ambassadors can do in Africa, using the Ambassador's Self Help Fund?" Where I had I think a $50,000 pot in E.G., $100,000 in Cameroon. Different communities would come in and apply for the money, $4,000 or $5,000 grants. You've got a little clinic, but you need a roof. OK, here's $3,000. You do the labor, we provide the fund, self-help programs. It's very effective in Africa.

And I would say, "Why don't you do the same? You've got hundreds of millions of dollars? I'm helping people here finish off this or buy chairs for a school or do something like this and they're doing the labor, we provide the funds. There's oversight, accountability, it has to be reported. Every dime is accounted for. Why don't you join me and we could crisscross this island with little projects, going here and there and little communities and really make a difference right down at the village level?" Couldn't get authority. What if we did that and the roof collapsed? Liability concerns.

Q: This is the problem that in many ways lawyers are the bane of our commerce.

STAPLES: Yes.

Q: Are the bane of our good governance, in a way, are basically saying, "No."

STAPLES: The first response is no, or what could go wrong? And, therefore, no. Hess, on the continent in Bata, the main city there, came up with an idea that they asked me what do you think if we were to build a vocational school there, which would teach people all kinds of trades, so people would have jobs? And not just jobs in the oil industry, plumbing and carpentry and electrical. I said, "That's a great idea. I think you should." And then they would tell me there were troubles. The lawyers said you can do

that, but 70 or 80 percent of the graduates have to be trained to work on our projects, the oil center. So, in other words, we can justify it because we're helping to train a labor force that we could use.

I'd say, "Gosh, you know?" There's such a thing as goodwill. You do that and people are trained, you have the president over, you cut the ribbon, he likes it, he gives you more things. Try that on. They wouldn't budge, wouldn't budge, wouldn't budge.

Q: As ambassador to these two companies, how did you find the human rights reports were?

STAPLES: Oh, I'm a big critic of the human rights reporting requirement. I remember in my second post, in Uruguay, we spent a lot of time on that report, because we were dealing with a military government that was leaving, a dictatorship. OK, and here's where I had my problem. We would have five copies of the report when it's done come up from Washington. You would have had a country team meeting decide how to place these reports, who would get them, for the maximum effect. The government took it so seriously that they formed a team...

Q: The government of Uruguay.

STAPLES: Yes. They formed a team to write their version of what the report should be. Fast forward 20 years and I'm in Equatorial Guinea or Cameroon. The report comes out and we're still talking about things that happened three years before, two years before. The report has been expanded to cover all kinds of areas, not just involving human rights, but anything that could potentially be a problem in a society. Because of these rigid rules from the State Department, from Washington, things that had already been corrected and cleared up, you still had to mention. And the government would just look at this and say, "All you want to do every year is hammer us, and we're your friends." In Equatorial Guinea, Obiang would say, "Yes, this happened. We fixed it. I told you about it, Ambassador, and it's your oil companies we want to work with. No one else is going to touch our waters. It's only you, and every year you do this to us." And this is my problem. How would you feel as a human being if no matter what you did, every single year you got criticized, you got hammered?

At a certain point, you blow it off, and I think that's what's happened in this world. No one has taken the time to rewrite reports. No one wants to meet and really discuss it. People just have it in their heads that every year we're going to get hit, there will be a dustup in the press for a week and then it's over until next year. It's lost its effectiveness. It's not a good tool of policy anymore, and I wish this new administration would go back on the Hill and have a frank discussion with Congress about this. It's turned into more of a feel-good effort. We evaluate the world and it's sort of we're in a position to do it because we're good. That's the feeling behind it, and I don't like it, and it's not an effective tool anymore.

Q: OK. Then, in 2000 and what you left?

STAPLES: Well, E.G. and Equatorial Guinea I left in 2004.

Q: Whither?

STAPLES: Whither a complete break from assignments in Africa and the Middle East and so forth and so on. I went to NATO. I went to Mons, Belgium, and I became the political adviser, or POLAD, to General Jim Jones, the supreme allied commander of Europe, and we like to say diplomatic adviser. We don't like POLAD. And I worked for Jim Jones for two years and it was a fascinating, fascinating time to be dealing in NATO issues, and for me sort of a homecoming. Back, before the Foreign Service, when I left college I was an Air Force officer for 8.5 years, and I had gone in 1972 to '73 to Monterey, Army Language Institute.

Q: (spoken in Russian). I am a graduate, but I was in 1951 in Russian.

STAPLES: Fifty-one, OK. Well, I was there in Monterey. And I learned Turkish. I spent a year learning Turkish, and then I went to Izmir, Turkey, to a NATO headquarters, where I worked for two years. And I was even there for the final 30 days of my tour when the Turks went into Cyprus, and I got to be involved in that.

Q: That's July '74.

STAPLES: July '74. So I had been involved in NATO issues. I had experience working with all kinds of officers and people from different countries, but it was old NATO. This was Cold War NATO. When we left Izmir, Turkey, we couldn't even fly to Brussels on a plane that would cross Yugoslavia and Hungary and so forth, because the plane might go down and they would capture you and interrogate you. We had to take different routes even to go up to Belgium, so it was a different NATO completely than I went back to in 2004.

Q: In 2004-2006?

STAPLES: 2004 to 2006.

Q: OK, let's talk about – firstly, it's Jim Jones, your...

STAPLES: Jim Jones.

Q: Who is now national security adviser.

STAPLES: Yes, he is.

Q: So your evaluation of him, at that time?

STAPLES: Jim Jones, as Supreme Allied Commander of Europe, was marvelous. Understand that the first Supreme Allied Commander of Europe was Dwight Eisenhower, so he's in the direct lineage, if you will. Jim was and is a superb person. I applied for the job through the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs and I had to go over to the Pentagon to interview with him, because Jim Jones was not only SACEUR, but he was also the commander of European Command, so the EUCOM commander, so the was dual-hatted. I to this day do not know how one person can be in charge of EUCOM, which has responsibility, until AFRICOM (African Command) came along, for about 100 countries, the U.S. military activities with those countries, and then the NATO job, which was dealing with the military forces of 26 countries. Plus work with the secretary general of NATO, plus all the Partnership For Peace countries, plus the other countries, like Russia and Ukraine and so forth. But we did the best we could.

In any event, I went to the Pentagon, interviewed with Jim Jones, took Jo Ann with me, my wife, and we interviewed together with him, which was nice. We apparently hit it off, because I went on leave. I was between jobs at the time, on leave, and I went back to Kentucky. By the time we got back, the phone call came that evening, would you like it? So, yes. And, in fact, before I left Cameroon Jim Jones visited on his Africa tour as EUCOM commander. We had him at the residence in Yaoundé and a little reception and a nice dinner that the Cameroonians put on, so we had gotten to know each other a little bit and we hit it off.

He has a great interest in Africa, by the way, and it was his effort to tell Don Rumsfeld that – he pushed for years that we needed a separate command for Africa, that we couldn't keep handling U.S. military affairs with Africa through EUCOM, and the result has been the development of the AFRICOM command, which is...

Q: When did that come into effect?

STAPLES: AFRICOM came into effect in 2007.

Q: So this is after your...

STAPLES: After I left.

Q: After your time, but it was ticking while you were there.

STAPLES: Oh, it was ticking and under discussion, and how would we do it if it were to be and so forth, because it was clearly evident that Africa, with its growing importance, especially Gulf of Guinea, which was a big concern with EUCOM, which was another good fit for me because of the oil issues involving the Gulf of Guinea, Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea. It was more and more becoming apparent to U.S. policymakers that we needed to really take a fresh look at the continent militarily in a separate way, not just as part of EUCOM.

And it had it been, in my view, sort of an afterthought. Most of the concern in EUCOM had been with Eastern Europe and of course the threat from Russia and what to do now in the post-Cold War era with the developing militaries in Bulgaria and Romania and so forth. And Africa was sort of, "Well, we haven't been down there lately, so we better make a swing through. And it was usually the deputy commander of EUCOM who had responsibility for African issues and who made the trips. And, of course, Africans aren't stupid. They would say, "Well, why doesn't the EUCOM commander ever come? Why do we always get visited by the number two?" So Jim Jones was very aware of that and wanted to change it.

Him, personally, he's just an outstanding individual, a person who really is very savvy. He grew up in France. His dad was an executive with International Harvester. He's fluent in French, pretty fluent, and that went a long way in the Iraq conflict era with the Europeans. He always got along with the French ambassador to NATO and the French military, I'm convinced that they really stepped up and committed to their rotations in Afghanistan because they respected Jim Jones. I'm convinced it was because of their relationship with him.

He would, as NATO commander, make a trip over to France to meet with their commanders and their military authorities. It was like a big homecoming. I mean, no tension, just friendship and good fellowship. Mrs. Alliot-Marie, who was the French defense minister, she liked Jim Jones, a lot. He had great entrée whenever he would go to France. So they had problems with the Bush administration and there were these clashes and so forth, and then Jim Jones would arrive and the sky would part for a little while, the sun would come out.

I think he, just through who he was and the way he handled himself and the respect he showed to the French military, went a long way to improving the relations. They didn't worsen, I should say.

Q: There are all these relationships between the NATO commander and particularly France and all, but probably the trickiest one during the period you were there, talking about different powers, was the relationship between the NATO commander, Jim Jones, and Donald Rumsfeld, the secretary of defense.

STAPLES: Yes.

Q: From your observation, how did this work?

STAPLES: You know, I didn't see much of that. I knew he would send on occasion these P-4 messages, personal for.

Q: These are snowflakes, I think they were called.

STAPLES: Snowflakes came from Rumsfeld. Jim Jones would answer him and so forth – Rumsfeld and the U.S. government, the pressure was on the U.S. NATO Ambassador,

who was Nick Burns at the time. It was interesting, because I'd worked with Nick when he was at the NSC on Greek-Turkish issues, when I was head of the Turkish desk, and we talked about that. So here he's the ambassador in NATO, and he knew me and I knew him, and we had Jim Jones, so the three of us got along just great, no problems at all. But the pressure was on getting the Europeans to do something in Iraq and more in Afghanistan. That was it. Iraq, well, we even got the Germans to open a training facility in Dubai where they trained truck drivers. And we got the Europeans to sign on to do rotations and take charge off the International Security] Assistance Force, the ISAF forces in Afghanistan, and they did it well.

The Turks ran a beautiful headquarters and they provided sources who were quite serious. The French, three times, and the French did their rotations as the responsible party in Kosovo in the peacekeeping operations there. And I remember, Jones really would push the Belgians to do more, push to provide another C-130, for example. He would try to get the Germans to do more than just hunker down in their quiet area in the Afghanistan's north. The Italians came through, thanks to Jim Jones.

Q: Well, I think one of the things that strikes me is the substandard performance of the Germans in Afghanistan.

STAPLES: I think they're in Mazar-I-Sharif.

Q: One can understand, they're like the Japanese, suffering from their reputation after World War II and all, but this is way beyond that time, and if they were there, why weren't they doing something? Was this – I mean, because it sounds like the Germans are no longer a NATO factor.

STAPLES: Well, they had their area in Afghanistan, and it seemed as if they wanted to make sure that they would do everything possible to ensure there was never a casualty. Of course, this was helped by the fact that the Taliban remnants and others were concentrating on the south, in the Kandahar area, not their area. But they had so many restrictions, and this is something that Jim would sort of – that drove him crazy, the caveats, the famous word, caveats. Caveats were restrictions placed by national governments on their forces as to what they could do.

With 26 countries, not all 26 were involved in Afghanistan, but we had, for example, the Italians could patrol, but not in an area so many miles from their base camp. The Romanians, so much and no farther. And we would prepare in Mons these lists of the different caveats by country and General Jones would go up and talk to the secretary general about them and we would have these meetings and push both in the foreign minister and defense minister meetings for some kind of commonality and reasonableness.

It was mainly a diplomatic game of name and shame, and it worked. Slowly, the caveats began to be reduced. When I left, the number of caveats on the use of forces or notification to other allies, et cetera, had greatly reduced, greatly reduced. But it was

something that was just a continuing concern. The bigger problem that we found that was affecting NATO operations in Afghanistan, and the NATO training mission to Iraq, which we started with Jim Jones, as well – the bigger problem is this, and it's not just the Germans. It's that the Europeans, long after World War II and, more importantly, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, no national leaders are talking to European peoples about the need for defense and the need to fund it, the need for national sacrifice.

That is what's missing, because the ambassadors and the heads of state we'd meet with and the governments would make the point that they did not have the needed funding from their parliaments. And you'd want to just say, "Mr. President, why don't you go there and make the case? Why aren't you speaking to your people that there's still a need for NATO, that there's still these threats. Maybe it's terrorism, maybe it's biological. The world is still not a safe place. Point out that these are firm commitments and that your neighbors and others must share the cost, as well." And that's what's missing, and that's reflected in the leaders in Europe today.

It's just shocking, a major country like Germany or Italy, for example, and they'd say, "Well, our budget only allows us to do one exercise a year. and you're asking us to send helicopters to Afghanistan and the maintenance support as well, and we have no experience maintaining these things in this kind of weather? That means we have to go to parliament for extra funding." Now, that's dangerous. What if they say no? These parliamentary democracies, maybe they parlay that onto some domestic crisis and all of a sudden we have a lack of confidence vote. It's hard.

Q: Did you see sort of a hollowing out of the military side of NATO?

STAPLES: Yes. Very much so. And on equipment and on training.

Q: Is Germany still – I mean, does it have a voluntary military?

STAPLES: Yes.

Q: What ones, any have the draft still?

STAPLES: It's interesting. I wish Jim Jones could be here to talk to about this, and it was fascinating for me. The countries really committed to the alliance, making the case for budgets, ready to deploy to Afghanistan, ready to go for an exercise, are the new members, the ones from Eastern Europe and the Baltics. The Bulgarians and Romanians – and, by the way, having them in NATO gives NATO forces access to these incredible facilities the Russians built, wonderful areas to train in and practice in, great runways and military facilities. But they were the ones ready to go. Little Lithuania, they had a law on their books that no more than about 25 of their soldiers could be out of the country at any one time. We asked them, how would you feel about setting up a provincial reconstruction team in Afghanistan?

They said yes, and they went to the parliament, got the law changed, gathered up their forces and the expense of this for this small country, they set up a provincial reconstruction team in one of the most difficult regions in Afghanistan. And they were proud to do it and boasting about it. The Romanians have had an important presence in Kandahar, and out there on patrol, taking casualties. But the more established powers, if you will, Greece and Italy and so forth, not willing to do it.

Q: How'd you find the Turkish-Greek equation working when you were there?

STAPLES: Oh, lord.

Q: I've been asking this question over 20 years.

STAPLES: Different place, same game. Yes, well, I've asked it ever since I first got to Izmir, Turkey, in 1973. No, even in NATO – they would still have these little incidents in the air, these...

Q: Over the islands.

STAPLES: Over the islands, yes. But Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, the Secretary General of NATO, and Jim Jones, would – he wouldn't do it directly. He'd have the British general who was the deputy commander. He would have them call them in, the MILREPs, the military represents in Mons, and say, "You've got to stop it." Jim Jones would pick up the phone and call the two chiefs of staff who he knew, because of the defense minister connection, and tell them you've got to stop it.

Hoop Scheffer would say, "Gentlemen, this is something that is not going to come before the Council, so figure out how to stop it," and things would just go down again until the next time. But even there, still the issues, still the problems. For me, this job was exciting, really interesting. My job was, of course, to provide the diplomatic advice to Jim Jones, but he knew the issues so well, he didn't need to say, "I can't do anything until I talk to George," Forget that. And, of course, he and Nick Burns talked every day.

My days often involved going to Brussels to speak to the other ambassadors, who wanted to know what General Jones was thinking. I wanted to know what they knew about their militaries and what they were thinking, but from the diplomatic side, not necessarily the ministry of defense side.

I had a good office in Mons. I had a British diplomat, a German diplomat, who were on my staff working for me. I had an American secretary and American NCOs who worked for me. But my travel and other expenses were funded by NATO, and I was the highest-ranking NATO civilian at the NATO headquarters in Mons, which was very interesting, because you had these different pots of money, different levels of authority and responsibility. When I would go back to the US, I would have briefings at the State Department and DOD on what Jim Jones was thinking. In Europe, I give talks sometimes, like at the Romanian Defense College, on various NATO issues.

Jim Jones had a very outstanding relationship with the Russian chief of staff, even as relations between the U.S. and Russia were sort of getting a little tense. And NATO officers, we all went one time and spoke at the Russian Defense College. I thought that was extraordinary. They invited people from NATO to come and talk about what they did at NATO headquarters. And when I got up as the political adviser to talk, what the Russians heard was political commissar. That's what they knew. But I explained what I did.

Q: How did we view the Russians at that time?

STAPLES: Well, the NATO-Russia Council was working very well at that time. We had Russian ships that were trying to meet interoperability standards to exercise with NATO ships in the Mediterranean. We had a lot of coordination on different exercises that we were working through. We had in Moscow a NATO office with allied military officers working with the Russian military. And the Russian general, the chief of staff, would come to Mons, and he and Jim Jones had their own sort of like a hotline set up in their offices to talk to each other. They liked each other. They would have gifts and dinner. Jim Jones would host the Russian team for a dinner at the chateau. It was extremely, extremely effective. We got along just great.

Q: How was Kosovo playing in those days?

STAPLES: Kosovo was a real concern. I went there three times, twice with Jim Jones, once on my own on another visit. The Serbs, Kosovo Serbs, were in their own enclaves, and of course the NATO troops were surrounding the religious sites and this was before independence. The place was balkanized, if you will, in the Balkans. The big problem was the area north of the river.

Q: Mitrovica.

STAPLES: Mitrovica, yes. We went there and walked over the bridge. We talked to some ethnic Serbs. We met with different leaders, and it was a strange thing, because here's the river and on our side of the river, so to speak, where the NATO forces were, up on the buildings along there were NATO forces and snipers and so forth. So if there was any hint of violence while we took our walking tour through the different sites and the checkpoints and so forth, we were all covered from up there by the sharpshooters.

I think we had about 17,000 NATO troops there, and then we had the police force. The EU was sending in the police units. Again, it's funny, Arabs don't like to hear that they're like Africans in many ways. Neither do Europeans. But, in many ways, it was like Africa: tribalism, ethnic divisions, the issues involving resources and who controls them and various issues and beliefs used as points to divide, religion and so forth.

I'll never forget, we were on this one mountaintop getting briefed by the French commander who had responsibility for certain forces in this sector of Kosovo and there

was this road leading up to these mountains and out of nowhere comes this black truck, this one truck on this one road. No other traffic. Commerce had been killed off, with all the ethnic fighting. No traffic and here's this one truck and we said, it's interesting, there's one truck at least. And the French commando says, "Oh, that's the smugglers. Every day, that's their morning run. They'll do it again in the afternoon."

You talk about Afghanistan being a narco-economy because of poppies. Well, I'm afraid that's pretty much it for Kosovo, too. It's smuggling and human trafficking and so forth.

Q: Well, was there tension with the Russian troops in the area?

STAPLES: No, no. I'm trying to think, were there Russian troops?

Q: I'm not sure if they had – well, they have a – maybe they'd hold out.

STAPLES: No, they'd gone, they left. The Russians had left before I came, before my time in NATO.

Q: How about the Serb forces? Were they challenging or was it basically...

STAPLES: No, we didn't go up really near the border area and the ethnic Serbs inside Kosovo, no, there were no problems there. That was the one area, that was unique. Of course, we had Bosnia, we had the NATO forces around there, as well.

Q: Well, Bosnia, the lid has been kept on, hasn't it?

STAPLES: The lid was kept on, but...

Q: What was the feeling, that you take the troops out and it goes again?

STAPLES: I don't think so. They were trying to make it work. You didn't have this tenseness like you did with Kosovo, but the problems there were all political. It was power sharing and the parliament. It wasn't the threat of armed force, but you could always get a riot started if things weren't right on the ground there. And the other problem in Bosnia that we worried about a great deal were so many radicalized Islamic extremists were going through and around and in and out of Bosnia, and a lot of them were reportedly going toward Iraq and back. That was a big concern in Bosnia, a big concern.

Q: How in NATO and all, from your perspective, how was the Iraq business seen, and how did that impact on you all?

STAPLES: Yes, Iraq was – the whole Iraq war effort was not popular in Europe, as you know, but the decision was made that – and the Iraqi Foreign Minister Zebari and others would come up and speak at the NATO conferences. The decision was made that this is a place, given the importance of the Middle East region, where if possible NATO had perhaps a role to play. And the way to do that, and I was – this happened right when I got

to Belgium, was the council voted to initiate an Iraqi training mission, so we had a NATO mission in Iraq. NATO took over, with the permission of the Iraqi government an abandoned airbase, called Ar Rustamiyah, which was about five minutes by helicopter from the Green Zone, right outside of Baghdad, and this was a base that had just been abandoned. The NATO forces put in money, rehabilitated the buildings, and brought in military instructors. It was about how to – not officer training like the basic course that you go through to be an officer, but staff officer training and how to work things effectively, mid-level kind of officer training.

And we established a college there, and the commander of the initial mission, the NATO training mission in Iraq, was General Dave Petraeus. He was dual hatted. At that time, he was a three star, and he was in charge of all the training of the NATO forces or the U.S., the initial training mission, and so he was dual hatted. And you know he's of Dutch extraction and speaks Dutch, so he would come to the NATO council meetings in Brussels to report on how the training mission was going, and speak a little bit in Dutch and so forth, and everybody loved him. He was really quite popular when he would come to Belgium, and he worked very well for Jim Jones.

He would come to Mons and they'd talk about Iraq. The big concern was to make sure we were getting the right people, a really good mix of young Iraqis to become officers. The new Iraqi army is supposed to be Sunni, Shia, Kurd. It's not supposed to be just a repeat of Saddam's army. Checking on the training mission was the major reason we traveled to Iraq, and I think I made three trips to Iraq with Jim Jones. We would meet with President Talabani and the senior US and Iraqi generals and then go out to Ar Rustamiyah and talk to the students.

The other thing that NATO was to help build up this new Iraqi army, and this made perfect sense for once. We were going to provide excess Soviet equipment from the former new NATO member countries like Bulgaria and Romania, to the Iraqi army. All of the former East Bloc countries came up with excess AK-47s and other equipment. In fact, I can't remember if it was Hungary or Bulgaria that provided 50 tanks that they didn't need, and the Greeks provided the shipping for the tanks free of charge and we just moved them down to the coast and shipped them off, so a lot of equipment to help rebuild the Iraqi army, because that's what the Iraqis were used to, was Soviet equipment. It came from former East Bloc members of the Soviet Union who are now NATO members, and that worked very well.

Q: How did you find the integration of the former bloc into NATO, the ones that came into NATO?

STAPLES: They were going well. As I say, they were eager to turn around their militaries and get training for them and so forth, so they were eager to take on these roles in Afghanistan and so forth. I thought it was going very well, from a military standpoint.

Q: Did you find that there was much progress in developing a noncommissioned officer corps? The Soviet army had done frankly a very poor job. They treated their recruits –

they hazed them. It was sort of a disgraceful operation, and too many officers and not enough competent, with authority, noncommissioned officers.

STAPLES: Again, here's a perfect example of vision by Jim Jones. He knew before he probably ever got there, just what you were saying, Stu, about the lack of a professional NCO corps and the ability to do things with it.

Q: Because that's what we run on.

STAPLES: Exactly, and that's not the case in a lot of these militaries, especially the former East Bloc militaries and now NATO countries. What he did was to establish the first sergeant major of NATO. He brought his sergeant major from the Marine Corps, and I should remember his name. He was wonderful. But he charged him with working at NATO headquarters to develop a staff of trainers and others that could go out and build up an NCO corps in these NATO countries that didn't have that tradition, and they did that. They had a wonderful program going in different countries. They expanded existing military academies to include NCO training. Then they would go out and provide textbooks and trainers and build up these people.

Some countries agreed, I think Romania was one, to revise their whole rank structure, because they didn't have anything like this. They had privates and other corporals, who were like drivers and helpers, but to develop a whole corps with a career path and so forth. But Sergeant McMichael, who was the sergeant major of the Marine Corps when Jim Jones was commandant of the Marine Corps. He brought him to NATO, and Sergeant McMichael took on this job and was doing it well.

The British generals and the German general who was the chief of staff were sort of bemused by this. It's like you're not supposed to get down in the weeds like that, but in the end even they were believers that this was...

Q: Well, when you look at it, I speak as a former enlisted man, and the noncommissioned officers are the guts of our military.

STAPLES: Exactly, exactly.

Q: The petty officers, the sergeants, pretty much run things. But was there concern at your time of the Russians called it their near abroad, the 'Stans, Georgia, the Ukraine. Were these – they were partners for peace, but they weren't...

STAPLES: Right.

Q: I mean, you as the political watchdog, I mean, these must have been something you'd want to pay special attention to.

STAPLES: The Russians were not really concerned like they are now with those countries and their participation with NATO and the Partnership For Peace. In fact, the

Russian defense minister kind of encouraged it because he saw it as a way to professionalize those militaries, have them involved with NATO. And under PFP, the Russians had representatives in Mons. NATO at that time had also reached out to the Gulf States as a follow-up to the NATO summit in Istanbul, which happened before I arrived. And before I left, we had Arab officers from the Gulf states in Belgium at the NATO headquarters there, in the Partnership For Peace exercise, so, yes.

Q: In your time, how would you, as PFP, the Partnership for Peace, how had this evolved and what was it doing when you were in?

STAPLES: The main thing were military visits and exercises, exchange programs, but I think in the old days there were actually more physical exercises with military units from NATO. NATO today, and when I was there, there's not a lot of money in these European countries for exercises. So it was more training missions, more visits to ensure that more PFP member officers could go to the French and German and British military schools, Italian military schools. That was mainly it. It was not actually providing NATO forces to go to these countries and hold on-the-ground exercises. That was still going on, but to a minor degree, minor degree. And we would have visits because NATO had changed so much.

We had when I was there, as well, the NATO Secretary General, Jim Jones and I and some of the ambassadors flew to Addis Ababa, the Africa Union Headquarters, because the council said we ought help in Darfur. And what we did was assign NATO officers to the African Union Headquarters in Ethiopia at Addis Ababa to help the A.U. with its staffing planning. We even had NATO forces on the ground for a brief time in Darfur itself, coordinating relief supplies.

We had German that were flying relief supplies with the help of the Nigerians, to provide relief effort. So NATO was involved in an African operation. The NATO response force which was developed, the Quick Reaction Force Multinational. Jim Jones said, "We're not exercising like we always do in Germany or Italy or Sweden. Let's exercise at a distance," which means money, again. And a lot of resistance, especially from the French who declared that NATO shouldn't go “out of area,” but it happened. The NATO response force actually deployed for three days in Cape Verde.

And you look at all this and you say, NATO and Afghanistan, Iraq, Darfur, the response force in Cape Verde, Lithuania with a provincial reconstruction team in Afghanistan and you say, "This is not the old NATO."

Q: I was thinking about the old NATO, how could you in good conscience do a drill to prevent a nonexistent Soviet tank force from coming through the Fulda Gap.

STAPLES: No one does that anymore. Those exercises don't happen. The exercise in Cape Verde centered on a quick reaction in event of terrorist incidents, natural disaster relief, that kind of a quick need to quickly intervene in the Balkans again. The tank armies rolling to the Atlantic, no one's thinking about that anymore. But your question

behind that, Stu, is even bigger, and here's where there was conflict. NATO in Afghanistan and in Iraq and exercising in Cape Verde, the French in particular led the charge among some who said this is not what NATO should be about. This is out of area, was the famous phrase. In their minds and in some countries' minds NATO should be focused solely on Europe. Jim Jones and the NATO SecGen and others argued that the threats come from everywhere. Poppies in Afghanistan produce heroin which is coming to Europe. The terrorists who are training in far corners of the world are coming to Europe.

You can't just say, we're only going to operate in Europe. The French took a very narrow view of that and they were overcome time and time again, but it was quite difficult.

Q: Well, was it your feeling, and you might say those around you in NATO that the French are basically trying to destroy NATO or take it over? I mean, was this sort of their goal or what?

STAPLES: This would come up sometimes because, I'm sure you've heard of it, at the same time NATO was becoming more active in different areas, you had the EU and the EU developing its own military force. And as Jim Jones would point out, we're talking the same forces. For example, a German force committed to an EU operation might also be needed for a NATO operation, the same people, and where's that balance?

At Mons, at our headquarters there, we had an EU coordination cell, but the relationship between the EU and NATO was a bit rocky, because the EU was really Europe first and Eurocentric, and here's NATO with all these other activities, plus, of course, the big boy in NATO is the U.S., the Americans. There were issues that would come to the council or the military side that were quite tense sometimes, that people would say, "Well, we've already made a commitment to the EU on that." And we'd say, "Well, that's nice, but your NATO responsibilities say this." "Well, we can't do both, we don't have the money."

Q: This is a dodge.

STAPLES: That's right.

Q: Well, I mean, in a way, though, looking at this, what are the European priorities?

STAPLES: The EU had their own defense councils. They mirrored NATO in so many ways and everybody had to be very careful. You had – they had their political advisers, too, come meet with me and we'd talk and discuss the EU. And on the diplomatic side, they would have EU-NATO joint meetings to try to sort of – I always felt the EU created this thing, this military side, to sort of enhance its prestige, but without the resources. So the way that some wanted to handle that that was to try to diminish NATO, which also for some meant perhaps limiting the influence of the U.S. over time. It wasn't quite working, and they were frustrated, so they wouldn't share information. They wouldn't cooperate.

Q: We're seeing the EU going under a lot of pressure right now, because we're going through what amounts to a recession/depression and all of a sudden the EU seems to be falling apart because of the unwillingness of the countries, really, to work together for positive responses as economic stimuli.

STAPLES: Yes, that's right.

Q: How about – from your perspective, how did the naval factor work? Because when you talk about Cape Verde and right now we've got anti-piracy patrols in the Indian Ocean against Somali bandits and all. But was it hard for NATO to think naval wise or not?

STAPLES: No, not at all. There were still exercises in the Mediterranean, and I'll try to think of the name of it. We went, for example, to talk to the Algerians and the Tunisians about joint exercises. Mainly the concern there was narcotics and antiterrorism activities. But we had an Italian admiral who worked for Jim Jones, who coordinated many of those exercises.

What we were trying to do was to in a sense to expand the vision of Europeans and their militaries, to help them understand that they had to take on a broader role. It was interesting to see the Italians, for example, go to Afghanistan, to see a Spanish battalion in Afghanistan. For these countries, for some of them, it's the first time they deployed like this since the Second World War, and yet it was necessary, and it was good to see them doing it. And you'd sit and talk to their officers and so forth and it was like little kids. "We didn't think we could really do it, but here we are and it's working."

And so Jim Jones would say, "Yes, and you're doing a great job, and here's what I really like about what you're doing," and the encouragement and so forth. And then he'd always – he was so smart. He'd always go back and call the chief of staff and say, "I talked to Colonel So-and-So out here, and he and Captain – they're really sharp and they're doing a great job. You might want to keep your eye on them. It looks to me they're the kind of people I'd want to follow."

Q: Well, for many of the countries, let's say you're a Spanish officer, to get assigned to a NATO commitment in Afghanistan, was a way of gaining both military expertise and also showing that you could do it, sort of promotion wise and all.

STAPLES: Exactly, exactly. The concern was, of course, when it got a little heavy – when I left, things were not like they are today in Afghanistan. It was pretty good. I've been in Kandahar twice and we never had any trouble down there. But today, if you go anywhere in Afghanistan, deploy anywhere, you may have to actually fire a weapon, and here we go. Are the European countries ready to risk casualties? Are they ready to put on the line – and it's a political calculation. Can they stand the criticism that's going to come from critics in their countries? But they don't do the steps ahead of time to build public support for recognition of why we're committed, why NATO matters, why we have to be in Afghanistan, why we have to deploy, et cetera.

Q: Did Libya play any role in the naval thing, or was this pretty much a lance boil?

STAPLES: No, Libya, we never worried about them at all. We never had to worry about Libya.

Q: Well, you were there when Putin was president.

STAPLES: That's right.

Q: Were you seen – I mean, were we keeping our embassy in Moscow and the connections? Were we watching the Russian pulse? Was this a concern for us?

STAPLES: For NATO, not really. The NATO-Russia Council was working very well. We never had real disagreements with the Russians about anything. You could see in my last year there that we were heading towards independence for Kosovo. Now, they didn't like that. They had their issues on Kosovo, but we really had no problems with the Russians.

Q: How about Iran and missile defense and all that?

STAPLES: No, that was not on the radar screen then. Not on the radar screen.

Q: Well, what about – I think I asked you before, but did you sense the battles that were going on all this time in Washington between Colin Powell, Donald Rumsfeld, Richard Cheney, George Bush, all these things that were going on in the Washington thing on the military side. Iraq was of course the main thing, but there were other – this was a very conservative of a certain type agenda in Washington. And did you sense – it seemed to be opposed by – God, I hate to say it, I'm showing my prejudice, but the same people who had been dealing with foreign affairs and all this over the years. I mean, there seemed to be this confrontation that the Bush administration was doing. How was this playing, from your perspective?

STAPLES: Well, Secretary Rice would come to Brussels, to the foreign ministerial meetings and so forth, and she was very well received and respected. I heard her at a foreign ministerial meeting give about the best explanation I've ever heard of the Middle East conflict, Palestinians and Israelis, talking about that, and leading from that into a discussion from her perspective of why Iraq was so important. But what was going on back here, of course everybody had heard and knew and we'd talk to friends and so forth, but it didn't really play out in the NATO arena.

We were focused on the mission. We had to make the NATO mission in Iraq work well and before I left we were down there for the graduation of the first officer class. That was great. Afghanistan, the constant battle to get resources and commitments. Here was Jim Jones, the former Commandant of the Marine Corps, four-star general, SACEUR, and

he's practically begging the Belgians to provide another C-130, just one more, that kind of thing. It took a lot of time.

Trying to make sure, reassure the French and others, that this initial help to the African Union – I mean, five NATO officers on the ground in Addis Ababa at the A.U. headquarters was not going to destroy the alliance. Trying to help the Africans coordinate movements of relief supplies into Darfur. The French would say, "What's next? Are we going to be in Thailand if there's a problem? Are we going to be in Mexico?" That consumed a lot of time just to convince those countries to support what they considered to be non-traditional operations.

Q: Well, did you find your sort of political advisers or people from other countries, everyone sort of coming up to you drinking, receptions, and, "What the hell is with this administration of yours?"

STAPLES: Oh, sure. Oh, sure.

Q: Trying to figure out, because it worries a lot of us who are professional diplomats, or were professional diplomats, about this administration. Other administrations come and go, but this one has been – was – of real concern to all of us, I think.

STAPLES: You know, it was funny for me, because I had to walk a very fine line. They all knew I was a former diplomat, ambassador and an American. OK, fine. But Jim Jones in that environment was not a U.S. – he was a NATO officer, and I was in a NATO job. So while yes, I was his diplomatic adviser and an American, I also was expected to do what was best for the overall alliance. So I had to walk a fine line there. Yes, I was his political adviser, paid by the U.S. State Department, et cetera, but filling this NATO position.

And, by the way, I had to interview for the position and be screened and there was a Hungarian diplomat who was in competition. Now everybody knew Jim Jones was not going to pick a Hungarian to be his political adviser, but we had to do the dance.

I also went out of my way to be helpful when I could to the British four-star general and the German four-star general. Remember, I supervised an international staff. My British officer was the key representative of my office on Afghanistan issues, and my German officer handled EU issues, which put him in a hard position, by the way. Again, this shows you NATO. He's working in NATO, dealing with EU issues, but he's got to be careful because in the German Foreign Ministry NATO is not viewed as highly as being involved with the EU. So he had to do his job and not burn any bridges on the EU affairs.

Q: But, again, returning back to that thing, did you feel that the EU was being used pretty much as a dodge to get out of responsibilities?

STAPLES: Sometimes, absolutely. Yes, or if you're short on money in a defense ministry, why would you want to put the effort and expenditure into EU planning when

you have a NATO commitment? What does that say? It was obvious, sometimes there would be no money for a NATO exercise but there would be money for EU operations in a certain country. Well, are you saying that you think NATO has seen its better days and you want to make the EU as the common European defense unit?

Q: Was there any real steam behind the idea of dissolving NATO?

STAPLES: No. No one ever came right out and said it, and I think NATO being involved in so many critical areas, it wasn't even...

Q: It would strike me that it wouldn't be, and there is this old thing, which I don't think has gone away, but this is just – but I think it's obvious that NATO, by its very existence, keeps the European powers, particularly Germany and France, from looking over each other's shoulder. And since you're all in the game together, you're not going to say, "Well, gee, they've got so many tanks and I better have so many, or begin to worry about – it really takes away this whole worry about your neighbor game.

STAPLES: Oh, yes, and in terms of those kind of traditional thoughts involving influence among their particular neighbors. If their neighbors are also NATO members – but even beyond that, the idea of lessening NATO's role and thereby in effect lessening the U.S. role in Europe. Now, is that what the Europeans really want? Do they want to see less of the U.S.?

I think during the Bush administration, quite frankly, there was a lot of feeling, yes, and a lot of upset. But longer term, when you think about it, do the Europeans really want the U.S. to play less of a role? I doubt it. They still look to the Americans.

Q: We also represent a certain amount of the honest broker. I mean, our issues are not those of bordering states.

STAPLES: Right, exactly.

Q: And, also, we started this whole idea and I think we've got a strong commitment. Also, I was thinking, we're getting close to maybe a lunch break, but is there anything else you want to talk about the NATO side?

STAPLES: I think the key – the old NATO, if you will, the NATO I first knew as a junior military officer in Turkey in a NATO job, was the NATO that worried about the Russians coming through the gap, stopping the Soviet Union from dominating Western Europe, et cetera. The NATO that I dealt with from 2004 to 2006 was worried about how to meet the asymmetrical challenges of the 20th, 21st century, and you could just name them: terrorism and natural disasters and health issues, et cetera.

And that was reflected in the missions that were undertaken. I'm sure in 1973, '74, the NATO commanders at that time would never have conceived of European forces on the ground in Africa or Afghanistan or running an exercise in Cape Verde. I doubt that

NATO in 1973, '74, received, as we did, visitors from the Japanese defense staff, who would want to know what NATO was doing, et cetera.

I doubt the Secretary General in those years would have been someone who had at one time been a former ambassador in Africa, as Jaap de Hoop Scheffer had been. It's a different world today.

But I think the European public in those years was more than aware of the threat posed and ready to support more military expenditures and military buildups. And, again, to show the contrast, that's not the case today, not the case today, and European leaders aren't even willing – or weren't even willing to make the argument to their peoples. They were not willing to write in the newspapers, speak to the parliaments, sponsor discussions, build support.

Q: Well, during the time you were there, you had come before, you had had your experience in Rwanda. Was there sort of a plan on the books, say, OK, if we get another one of these things, because we had apologized for not doing stuff. I mean, everybody felt pretty guilty about this Rwanda thing. Were we saying, "OK, if this starts to happen again, we're ready to go when something"? Was there any talk about it?

STAPLES: Talk, that's all. Yes. The typical, "We can never let this happen again." And if you ask the next question, "Well, what are you prepared to do to make sure it never happens again?" Well, yes, no. No.

Q: Was there any reflection of the Palestinian-Israeli problem in NATO?

STAPLES: Trying to remember. Yes, concern about the Middle East. I'm trying to think. I think there was discussion about – yes, because of the outreach for the 2004 Istanbul summit to include the Gulf countries as Partnership For Peace. And there was an idea floating around that maybe that could be used to bring together Israeli and Arab military people to kind of think about things, talk about things. But that wasn't going anywhere when I left.

Q: OK, well, let's break for lunch and we'll pick this up, you're off to Washington.

STAPLES: The next job, you mean?

Q: Yes.

STAPLES: Director general of the Foreign Service.

Q: All right, well, we'll do it then.

(END FILE)

Q: Today, this is part two of our catch-up interview with George Staples, March 5, 2009. George, so you left NATO in 2004, 2006?

STAPLES: May of 2006.

Q: And then you came back to be Director General.

STAPLES: That's right.

Q: And how long were you the Director General?

STAPLES: I was Director general from May 2006 until I retired in July 2007.

Q: All right, how did the job come about?

STAPLES: Well, the job came about because of Secretary Rice. She would come to Belgium for meetings at NATO, and when she was there sometimes she would meet with Jim Jones and I would be there and we would talk and so forth. But Bob Pearson, Ambassador Pearson, my predecessor, was going to retire and my name was put into the hat back here in Washington and she cornered me at a NATO foreign minister meeting and said, "You know, I'm looking for a new Director General and people say good things about you. Let's talk." So at a break at one of the sessions, we talked for 30 minutes or so. Then I interviewed with Under Secretary for Management Henrietta Fore and we had a good discussion. I came back, met with a lot of people in person and the Secretary offered me the job, which I was glad to take, although it meant cutting short my assignment in NATO by about a year. But I talked to Jim Jones about it and the Secretary said she wanted me, so I came back.

Q: In 2006, what was the job?

STAPLES: Well, the director general job is – you're director general of the Foreign Service. You're also in charge of – you're director of human resources.

Q: Which is a fancy way of saying personnel.

STAPLES: All the people. It's an assistant secretary level position and it requires Senate confirmation. And in the Foreign Service Act of 1980, it specifically states that the Director General has to be a career Foreign Service officer, by law. It cannot be a political appointee. You work for the Undersecretary of Management and you have responsibility for heading the bureau of human resources. You supervise three deputy assistant secretaries. There are 13 separate offices, including the Family Liaison Office, as well.

The overall staff in Washington is 400 people, but you're also responsible not just for the Foreign Service, but Civil Service, all our Civil Service personnel and all our Foreign

Service national personnel abroad. Total workforce, when I was D.G., about 58,000 people.

But I always told people, if you think about the policies that you oversee and implement and how they affect people, if you look at families and the kids who are affected of all these people, we in H.R. probably affected a quarter of a million people around this world, so it was a big job.

Q: Well, this is your – would you put it, your first time that you had sort of major executive responsibility in Washington?

STAPLES: Right.

Q: It was a hell of a way to get into the business.

STAPLES: It was, and it was great. There were a lot of things I wanted to do as Director General. You talk when you're a junior officer on, about Washington and if only I were in this or that position what I would change.. Well, here's your chance. So there were some specific things that I thought needed to be done in the Foreign Service in particular, in the State Department.

Q: OK, well, let's talk about it, then. What did you see were the problems and what did you see should be done?

STAPLES: The first problem was that I thought the Foreign Service had to have a change in mindset, and that Foreign Service officers needed to recognize that we lived in a very dangerous world, unlike any other in history, really, and that more and more of one's time would have to be spent overseas, and probably in dangerous places. Because when I became DG, the big controversial issue was war zone staffing, how to deal with the need to send people to Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries where our personnel might be in harm's way.

We had never sent so many people abroad to places that were dangerous since the Vietnam era conflict. And it was very controversial. Every year, we had to send our personnel for one-year assignments to places like Iraq. It was getting harder and harder to fill those slots. There was talk of directed assignments, meaning if personnel didn't volunteer they would be told to go, and if they refused to go they might be forced out. Something like that for the Foreign Service, which is a small organization, would have been very traumatic.

And beyond that, it would have meant a lot of scrutiny on the Hill, and there were already complaints from our colleagues in the military, who seemed to feel like the diplomats weren't carrying their fair share of the load.

Q: Do you feel that this was trying to point the finger of what went wrong?

STAPLES: Yes.

Q: I mean, as opposed to the real – that was behind it, wasn't it?

STAPLES: Yes, it was, that we might not be in this shape if we had more diplomats, which is cockeyed, because DOD ran the war and mismanaged it.

Q: And actually brushed aside the diplomats.

STAPLES: Brushed aside the diplomats, brushed aside any effort to collaborate on post-combat reconstruction and political development in the area. They wanted to run the whole show and then turned around and blamed the State Department for not being there. And having gone to Iraq with Jim Jones, and I made one trip there as the Director General, and spoke at the National War College, because the director general is on the board of governors at the National Defense University, the problem really was one of inaccurate information. When you told people in uniform just how small the Foreign Service was, and that we were assigned to over 160 locations in this world where we had representation, and that that's why not everybody has gone or could go, while they in some cases had served two and three times and been called up or had the Reservists called up, then they sort of understood. They didn't realize how small we were, how few people could be called.

Q: When you're talking about the Foreign Service, you're really talking about the officer corps in this case.

STAPLES: That's right. I'm talking about not so much the specialists, the diplomatic security agents or the communication staff, but officers who could go in, run sections, interact with Iraqis and Afghans and then do the policy work.

Q: And the Foreign Service officer corps when you were there was about how many?

STAPLES: A little over 6,000, small.

Q: I have to say, I came in in '55, and there were about 5,000. I mean, it's...

STAPLES: It's astounding.

Q: And we're talking about 50 years ago.

STAPLES: Well, the Iraq staffing issues just consumed us, but I soon discovered that it was more than just Iraq staffing, that we had to fill about 750 unaccompanied positions worldwide every year. These are positions where because of war or combat situations or because of hardship posts or because of evacuations our personnel were serving one-year tours. And if you think about this, every year turning over 750 people, trying to find them jobs and replace them, it soon became apparent that something had to give.

Iraq and Afghanistan obviously took priority. We had to fill those positions. But what about our posts in Pakistan? What about Algeria? What about hardship places in key places like Angola or Khartoum? Places in the Arab world. It quickly became apparent that members of the Foreign Service didn't understand, nor did our colleagues in DOD not to mention the general public. The rules needed changing, because the old bidding rules basically stated that if you served in a hardship post you wouldn't have to serve again for a number of years. All of those were out of date for today's world.

I had my conflicts with the union, the American Foreign Service Association, even though I'm a member of AFSA and have been forever. But the idea that everybody has served and we don't have to go again was just wrong. We have to do as an institution and as individuals whatever it takes to serve the country.

So when I first became director general, I had a big town meeting and talked to a large town meeting in the Dean Acheson Auditorium and by video teleconferencing around the world, to as many posts as could carry it. The subject was Iraq and hardship service, et cetera, and they tell me that that town meeting was the second-largest ever held at the State Department, the first being Secretary Powell's at the start of the Gulf War. I laid it on the line about the need to fill hardship posts. I told the crowd that the old Foreign Service where once in a career you might have to serve in a place of difficulty, that was over.

I talked about the need for equity for those coming out of Iraq and Afghanistan and unaccompanied positions, that they were going to be the first ones to get a crack at the so-called nicer places, if they wanted it, the European posts, Asian posts. I said we were going to change the precepts for promotion to recognize people with Iraq service and that any organization would not for a minute think about having leaders who had not served in hardship posts, or had not met the requirement to serve in a time of crisis. And yet I said, and despite all of that, we're going to do all we can do to take care of families, to recognize that we don't have bases where those who are not abroad have all the support services and the communities. We have thousands of people – we did have, and probably today – who are scattered across the U.S., alone out there in communities where nobody knows what the Foreign Service is. And we're going to look at how we can support those families and those children. So off we went to work, and I had a year and a half of a lot of changes in terms of Iraq staffing.

I also said we were going to change the way we brought people into the Foreign Service. I made it a point throughout the building that we were going to revise the Foreign Service exam procedures, which I thought were very antiquated. I was able to hire a consulting firm, McKinsey & Company, with a grant and they did a study on different ways of hiring people that would preserve some of the best ways of the system that we had, but also...

Q: This was the Cox Foundation.

STAPLES: The Cox Foundation provided the grant. And in the end, after many months, lots of meetings, messages to the field, an advisory group of senior officers that helped me, we made changes to the Foreign Service entry system that are in effect right now today, to make it more flexible and more...

Q: What were sort of the major things you focused on for the change in coming into the Foreign Service?

STAPLES: Well, the Foreign Service exam, has never been just the exam, unchanged for 40 years. There's always been changes. But the process as it previously existed was that in the springtime the exam was offered, and those that made the cutoff were then invited to an oral assessment where some were then offered a job, and that happened one time a year.

I talked to Secretary Rice about this – before, in an earlier life she was the provost at Stanford University, and she agreed with me immediately that this was a flawed process. What university would just accept students based primarily on SAT scores? You look at the whole candidate. I said we had this test, the test is over and that's it for the year, but we walk up to the Metro, Foggy Bottom Metro and we meet somebody and that person has the background, they're interested, but they missed out on the test. So we say next year take the test and see what you can do.

So you need more flexibility. An organization needs to have the ability to bring in whoever it needs, I said to Secretary Rice, "We have this requirement in Iraq and it's growing, not just the embassy, but these provincial reconstruction teams." And, in fact, we were bringing on 240 a year when I became director general. It then expanded to over 400 a year in Iraq every year, and the requirement that more and more of them speak Arabic. I said, "OK, if you tell me that we need to surge, if you will, to bring on Arabic speakers, there's no mechanism to do that. There's no way to do that in the current system. We need flexibility."

So what we did was go to a total candidate approach, wherein if someone is interested, any time during the year, they go to a site to apply, just as you apply for the SAT or any other college entrance exam. And on that site you post an online résumé. The format was developed for the résumé, using consultants and others. And once the online resume was completed, then you would receive a test date, and we decided to have a test four times a year, and not the original test from the past or revised, but a more focused test on diplomacy and on skills needed today to do well in the Foreign Service.

You take the test, and if you pass then your résumé and test results go to a screening board, and the screening board, taking into account the numbers we were permitted by the budget to hire for the year, plus the number of people we need with specialized requirements, hard language skills, et cetera, et cetera, they would pass, after that initial screening, those candidates onto the oral assessment program, which was unchanged, the all-day oral assessment as it exists today.

And we felt it would do a number of things. First of all, under the old test system, it came up once a year and people sort of rolled out of their dorm rooms and took it with their friends whether or not they really wanted to enter the Foreign Service. And we patted ourselves on the back, saying that, well, 25,000 took the test and by the end of the process there are only 400 of us that entered the Foreign Service that year. Well, of that 25,000, a lot of people took it for no reason. A lot of people took it because everybody else in the dorm was taking it.

Q: Sure. They thought if – I've heard the people say they took that and they took the examination to be a postal clerk.

STAPLES: Sure, just something to do. Under the new system, you had to make an effort. You had to first indicate your interest and post that résumé, and that weeded out a lot of people who weren't really serious, so I thought that was a very good thing to do. But the oral assessment stayed the same and at the end of it people were offered a job. And then I tried to fix the other problem on the back end, people finished up, were offered a job, but then went on the register until a position opened, and that register, it was so long and people were waiting so long out there that along would come the companies and they would pick off our good candidates.

One of the reasons the process took so long was the security clearance process. I talked with the Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, and we developed an agreement where those who would come on the register in the new system would get priority in terms of clearing them if at all possible in 90 days.

And I understand that today it is working. People are being brought on much quicker. You can post the résumé, the test, the interview, security clearance, medical and actually come onboard within six months, which is very good.

On the Civil Service side, while I was the Director General, we worked to expand the career entry program, where Civil Service candidates would be able to work for two years, sort of like being on probation on the Foreign Service, and then, if accepted, they would have a full career. We also developed an expanded mentoring program throughout the State Department.

One of the things, and I don't know about you, Stu, but for me, mentoring and how to work in the department and how things really go, it's hit and miss. You had to find someone hopefully to help you. Some people got way off track, because nobody ever talked to them.

Q: Nobody really ever helped me. I just sort of bumbled along.

STAPLES: I did too at first. We developed an extensive mentoring program. Everybody in an A-100 Class had a mentor. We had class mentors for them. On the Civil Service side, we did the same thing, to expand how to work in the federal government, what it meant, et cetera. We developed metrics to measure these things, as well, and surveys

from people, and that was very good. We also on the Civil Service side, I said, "Why should civil servants" – because I heard this complaint all my life. You go in to work at, say, the Africa Bureau. Thirty years later, you're working in the Africa Bureau, but maybe you wanted to try something else, but you couldn't. So we developed a Civil Service rotation program, where certain people with the two bureaus could switch jobs for a year or two period, and that kicked off before I retired, and I hear that's going well, to give people a good way of expanding their opportunities.

The other thing that we had to deal with when I was director general, because of the staffing shortages and this turnover in Iraq and Afghanistan, was the business of Civil Service excursion tours. This is a process where our Civil Service employees at the State Department can go out and fill positions not filled overseas by Foreign Service personnel. When I was a young officer, on occasion you would find one or two G.S. personnel overseas, filling a job. It was rare. When I was Director General, 25 years after coming into the Foreign Service, we had over 400 Civil Service personnel overseas.

Q: Excellent idea.

STAPLES: Because our shortages were so deep, but also these were people who had skills, who knew how the State Department worked, who could write, who could go in and make a demarche or who could do contact work, and we made use of them. There were strains on the system because when they came back they had the exact same rights to go back to their job, et cetera. Many of them wanted to convert and become Foreign Service officers, and the opportunities for that were very limited, because of staffing numbers. But that was something that we worked to expand and make more equitable.

Another thing I tried to do as director general was to take better care of our Foreign Service national employees overseas. As you know, sometimes we have our local staff who really make things run, in a time of crisis will maybe take you into your homes and keep you safe. Many of them worked in countries where their national retirement system was bankrupt or corrupt, or in places where the security for themselves, after they finished working 30, 35 years at an American embassy, just did not exist. So I tried to see if we could not include them in the Thrift Savings Plan. By law, it wasn't possible, so I tried to develop a plan with the help of some of our major U.S. insurance companies, to develop a Foreign Service offshore-based retirement system for our local employees. And I had a lot of interest from major American companies, and when I retired in July of 2007, I think that was going to come to fruition in some places in this world..

For example, when I was ambassador in Cameroon, it turned out that the entire retirement system in Cameroon had been gutted because of corruption. The people had been paying in, the embassy had been matching. Our employees when they retired would get a percentage based on the amount of funds in the fund, and the funds were down 90 percent through corruption from what they should have been. Basically, it collapsed. So we were finding a way to do something offshore for them, even when I left Yaounde, but that's not unusual in some countries in the world. Our local staff who in many cases have given

their entire working careers or in some cases risked their lives for the United States overseas should be treated better.

We also tried to do in H.R. things that might make the department more efficient. For example, why in every bureau should there be an executive office, basically an administrative office, doing the paperwork, assignment and awards processing, all of those things, and here's someone in another bureau doing the exact same thing? Why not have a system of what we called shared services? So we started that in H.R. as a trial basis. It was going very well. Some bureaus just gave up their whole H.R. function and found another provider who would take them on, and I thought that was quite extraordinary. So the human capital side of the business, and making better use of our people, I felt we really made giant strides in turning the State Department into a more efficient operation and making use of the best management practices of the day.

The same is true of technology. Why did we have to have so many personnel actions done by cable? A cable announcing your assignment. You get to post, the post sends a cable announcing your arrival. Then you go to the B&F section and they set up your pay and they send a message to Charleston and Charleston sends a message back, and then your household effects and on and on and on. We employed a number of contractors in our bureau function who made incredible systems improvements leading to the point where, for example, if you're going to be assigned overseas and after you arrived at post, all of those things you could do on your desktop computer. A lot of these improvements that will save the department millions of dollars and man hours.

Basically, anything that would be more efficient or more modern or more up to date I wanted to try to get up and get running. Also, we have 17 diplomats in residence, usually former ambassadors who are around the country whose job it is to liaise with universities and find summer interns, help people register for the exam process, explain the hiring process, and speak in their local communities about the State Department and what we do. That was usually the kind of thing we sent people to at the end of their career, maybe close to where they were going to retire anyway, and not much was happening. I changed that. In fact, I think three of my 17 went on to become ambassadors again. I made it clear this was not an end-of-tour sort off job, and we had officers really promoting the Foreign Service, answering tough questions about Iraq policy, et cetera.

And, finally, let me say that on the unaccompanied positions and the Iraq staffing issues, and Afghanistan, we never had to go to directed assignments during my time as Director General. I also negotiated successfully with AFSA a change to the fair share rules on assignment policies, to where personnel who had not served in a hardship post that was at least 20 percent or better were fair game. It used to be if you'd served at a hardship post with a five percent differential, or ten percent, you were considered to have met your hardship requirement and you didn't have to be considered for Iraq or Afghanistan. That was totally ridiculous. Rome, for example, maybe for traffic reasons, was a five percent post!.

We toughened that up. One of the jobs of a D.G. is to go out and be seen and to explain to people what the State Department is doing, and answer their questions. I made a number of trips in the Foreign Service, a big extended trip through Asia, the Middle East, Europe, Africa, but I never got to Latin America, unfortunately, before I retired. But in all those trips I tried to be sure that we explained our personnel policies and talked about why we had to change. And I also had a session of individual counseling at each post, as well.

The other thing the Director General has to do is deal with the tough individual personnel cases. We had some people who were investigated or even arrested and pending dismissal. We had a number of personnel who had disabilities and there were questions of equitable hardship service for them. One of the rules when I came in was that you could spend no more than eight years in Washington. I changed that back to six. I felt, and I took a lot of flak for this, but I felt and do feel that it's the Foreign Service and the majority of one's career should be spent overseas.

We have people in our profession who go overseas for a tour, one-year or two-year tour, they come back and stay eight years in Washington. That's what they were doing, overseas and then back again for a long period of time. I didn't feel that was right, especially when we had so many hardship positions to fill. So we succeeded in negotiating with AFSA, changing that rule, and that was the rule that existed I think back in 1997, and we went back to it so more people were available overseas. And then I tried as well to plus up "State" magazine, make it a better, more interactive magazine, with better articles, better information to field. I felt that there ought to be more communication out to the field. I found a lot of people just didn't know what was going on in the State Department or felt that they weren't hearing what was needed. And our assignment counselors and technicians, I changed things there, as well, so that they mandatorily had to have more contact with the customer and to get out more information to their clients. That was not being done, as well.

But, overall, that's what I did as Director General, and on the fair share requirements, by the way, especially Iraq, I took some people out of the seventh floor, some staff assistants and others.

Q: The staff assistants has always been – we both know the staff assistant often is a special breed, very smart people who cozy up – it's the wrong term. But give efficient support to the principals so the principals then take care of them, often to the detriment of those who are doing more hands-on (ph) jobs.

STAPLES: Exactly, and they were just as smart and just as capable. I made it clear at a staffing meeting with the Secretary sitting right there, because I knew she'd say, "That's right. Did you all hear George?" I knew she would, and she did. I explained about the new fair share rules and I said, "I'm sure that all of you here in this room will help me by setting the example. And even requests for extensions for people who are fair share or who have been identified to go to hardship posts, I'm going to turn them down. It's not going to happen." I think I had one request later on, some weeks later, which I turned down. But I never had a problem with announcing a policy and then having the people on

the seventh floor try to go around it. It never happened. They were all – it was very good. They were very good about that.

Q: Tell me, this meeting that you had when you started out and started talking about particularly the Iraq business, was this the meeting that – or was there one before this that got out to the press, that there were people who were claiming that – I mean, there were articles about the Foreign Service doesn't want to do its part and all that?

STAPLES: No, I think that was the first town meeting of my successor, Harry Thomas, who I guess there was a question or two at the end of his talk that caused some controversy in terms of the back and forth.

Q: A couple of questions. Foreign Service, I go back say to '55 and almost yearly I would read articles on the op-ed page or something about the poor morale in the Foreign Service. I'd get up in the morning, I look in the mirror and I thought, gee, I don't have bad morale. But things are – the press people usually go talk to bright young people who are disgruntled. Bright young people are usually disgruntled. But, anyway, what about retention? How did you find retention?

STAPLES: Morale and retention were great. I would hear these stories, as well, and I would hear that with all the emphasis that you're putting on hardship posts and tougher fair share rules, people are going to get out. People won't stand for the family separation. But that wasn't true. Morale was good and we had the highest retention of any agency in the federal government, absolutely the highest.

Q: I heard somewhere even that in doing this Foreign Service comes in something like fourth after Disney, Google and Microsoft.

STAPLES: Right. These are the surveys that are done on college campuses asking students what they considered to be their ideal place to work, and the Foreign Service is right up there in the top five. And, you know, just a historical note, I think you remember and I remember the women's class action suit...

Q: Yes. It started during the '70s.

STAPLES: Started in the '70s, ended in the early '80s. The State Department faced a lawsuit because of its treatment of women, assignments and promotion policies and the lack of senior positions held by women. When I was Director General, we had a survey and in the federal government, the State Department among women was shown to be the number one place to work. And I thought that was quite a nice transformation, reflective of what we were doing. And, in fact, most of our A-100 Classes for Foreign Service officers were I'd say 40 percent women.

And I found another interesting statistic that again shows you the complexity of the assignment process. I just asked the question one day to everybody, I said, "You know, how many people do we have in the Foreign Service who are married to others in the

Foreign Service?" Because the idea is that you try to put people together at the same post, if you can. And the answer was close to 1,000.

Q: Great God.

STAPLES: Yes, that was my reaction as well. So I always, when I came to FSI to talk to new entrants in their A-100 class or in messages to the field, when we talk about the need for separation it's because people are going to have to serve at these hardship posts more often in a career, and it may mean unaccompanied. I said, "And remember, too, a large number of our people are married to each other. And what this means is when you're a junior officer there's lots of positions where we can try to assign people together. But when you get up to the more senior positions, nepotism rules are going to come into play, and that may mean that the more successful you are the more often you may have to serve apart overseas. And I said, "That doesn't mean this is not a wonderful career and a great way of living, but think about it and plan for it."

People would tell me, if you say that, if you talk about these hardship posts, if you talk about Iraq, if you talk about separations, people aren't going to come in, people aren't going to this that and the other. Don't do that. But I found as I went around to college campuses and spoke to people that when I was finished we'd have more students than you could imagine asking about the Web site, how do I join, et cetera? It never was a problem.

I've always believed, and I really found it to be true in this very special job, if you're straight with people and tell them the truth, then they'll step forward.

Q: Yes, and also, they know what they're getting into.

STAPLES: Exactly.

Q: The other thing that one thinks about, and we have this really – this exam process really does pick out the best and the brightest. It makes for a magnificent breeding gene pool, one in a thousand, (inaudible) have children.

STAPLES: Well, the whole process, especially now, where we may pick people to go on who maybe wouldn't have passed the old exam, we're getting a broader cross section of people. We're getting people from more parts of the country. We're probably getting some more people with international business experience. All of that is not bad, not bad at all. When I came in, we had some military persons in my A-100 Class. The last A-100 Class I spoke to over here, there was the former defense attaché in Hungary starting over and I think that's just great.

Q: When I came in – again, I'm going back to '55 – we were all male and I think there were maybe 25 of us, and something like 22 were veterans. I mean, this is just the way it was, not through a fancy – but we'd spent several years in the military. What about diversity? It seems that diversity, when you say diversity at the Foreign Service, it almost

always focuses on African Americans. But the largest minority in the country now are Hispanics. Has that...

STAPLES: I think they are, or they will be. You're right. Diversity was a key concern. We were getting many, many more candidates, African American candidates, more Asian candidates, but we were not doing that well with Hispanics. We developed a special outreach program, working with Latino organizations. I went to San Antonio, Texas and in fact addressed a major conference. We had a booth and I talked to lots of people. You know, there's conflicting stories there, as I came to find out.

I was told that the reason why a lot of younger Hispanics, are discouraged from trying to join the Foreign Service is that in the Latino community the family structure is so strong that mothers in particular don't like the idea of their children going overseas. The families are just fine with the child taking a good job with IBM and moving to another city, but not overseas?

So I had a lunch in San Antonio with the presidents of about six universities, and I said, "This is what I've heard," and about five of them were Hispanics. They said, "Oh, no, that's a stereotype. It's a global world today and our students know that. I have 60 students on a summer overseas in Europe, etc. But, the family is in fact very important"

I had two of my diplomats in residence with me at the lunch, one who was based in New Mexico and one in Austin, and I said, "This is where we do a lot of our recruiting, here in the Southwest." And I said, "You go out there and work it, but don't just talk to the students. Ask this next question, is your family OK with this?" I said, "Even with summer internship, do they want them just to go to Washington? What about overseas. Ask the next question, and if the family has a concern, go speak to those families, as well." And we had more applicants. We had more people coming in that way, so I hope that's continued.

Q: How did you find the caliber of the recruits?

STAPLES: Oh, they're fabulous, fabulous. I used to speak to all the A-100 Classes. I spent a lot of time with our Junior Officer Division in the assignment area, because the first two assignments when you come in the Foreign Service are directed. You don't get to bid. And I said, "What do you think, how are these people? Are they ready to go?" They're more than ready to go. In fact, half of every class, they put in a request on where they want to go. In just about almost half of some of these classes, they all wanted to go to Iraq. They wanted to go to Afghanistan.

In Iraq, we had, when I visited, I met with about eight first-tour officers. They loved being in Iraq. They felt they were on the front lines, making a contribution. I felt that this generation of new Foreign Service officers – by the way, for me, there must be I'd say 50 to 60 percent of them I do not know anymore. My generation is heading out, but I think the new officers are great. They want to travel, want to serve. They're very tech savvy, very, very technically inclined.

They ask why we don't have more video teleconferencing. Why can't we make more use on the cell phones? And they're all in touch with each other on the Internet, about their bosses, about their housing, et cetera.

Q: What about removal from the service? I can't tell you how many people I have interviewed who talk about, particularly in their more junior officers, how their boss is an alcoholic or something like that, and everybody maneuvered around him. I had a couple, too. How did you deal with that?

STAPLES: We had a couple of cases. We had in H.R. the grievance staff, which would handle these kinds of cases. The problem was legal requirements. You could bring people back and put them on suspension. We had some cases going on two and three years and the person not able to work, because when you do that, when you pull someone from post, their clearance is pulled. Without a security clearance they can't work on classified issues. So you have to find an unclassified project for them to do, and park them somewhere which is not easy.

Q: And particularly at a more senior level.

STAPLES: I had one person that we were going to assign to the Family Liaison Office. He retired. He just said, "I don't want to fight the system anymore. I'm not going to agree. I just want to retire." We let him go. But that's the problem, the legal process is so long. Sometimes the cases are very complex and the Justice Department wants to get things lined up exactly right before they prosecute. Sometimes there's just disciplinary actions, but even that can take a long time, because people will grieve an appeal, take things to the Grievance Board.

Q: Well, what about – I'm a consular officer by profession, and consular officers have an awful lot of temptation their way and every once in a while you read cases of people. Did you have problems with that? I mean, this is selling the visas...

STAPLES: I didn't have any on my watch. There were a couple of cases that were wrapped up on my watch that started earlier, massive selling of visas. This one person, I think he was in South America, they found money stashed in Chicago. But, no, I didn't have anything like that. My Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Ambassador Heather Hodges, who is in Ecuador right now, Heather had a weekly meeting with the PDAS in the Bureau of Diplomatic Security to go over those kinds of issues, clearance issues, the bad boys and bad girls we dealt with. We did have a couple of no-confidence issues that came up, where ambassadors would send in a message saying they wanted someone removed from post, and we had to then find them other jobs.

Q: Did you get involved, or was it on a different level, with political appointees who turned out to be duds or have real problems?

STAPLES: I did not. I never had one like that during my time.

Q: It seems to me that maybe it's five years or so ago where all of a sudden there were all sorts of articles and talk about sexual harassment suits and all that, and I haven't heard much about it since. Is that just sort of a phase, people learn not to do it, or what? Or was this...

STAPLES: I think people are a little more aware now, perhaps. There are frequent seminars about this, everyone hears about it. FSI, when you come back for training, everybody knows that's a career killer, as it should be. But I think it's just a little bit better now.

Q: Well, George, I guess we've probably come to – what caused you to retire, and what are you up to?

STAPLES: Well, those were the big things that I dealt with, and I retired in July 2007 because I had pretty well accomplished all I wanted to accomplish as director general. We slayed a few dragons there, changing the whole exam, the intake process, that's sacrosanct for a lot of people, but that happened. The whole Iraq and Afghanistan and unaccompanied tour staffing issues changed. I changed the policies that needed to be changed after negotiating with AFSA. I think even more than that I changed mindsets. In other words, people had a greater awareness that we're in tough times and one's career is going to probably be more difficult than they might have imagined, but that the department, the institution, would take care of them. They and their families would be treated with respect.

So I'd done all I could do, and in July of 2007, with my 8.5 years of military time, 26 years of Foreign Service and unused annual leave, I had 35 years and the original, the old retirement system, as they called it, I was in it. At 35 years you max out for pension purposes and I thought it was time to move onto a different phase in life, so I retired and moved with my wife to our home in Pineville, Kentucky, where we had built a home 20 years before. My wife and daughter lived there when I was unaccompanied overseas. And, since then, we've done improvements to the house and to the land. We have a beautiful log home on 70 mountain acres with a beautiful stream. We've done that, and the governor appointed me to be a member of the State of Kentucky's Human Rights Commission, so I'm a State Commissioner.

I teach a course every year at the University of Kentucky's Patterson School of Diplomacy and International Commerce, and I had also served – it has ended now, but I also continued to serve as a member of the National Coalition on Adult Literacy, an organization looking at the problems this country may ultimately come to face in the very near future with perhaps 80 to 90 million people, adults, who are functionally illiterate, at a time when we have to deal with the global economy. So I've been doing that, and it's kept me busy enough.

Let me just add, Stu, that in reflecting on my career, the success I achieved would not have been possible without the love and support of my family. My wife Jo Ann was an

indispensable part of everything we did for over three decades in the service of our country. Her wisdom and wonderful ability to interact with people helped enormously in our efforts to build goodwill and greater understanding for our policies. And our daughter, Catherine, did the same in her own special way as a student and as someone who was also seen as an American diplomat. At every post, they also were key in building good morale and helping colleagues and their families have a good experience. Far too often we overlook or fail to give adequate credit to the important role our families play at our overseas postings.

Q: Well, thank you very much.

STAPLES: Thank you.

End of interview