

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

**AMBASSADOR HARRIET L. ELAM-THOMAS**

*Interviewed by: James T.L. Dandridge, II & Mark Tauber*

*Initial interview date: June 2, 2006*

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Experiment in International Living: Study Abroad – Lyon, France - Summer 1962

Paris, France

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Secretary at the American Embassy

Civil Rights Movement in America

Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Activism in United States and Left Bank, France

Washington, DC

1968-1971

Sen. Edward Brooke and White House Assignment Opportunity

West Wing White House Position

Work with President Richard Nixon's Special Assistant for Appointments

White House Departure - February 1971

U.S. Department of State

Foreign Service Reserve Appointment

Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs

Program Officer in the Office of Youth, Students and Special Programs

Responsible for High School Exchange Programs and Young Leaders Exchanges

Member of the U.S. delegation to the 25<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly  
(UNGA)

American Council of Young Political Leaders

U.S. Youth Council

Foreign Service Oral Exam to become career FSO

U.S. Department of State

1971-1974

Assisted return U.S. Exchange students during Turkish invasion of Cyprus

Commissioned as Foreign Service Officer

Career FSO Overseas Assignments:

Assistant Cultural Affairs officer in Dakar, Senegal	1975-1977
Mali	1976
Temporary Duty Assignment (TDY) - Acting Public Affairs Officer	
Abidjan, Ivory Coast (Now Cote d'Ivoire)	1977-1979
Cultural Affairs Officer	
United States Information Agency (USIA)	1979-1980
Received the Jefferson Fellowship	
Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University	
Master's Degree in Public Diplomacy	
USIA Personnel	1980-1982
Career Counselor	
Greek Language Training	
Athens, Greece	1983-1987
Cultural Affairs Officer at the American Embassy	
USIA Washington, DC, Assignment	1989-1990
Desk Officer for Greece, Turkey & Cyprus	
Nelson Mandela speech at joint session in Congress	
Turkish Language Training	
Istanbul, Turkey	1990-1994
Director of the American Press and Cultural Center	
Countered Allegation of USG re PKK Terrorists	
USIA	1994
Member of the 37 <sup>th</sup> Senior Seminar	
Brussels, Belgium	1995-1997
Public Affairs Counselor – U.S. Embassy	
USIA	1997-1999
Counselor of the USIA	
Acting Deputy Director	
Orlando, Florida	2003-Present
Diplomat in Residence at the University of Central Florida	
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Director of the UCF's Diplomacy Program	
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## INTERVIEW

*Q: Today is June 2, 2006. This is an interview with Ambassador Harriet Elam Thomas and I am Jim Dandridge. Ambassador Thomas, thank you very much for coming in for the interview today. What I would like to do is to start with something on a brief background on your parents. Can you tell me a little bit about where your parents were born and a little bit about their background?*

ELAM-THOMAS: It will be a pleasure. My parents were from the South. My father was born in Chase City, Virginia; my mother was from Aiken, South Carolina. When they passed away in 1974, they had been married for 54 years. They migrated north shortly after their marriage.

An automobile mechanic, my father worked on large transport military vehicles at The Boston Army Base. Prior to that, he had opened an automobile repair shop in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It must have been significant for an African American man in those days to have his own automobile repair shop. I was told the business did not survive due to The Depression.

My mother was a domestic; cleaned homes of doctors and other professionals in the Boston suburbs. On several occasions, I went to work with her using the well-known Boston MTA. I enjoyed the bus and trolley ride as I viewed the elegant homes along the way. I remember reminding my mother: "Mama, you didn't do that corner." She would say, "I have four houses to do today; I didn't ask you to be my inspector. Just do what I asked that you do." One of the ladies would leave tea, crumpets and/or scones for us. I looked forward to going to that residence because this was one of the few ladies who demonstrated some humanity towards us.

When I reflect on that experience, I am amazed that my parents raised five children who made them proud. With my Dad's annual salary never more than 3,500, he was adamantly against welfare. It didn't matter what he did but he was going to make an honest living and that commitment is evident in all of his children.

*Q: Do you know how your parents met?*

ELAM-THOMAS: No, I do not. However, the connection must have been very strong for mother did not wait for her only sister to finish teaching at a school in North Carolina, The Palmer Memorial Institute, in North Carolina. June was just too long to wait so they married on March 10, 1920.

*Q: Well. And how many siblings are there, how many children did they have?*

ELAM-THOMAS: There were five of us. I was referred to "the surprise," since I arrived almost 17 years after my sister. She was the youngest and she was the only girl. My

brothers are 18, 19 and 20 years older. My sister who has had Alzheimer's disease for 28 years is my only remaining sibling. My parents passed away when I was 33. Until August 16, 2012, I was blessed to have an incredible surrogate father in my brother, Judge Harry Justin Elam. While he had five children of his own, my brother was the father figure in my life. He offered wise counsel throughout my career, gave me away when I married and swore me in when I became an Ambassador in the elegant Benjamin Franklin Room at the State Department.

*Q: Now were you all born- Where were you born?*

ELAM-THOMAS: I was born in Boston, but all of my siblings were born in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

*Q: And as far- You mentioned that your older brother is a Superior Court judge; tell me a little bit about the rest of your siblings and their professional lives.*

ELAM-THOMAS: My sister, Annetta Elam Capdeville, still considered the "soul" of the Elam family was a poet and a writer. Before the early onset of Alzheimer's disease at 65, she was writing the history of our family. Sadly, we have been unable to locate the original draft.

Now to my brothers: Despite the availability of the GI Bill, my oldest brother, Charles, did not want to go to college. Charles was, however, the one person we could rely upon in terms of keeping our homes well repaired, painted and spotless. He worked for the Boston Transport Authority and was also a building superintendent who, like our Dad, took pride in his work.

The baby brother, Clarence, who died in 1985 while I was Cultural Affairs Officer in Athens Greece, attended Boston University under the GI Bill. With an undergraduate degree in Business Administration and much later a Law Degree from Suffolk University, Clarence was the Executive Secretary of the Governors' Council during Governor Christian Herter's term. Later in his career, he was named Chairman of the Boston Licensing Commission. The middle brother, Harry, was the first African American judge on the Boston Municipal Court, the oldest trial court in the country. Harry became Chief Justice of that court and later was appointed Associate Justice to the Massachusetts Superior Court. He practiced law with Senator Edward Brooke in Boston more than 60 years ago. My husband and I were delighted to accompany my brother to the U.S. Capitol October 28, 2010 when Senator Brooke received the Congressional Gold Medal two days after the Senator's 90th birthday. At the time of this edit, I am honored to note I was asked to do a reading at Senator Brooke's funeral on March 10, 2015 at the National Cathedral. No doubt that request was because of the close relationship the Senator had with my two brothers for more than half a century. Throughout my career, the Senator was also a surrogate big brother to me.

*Q: That must have been an interesting experience because of the popularity of Senator Brooke, not only because of the fact that he was an African American but his constituency held him in high regard.*

ELAM-THOMAS: The Massachusetts voters certainly did. At that time African, Americans and other minorities comprised approximately 2% of the Massachusetts population. That's all! In short, Senator Brooke was not elected by the so-called "Black vote." Brooke was the trailblazer for the current occupant of the White House, President Obama. I found it extremely uplifting to see that there are maintain very close relationships with The Senator who turned 94 in October 2013. The Senator, as my brothers, helped chart my career path - - More on that later.

Clarence, Harry and Charles, were very close because they were a year apart. My sister is two years younger. She said my mother asked her to take the blame for my brother's pranks because my father was such a harsh disciplinarian yet he would not be harsh with Annetta. She bristled at my mother's request but had little recourse. My mother said she could not bear to have those three young boys in the house for discipline for a full week. The three brothers loved their little sister Annetta, no doubt in part because she kept them from harsh punishment. Lo and behold, I arrive nearly 17 years later and my sister had to share the limelight with a new baby sister. It had to be very difficult.

*Q: Now obviously this experience, even though you were probably quite young at the time, did have some impact on your outlook as far as your future professional options are concerned. As a key advisor to Senator Brooke's campaign, what transpired for your brother to be in that position politically?*

ELAM-THOMAS: During WWII, Clarence served in Italy with the 366th Infantry Unit with Senator Brooke. He loved Italian opera and I very reluctantly attended classical music concerts and operas with him. I had no idea that someday I would become a Cultural Attaché and host some of American top performing artists of all musical genres during the early portion of my diplomatic career. Through Clarence's WWII friendship with Ed Brooke and Harry's law practice with Ed Brooke, my brothers were a longtime member of The Senator's inner circle In the mid-1950's, Harry shared Senator Brooke's law offices in Roxbury, Massachusetts. The "Berry," as it was known then, was the black section of Boston and home to Malcolm X. The Law Offices of Brooke and Elam served as the community's resource for all things legal. The two of them did so much pro bono work that they garnered unconditional support on both of their political ventures. In fact, my brother Harry often said he became a judge because several leaders met with Governor Francis Sargent and said, "You need to make Harry Elam a judge." Governor Sargent took their advice.

As chairman of the Boston Licensing Board for restaurants, hotels/inns, lodging establishments and alcohol, I am certain my brother was the recipient of "special" treatment at these dining places. With the wisdom of age on my side, I now understand that "special treatment could include a case of wine or spirits from these restaurant

owners which contributed to Clarence's dependency on alcohol. He also smoked heavily and died of throat cancer.

*Q: Well obviously these experiences, the professional experiences, did have a positive impact on the overall family and more specifically particularly on you. Can you talk a little bit about how you felt?*

ELAM-THOMAS: I was a very shy adolescent and teenager. For years I was the little Elam girl in Boston. No one seemed to know my first name. My sister and brothers were known quantities, but I was the afterthought. One church member always called me the "little Elam girl" and I could not stand that. One day I mustered enough nerve to tell her, "My name is Harriet. I have a first name."

Because they were so much older, my brothers were very much like parents. A few weeks before I was scheduled to enter The Lewis Junior High in a very rough neighborhood, Harry and Clarence went to Boston City Hall. They informed the responsible persons that their little sister should attend the more reputable The Patrick T. Campbell Junior High. I do not know what they did, but they succeeded and I was transferred to The Campbell School. Since it was a greater distance from my home, I walked approximately 5 miles round trip each day which contributed to my weight loss.

After junior high my parents then enrolled me in Boston's classical high school for girls, Girls Latin School. I thought that was a fate worse than death. After a few months struggling to learn Latin, I pleaded with my parents to take me out of that school. I reminded them, "I am not my brothers and I cannot learn Latin so please take me out." They did and I entered Roxbury Memorial High Schools for Girls (RMHS). Once again, I had another subtle encounter with discrimination.

When my brothers learned that the high school guidance counselor had assigned me to the commercial course, my brothers went to her and insisted that based on my grades I merited assignment to the academic track. We all suspected that the moment the counselor saw this young "colored" woman she automatically assumed that I should enter the commercial course. If it were not for my brothers assertions, I may not have entered college.

My brothers were extremely important influencers in so many aspects of my life. I worked on political campaigns and in their law offices or at City Hall. Early on, I thought that I would be a legal secretary. I had no idea that I would enter a career which would take me almost around the world.

*Q: This is a great revelation here, the impact-of your frustration with Latin language and your learning two hard languages subsequently!*

ELAM-THOMAS: Of course when you met me at USIA, you had no idea about my challenges with Latin.

*Q: No, I didn't know any of that.*

*Q. Since you mentioned that your brother insisted that you follow an academic track in your early education, let's talk a little bit about your early education.*

ELAM-THOMAS: I went to the Boston public schools which were, at that time, among the best in the nation. My parents thought that I should follow my brother Harry and go to Girl's Latin School, the classical high school in Boston; Harry attended to Boston Latin, the boys' classical school. After four months in that school, I asked my parents to take me out of that school. I was struggling with Latin and reminded them I was not like my brothers and did not like being compared to them. Convinced I was not able to learn that difficult language, they relented. I had no idea that years later I would learn Greek and Turkish. I was then enrolled in the Patrick T. Campbell Junior High and later I attended Roxbury Memorial High School for Girls (RMHS)

Overweight and very shy, my refuge from society was my homework. Totally inept in social settings, I dared not speak to anyone I did not know. Children were to be seen and not heard. Given the fact that my parents were the ages of my peers' grandparents, my actions were not unusual. I arrived almost 17 years after my closest sibling and I kept my parents young. They passed away when I was 33. While most of my friends' parents were divorced or separated, I grew up in a very stable environment.

At age 16, I worked in a drug store where I hand packed ice cream and made root beer floats and banana splits. All of a sudden I had to speak with total strangers. Being a "soda clerk" was service oriented so I learned to respond to customers politely. That brought me out of my shell. Heaven only knows what might have happened if I did not have that initial exposure to the general public.

*Q: And how about your social interaction with your peers in school?*

ELAM-THOMAS: High school or college?

*Q: High school.*

ELAM-THOMAS: It wasn't very great. One, I was indeed "chubby" as we were called back then. I did not play sports. I wore size 18 gym bloomers. Trust me, they were really big and I struggled doing many of the exercises back then. Eventually, I began losing weight during adolescence. In the interim, however, I withdrew from most social interactions and just studied. The only time I really felt good about myself was at my high school graduation when I walked across the stage with two of the three major scholarships awarded during that ceremony. At age 17, I realized that maybe I had done something right. I was going to college when a lot of my classmates were not. I had increased confidence and by the time I entered college, I had lost significant weight. New challenges appeared. I entered Simmons College – one of the few remaining all female colleges in the U.S. The majority of my classmates were wealthy girls had gone to independent schools and they often wore black and navy blue cashmere sweaters and black watch plaid skirts and expensive loafers. As much as I wanted, I knew I could not

have cashmere twin sweater sets. My mother marched me down to the famous Filene's Basement. As I said earlier, I shopped there until its 2011 closing. My mother sent me clothing from there during my three years in Paris.

*Q: What percentage of this all girls' high school was black?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Probably two or three percent. Even though Roxbury Memorial High School was located in the predominantly black community at that time, it was considered one of the more competitive high schools and there were very few students of color.

*Q: Were there any unique experiences that you had during this- Because this is a post socialization period that you're in now.*

ELAM-THOMAS: My high school classmates and friends were of all races: Italian, Polish, Jewish, black. There were fewer Hispanics in Boston in the mid -1950's. Long after our graduation whenever we attended class reunions, we wished that the Boston Globe Newspaper covered our event. We reflected on the benefits of the multi-racial, multi-cultural friendships we experienced in the late 1950's. Many of us remain close to this day. While we were aware of unpleasant events in the southern part of the U.S., our main focus was to get an education.

Some of my high school classmates of West and East European descent were embarrassed when their parents spoke their native tongue in public or even at home. My Irish classmates had other challenges in Boston. It was not a pleasant time for any so-called minority. In essence, my high school experience was most positive. One African American classmate became a State Senator; another Jewish friend owned one of the top catering businesses in Boston; another African American classmate recently deceased (1/5/2014) held a major position in the Catholic social services in Boston. Of course from time to time some were called to the principal's office, but the mutual support network was strong.

*Q: Well obviously, although you were living in a mixed environment but obviously having this experience, this interaction with many ethnic backgrounds had an impact on your communication- your successful communication processes, regardless of the individual later on, which we 'II get to.*

ELAM-THOMAS: It certainly did!

*Q: Did you find yourself looking at people through a different prism than you probably would have looked at them if you had been in a different ethnic mix, predominantly one or the-other?*

ELAM-THOMAS: I always enjoyed meeting the immigrant parents of my friends. I was fascinated to hear foreign accents. That curiosity may have been the first sign of my later interest in international affairs. Perhaps that initial exposure sparked my desire to communicate more effectively across cultures.

Two of my elder brothers were community activists and involved in Boston politics. As a result of their high profile in Roxbury, we came to know many people. My summer jobs at municipal pools or at Boston City Hall allowed me to feel comfortable being the only person who looked like me in work settings. I was always intrigued by the respect which my brother Clarence engendered when he was The Chairman of the Boston Licensing Board. Now I that I fully understand one of the key responsibilities of that job (to approve the liquor licenses for hotels, restaurants and bars) I know why these individuals at least implied they truly respected my brother. Having lived a bit longer, I can now read between the lines that this “respect” was a mixed blessing. I honestly believe that the employees he supervised genuinely respected Clarence. He made little old ladies feel as if they were queens for a day. As I observed Clarence’s approach to his staffers, I learned the value of treating your employees with respect.

*Q: Well I'm hearing several things here that parallel an advanced development in communications, the soda jerk, meeting strange people, the high esteem in which your siblings, your brothers in particular, enjoyed in the community; they were received in a very different- and all of this had an impact on you, obviously.*

ELAM-THOMAS: It certainly did have a significant impact on me.

*Q: This would be a good transition for us to turn the tape over. Hold your point. This is tape one, side two, interview June 2 with Ambassador Harriet Elam-Thomas.*

*Ambassador Elam-Thomas, what I'd like to do is just pick up where we took the break. We were discussing the kinds of things that had an impact on your early development of your extensive communication abilities:*

- Your family enjoyed a favored position the community seemed to accept them in an apparently unbiased political and social atmosphere*
- You secondary school and early employment placed in you in diverse settings*
- Your first job that you had when you were 16 years old as a soda jerk.*
- Did any of this lead to your thinking about the type of higher education you would pursue, the type of university, the courses that you would take?*
- Were you thinking at this period of your life about what did you want to do when you grew up?*

ELAM-THOMAS: A bit later in my youth I worked in my brother's law offices and I became fascinated with the law. I enjoyed reading cases and felt empowered each time I typed a summons. For some reason, I was impressed with the blue covers on each summons. That cover immediately indicated the enclosed was a serious document and action must be taken. I was even more intrigued when I typed Last Wills and Testaments. At that time, I recognized the importance of written and oral communication. And speaking of communication let me tell you a bit about my sister, Annetta Elam Capdeville. You have learned plenty about my brothers and now to introduce you to “the soul” of the Elam Family.

My sister was a poet and had a mellifluous voice. While I cannot sing, I memorized Biblical passages and recited Bible stories at church teas. No doubt I was searching for my parents' acceptance and, since I could not sing, I read and I recited in public. My sister Annetta drafted the history of our family. Unfortunately, we are unable to locate that draft and perhaps it was meant to be. She has suffered with Alzheimer's disease for the past 23 years. Currently at a Nursing Home in Yelm, WA, the essence of her being is still evident despite being unable to speak for the past 8-10 years. Her caregivers seem to surround her with their love and her oldest daughter lives in the assisted living facility right next to the Alzheimer's Unit. Annetta's second husband Andrew Capdeville was legally blind. She was his note taker as he pursued his Master's Degree in Social Work from Boston University. Never once did she consider the care of Andrew a burden and since I am the only remaining member of the initial five children who can speak or write, I shall do my best to carry out the Elam Family History through my memoir. My brother Harry completed most of his memoir prior to his death at 90 in August 2012.

Back to my brothers –

When Harry dated Barbara Clark from Simmons College, I fell in love with her almost as much as he did. She became my second sister for she was totally committed to my development. A Children's Librarian who directed the Boston Public Schools Library Program, Barbara introduced me to the joy of reading at a very early age.

When I received the college scholarships, one major one came from Simmons College. I was thrilled and decided to attend Simmons rather than Boston University. I wanted so much to be like her. She had major influence on my life.

My other brothers were married to incredible women as well, but I must admit, I felt closest to Barbara. She took me to museums, libraries and children's concerts. I was not always enthused about going, but once we arrived I was happy. My mother had instructed Barbara to be the sponsor of a teenage club for my young female friends. That interaction solidified my relationship with Barbara. My mother wanted me to learn proper etiquette, comportment, appropriate attire and to be comfortable in social settings. The club, "The Teenettes," coordinated a speaker's series, teas and fashion shows. We hosted Gloria Lockerman, the young African American student (then Negro) who won the predecessor to Jeopardy, The \$64,000 Question. I could not believe this celebrity actually came to our home. We also hosted Tom Mboya; a Kenyan politician during Jomo Kenyatta's government, was also a guest in our home. My brother Clarence met Mboya during the 1968 visit to Africa with Senator Edward Brooke. Upon reflection, thanks to this exposure to national and international figures, we broadened our horizons and career options.

*Q: Well here we have a couple of other influences. You talked earlier about your brother and going to the opera; now you're talking about going to the museums, etc. So we are talking about expanding your horizons again at a very early stage in your life.*

ELAM-THOMAS: I was not thrilled at that time. At age 15 and 16, knowledge of classical music and opera was not my first priority. However, I became more appreciative of all art forms as I became older and wiser.

*Q: But you were obviously influenced.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Certainly. I had no idea I would be a cultural attaché 20 years after I was a reluctant concert goer. I had no idea I would coordinate programs for many U.S. artists at foreign museums, theatrical venues and concert halls. When I watch the Annual Kennedy Center Awards, I am thrilled to think I interacted with many of these revered artists of every genre during my time as a cultural attaché.

*Q: Tell me a little bit about Simmons.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Simmons undergraduate school is, as I indicated, one of the few remaining all female undergraduate colleges. From 1959-1963, there were four black students in my class. There were two in the class before and one in the senior class. The Simmons educational experience changed my life. Two teachers: Dr. L'Homme and Dr. Neuman took me under their wings. Also, Mr. Woodrow Baldwin, Dean of the School of Business played a critical role in my international exposure. I no longer had to compete with my brothers. While I was accepted at Boston University, the interview process was intimidating. There were 50 people awaiting their turn for interviews. At Simmons, there were only two. The then Dean of Admissions, Jane Curtin, took her time in posing questions. Still shy, I doubted I would be able to raise my hand in a class of 80-100 students. At Simmons the classes the maximum class size was 18-20 students. That was much closer to my comfort zone.

I thought my French Professor, Dr. Neuman, was uniquely gifted. His French was fluent and he had a cosmopolitan air. Ironically, my other favorite teacher was my English professor who just happened to have a French name. Mr. L'Homme. His analysis of George Orwell's work in "Homage to Catalonia" captured my attention at the beginning of the semester and I looked forward to attending his class. These two professors opened my eyes to a different world through our readings and through the manner in which they presented the material.

In 1962, Mr. Baldwin called to see if I had been accepted by the Experiment in International Living for a summer abroad program. I informed him I was accepted, but I did not qualify for scholarship assistance. My family did not have the \$1100 for me to take part and I had to decline. I was amazed to learn that Mr. Baldwin had convinced a group of businessmen in Boston to provide \$900 towards the total cost. When Mr. Baldwin called to say, "Miss Elam, you are going to France," I was flabbergasted. I can remember being stunned as I held the phone in our foyer. It was one of those old fashioned black telephone and the receiver weighed close to three pounds. Somehow my siblings raised the remaining \$200 and I was able to go. Let me assure you, \$200 in 1962 was the equivalent of \$2,000 today. It was a significant amount of money. If I thought

other things changed my life, it was that summer in Lyon, France that really gave me a world view.

A French family in France saw my picture and welcomed me into their home. They didn't care what color I was and for 51 years we have stayed in touch. I spent my birthday in mid-September 2013 in Paris with my French sister, Dr. Paule Sassard-Serusclat. We visited the French Senate. They accepted me far more graciously than many of my hometown of Boston. I thank my siblings and Simmons College for having given me that opportunity.

I did not realize how significant the summer of 1962 was until I reflect on it now. Until then, I had been trying to prove myself, that I was academically equal to all of my white classmates. I was doing what my parents wanted me to do. In France I did not have to prove anything. This family welcomed another human being in their midst unconditionally. That experience really sparked my desire to live and work abroad. I slept in the room where my French mother taught the cello. I shared the space with a baby grand piano and other musical instruments. They took me to classical music concerts and to historic sites in the area. I shall never forget hearing Debussy's "La Mer" performed by a full orchestra for the very first time.

There were 10 American students and, of course, I was the only minority in the group. How many other 18 year olds could spend Bastille Day watching fireworks at Fourvieres in Lyon, France? We rode bicycles; we camped out; went to museums and explored a country I never thought I would see. The best thing that happened one day was when someone said, "La Noire, comme elle est belle." (The Black girl, how pretty she is!) Well nobody had said I was beautiful before in my whole life. I thought, this was someone happened to pass me on the street who made such an observation. Now I know what I look like, but just hearing that phrase lifted my soul.

When I returned to Simmons I got all As in French and a B plus in English. My parents were perplexed and asked, "How could you get a B plus in English and As in French?" I said I love my French teacher and my time in France this summer helped me excel in the written and spoken word. Of course I had to hunker down and improve the English grade the next semester.

While posted to Istanbul, Turkey, I hosted my French mother and sister in Istanbul. My French sister had visited me in Boston just before I graduated from Simmons. They stayed with me for a week. I took them to concerts and in my capacity as the public affairs officer at the consulate in Turkey I was able to say a very special "Merci beaucoup" for what they had done for me 36 years earlier.

*Q: It must have been also a positively moving experience for them.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes. And then I went to see them again when I was in Brussels and she died a several years ago. Mme. Sassard passed away in her late 80's. She was more patient in perfecting my French than my French sister. Living with them, I was then

convinced I could be far more effective in changing the perceptions of America and how minorities were viewed in America if I worked abroad. In fact, I was away from the U.S. during the height of the Civil Rights Movement working at the Embassy in Paris from 1965-1968.

In many ways, I miss not having been in the States to take part in the demonstrations which have allowed me and so many others to hold positions that may not have been possible.

*Q: And maybe you weren't. Maybe this was your contribution to Civil Rights...*

ELAM-THOMAS: I remember reading about my brother Judge Harry Elam, in Time magazine. He rode through the city of Boston with the Mayor at that time to calm the community after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King on April 4, 1968.

*Q: Side two, June 2nd, 2006, oral history interview with Ambassador Harriet Elam-Thomas. Ambassador Elam-Thomas, we were talking briefly about the experiences that you were having during the civil rights reactions to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, the involvement of your brother with the mayor of Boston on quelling some of the disquiet leading up to the possible- to possible violent disturbances and your own position at the time with your experiences of having been an exchange student and a decision that you were making, probably subliminally, to project American culture and society and more specifically the positive image of the American Negro and his and her potential. Do you feel now looking back that those were elements of contributions that you were making parallel to the civil rights movement?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Looking back I would say yes because again I spoke French fluently and I spoke French better than many of my white colleagues at the embassy. While in Paris, these other young women stayed very close to me mainly because of my language skill. I also met many French people who were just curious to talk to me about what life was like in the U.S. for people of color. I believe I helped change some of the misperceptions which the French had seen on television. They were particularly curious about my family background. Whenever I described the humble beginnings of my parents and the accomplishments of my siblings, they were clearly impressed. I was not bragging, I was stating facts and these young French men and women learned that the stereotypical images they had seen in print and electronic media in 1968 were not the norm. Thus began my journey to bridge cultural divides.

ELAM-THOMAS: I went to the Boston public schools which were, at that time, among the best in the nation. Overweight and very shy, my refuge from society was my homework. Totally inept in social settings, I dared not speak to anyone I did not know. I followed the rule in those days that children were to be seen and not heard. My parents were strict disciplinarians and they were the ages of my peers' grandparents. I arrived almost 17 years after my closest sibling and I kept my parents young. They passed away when I was 33. While most of my friends' parents were divorced or separated, I grew up in a very stable environment.

*Q: And how about your social interaction with your peers in school?*

ELAM-THOMAS: High school or college?

High school.

*Q: Well obviously although you were living in a mixed environment but obviously having this experience, this interaction with many ethnic backgrounds had an impact on your communication- your successful communication processes, regardless of the individual later on, which we'll get to.*

ELAM-THOMAS: You're right.

*Q: Did you find yourself looking at people through a different prism than you probably would have looked at them if you had been in a different ethnic mix, predominantly one or the-*

ELAM-THOMAS: In thinking about that you're absolutely right. I liked meeting the parents. I got a big kick out of Irish accents and Italian- the woman who wouldn't want her mother to speak Italian and didn't want her mother to come pick her up at school; I said Theresa, why don't you let your mommy come? No, I don't want her to come to school. I guess I was curious. I didn't know what it was going to develop into at a later date. I was just plain curious and I liked them as people and that's all. Children have to be taught to hate and I didn't know any difference and they didn't know any difference. We were just curious about one another. So come to think of it, that probably had something to do with my ability to communicate across cultures later in life because I had that- there was the North End where all of the Italians lived in Boston; South Boston which I didn't go to for a long time, which was all Irish; Mattapan, which was predominantly Jewish. But again, with brothers in politics you got to know everybody and I got summer jobs where, again, I was the only person that looked like me but it didn't make any difference. I was always fascinated when I watched my brother Clarence during his tenure at the Boston Licensing Board. These women, mainly Irish and Italian loved my brother because he treated them as if they were critical to the office's operation. Judging by their reactions, I assume other bosses seldom gave them such respect. I liked the fact that my brother received this kind of admiration from everybody. I learned that more from him than any training I received in management from the Foreign Service Institute.

*Q: Well I'm hearing several things here that parallel an advanced development in communications, the soda jerk, meeting strange people, the high esteem in which your siblings, your brothers in particular, enjoyed in the community; they were received in a very different- and all of this had an impact on you, obviously.*

ELAM-THOMAS: It must have. I didn't think about it.

My sister had been the poet and she sang beautifully and I couldn't sing but somehow I could talk all right, I could- I felt I could and in Sunday School you'd have to memorize passages and tell little stories, Bible stories, and you had to do that at teas at your church, and I got a kick out of doing that because I knew I couldn't sing but I couldn't be like my sister, but again you're vying for your parents' attention in some way, shape or form when you have four other siblings. And that's perhaps natural, natural in the sense that if I had been an only child I might never have done that. So I can tell you that it wasn't until my brothers began dating and Harry began dating a woman who went to Simmons College. I love this woman to this day. She cared deeply about me. A children's librarian, she introduced me to books. She was my motivation to gain a college education.

And so when I got the scholarships, one major one came from Simmons College, and I was thrilled to go there because I loved Barbara so much that I wanted to be like her. So I can tell you that her influence on my life was significant because she had a knowledge about creative things because of her writing. My other brothers were married to different kinds of women but somehow she would take me to museums, kicking and screaming, and to libraries but also my mother had asked her to be the sponsor, the chaperone of a teenage club so then I really became close to her because we were members of this club because my mother felt young ladies needed to know more about how to dress, how to comport themselves in public and to learn how to be polite, some of the "finer things in life." My dear, my mother didn't give my sister-in-law a chance to say no; she said you will be the chaperone for this teenage club called the Teenettes. So we had teas, we had fashion shows, we had speakers come. I'll never forget the young woman who won the \$64,000 question, Gloria Lockerman, came to my house. I'd forgotten about that. Now, this is when television was black and white and any significant person- Tom Boyer came to my house because of my brother's involvement and the teenagers in this club got to meet people like that who were significant activists in communities in the United States and I- obviously from Africa. I didn't even think of that.

*Q: Well here we have a couple of other influences. You talked earlier about your brother and going to the opera; now you're talking about going to the museums, etc. So we're talking about expanding your horizons again at a very early stage in your life.*

ELAM-THOMAS: I wasn't thrilled at that time.

*Q: But you were obviously influenced.*

ELAM-THOMAS: I guess so, never knowing I'd be a cultural attaché 20 years later, taking other people to museums, bringing performing artists, knowing more of our art than I would have ever imagined. Yes, that was fascinating now that I reflect on it.

*Q: Tell me a little bit about Simmons.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Simmons undergraduate school is an all-girls college and when I was there we had a total of four black students in the entire school, in my class rather. There were two in the class before and one in the senior class. This is 1959 through 1963. I can

say to you that the experience at Simmons changed my life. One, there were teachers, two teachers, Mr. L’Homme and Mr. Newland who took me under their wing and Mr. Baldwin. I had a chance to find myself without competing with my brothers. I had been accepted at Boston University as well but it was a huge institution and when I went for interviews there were 50 people sitting outside the door for the final interview where at Simmons there were only two of us and they took time and I thought a classroom with 80 people, I’ll never be able to raise my hand to ask a question. At Simmons the classes were 15 or 20 students in each class.

One of my favorite professors, Mr. James Newman, was my French professor. I just thought he was wonderful because his French was fluent; he had an air- a cosmopolitan air about him. Mr. Charles L’Homme. Interestingly enough, while his name is French, he was my English teacher. He made George Orwell’s work in “Homage to Catalonia” come alive. He reminded me of the Dartmouth professor featured on 60 minutes years ago who taught classical Greek and Latin. The students loved him for he enacted portions of plays which kept the students engaged. Many of my friends attended universities where professors lectured because class size prohibited interactions. These two professors opened my eyes to a fascinating world by the way they presented the material. I was hooked on reading yet again.

I thank Simmons, Mr. Baldwin and my dear brothers as noted earlier for having given me the opportunity to spend a summer in France. The French citizens I encountered in Bron and Lyon, France accepted me unconditionally. That was the spark that led me to consider living and working abroad. This family (Madame Sassard and her daughter Paule Sassard) took me to classical music concerts, exposed me to important historical sites in the region and literally broadened my horizons. I shall never forget hearing my very first full symphony orchestra performing Debussy’s “La Mer” at the Bastille de Fourviere.

There were 10 American college students in my group. I was the only African American person in our group. I felt uniquely fortunate to have been placed with this family. I lived with them in a city Bron, a suburb of the gastronomical capital of France, Lyon. We rode bicycles and went on camping trips. These were experiences I never had. But the best thing that happened that, again, someone said, “La noire, comme elle est la belle.” (Translation: The black one, how pretty she is.) Well, aside from my parents, I had never heard I was pretty before. To be honest with you I knew then and now, I am far from “pretty” by the superficial Hollywood standards which most teenagers and adults judge themselves. However, hearing that pronouncement in French certainly heightened my self-esteem.

While I served in Istanbul as Branch Public Affairs Officer, I hosted Madame Sassard, her daughter Paule and Paule’s grown son Huge (pronounced You-gh) for a week-long visit. I took them to concerts, scheduled meetings with museum directors and we toured all of Istanbul’s revered historical sites. What a wonderful way for me to say thank you to the family who helped change my life 36 years earlier.

*Q: It must have been a positive experience for them as well.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes. The next time I saw them was during my time in Brussels. Madame Sassard died in her mid-80's in 2003. She was far more patient with me in helping me to learn French than my French sister Paule. Madame Sassard spoke very slowly, explained the grammar and pronunciation and intonation. Again, it was precisely that experience which led me to think I could be more effective in changing the perceptions of America and how minorities were viewed in America if I worked overseas. I am sure some of my friends may have perceived my desire to work abroad as a cop out. They may have thought I was running away from the troubles in America.

*Q: And maybe you weren't. Maybe this was your contribution to the Civil Rights Movement.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Even though I was working as a secretary in the American Embassy in Paris when major cities in the U.S. suffered the effects of widespread riots, looting and burning, I followed all of those events very, very closely. After all, I grew up in what was then considered the ghetto of Boston – Roxbury. I remember reading about my brother and the then Mayor of Boston Kevin White in “Time” magazine. The two of them drove through the volatile areas of Boston imploring the citizens not to riot. My brother was then Chief Justice of the Boston Municipal Court – the oldest trial court in the U.S. I said to myself, “Good heavens, this is my brother. Roxbury is going up in smoke.” The unrest took place shortly after was after Dr. King's April 4, 1968 assassination.

*Q, June 2nd, 2006, oral history interview with Ambassador Harriet Elam-Thomas.*

*Ambassador Elam-Thomas, we were talking briefly about the experiences that you were having during the civil rights reactions to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, the involvement of your brother with the mayor of Boston on quelling some of the disquiet leading up to the possible violent disturbances and your own position at the time with your experiences of having been an exchange student and a decision that you were making, probably subliminally, to project American culture and society and more specifically the positive image of the American Negro and his and her potential. Do you feel now looking back that those were elements of contributions that you were making parallel to the civil rights movement?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Looking back I would say yes. I spoke French fluently and more fluently than many of my young white colleagues at the embassy. In fact, we were all very close during those three years in Paris. That closeness did not last when we returned to the U.S.

Because of my language fluency, I met a number of French people who were just curious to talk to me about the United States. Invariably someone would say, “But you don't seem like the Americans we see on television.” When they asked about my family and my upbringing; I enjoyed telling them about my parents. Then, I will admit, with a certain sense of pride, I would explain the positions which my brothers held. Without

exception, they all seemed amazed. After all they expressed only what they had learned from stereotypical images in the print media and the electronic media which existed in 1968. They learned what they had seen was not necessarily the norm. I then decided that it was my duties to let all of my interlocutors know that we (people of color) speak the English language and other languages. We have a history and we can indeed communicate across cultures.

*Q: And obviously we're leading now into a transition of your awareness of professional directions during your studies. When did you first become aware of the possibilities of a career in Foreign Service? Was it during your studies at Simmons or was it afterwards?*

ELAM-THOMAS: It was afterwards. In the early 60's when women graduated from liberal arts colleges often the first question visiting recruiters posed was, "Do you know how to type? I said yes. Remember my initial goal was to be a legal secretary. My mother insisted that I learn typing and shorthand during the summer prior to my senior year in high school. After a working a year in Washington, I was assigned as a secretary at the American Embassy in Paris. The work was not challenging and I decided I should leave the U.S. Government. Upon my return to the U.S. I went to New York City for an interview with the Ford Foundation.

Surprisingly, I had difficulty in navigating the New York subway system despite having managed to go everywhere in Paris via the Paris Metro.

*Q: So tell me about the examination process.*

ELAM-THOMAS: I must tell you about the New York experience first. Here is what transpired.

Richard Nixon was elected President two weeks before I went for the Ford Foundation interview. On day after my Ford Foundation interview, Sen. Edward Brooke called me. My brother Clarence, a senior advisor to the Senator in Washington, DC, informed the Senator I was going to leave the U.S. Government. The Senator said, "There is a possibility that you could work in the White House." I said that might be interesting for a couple of years. With amazing speed, I was assigned to the White House from 1968 - 1971. Ironically, I had to stay in NY for six weeks as I worked in President-Elect Richard Nixon's transition office at the Pierre Hotel. The next two and a half years I worked in the West Wing of the White House for President Nixon's Special Assistant for Appointments. My office was just outside of the Oval Office and to my right was the entrance to the Cabinet Room. That exposure significantly enhanced my self-confidence. Daily contact with cabinet members, heads of states, foreign ministers, leading businessmen, academics and journalists taught me not to be intimidated by anyone.

In June 1971, well before Watergate, I left the White House and went to the State Department's Bureau on Education and Cultural Affairs.

*Q: Okay, as a Civil Service employee?*

ELAM-THOMAS: That's correct. I began that assignment as a Foreign Service Reserve Officer. The Assistant Secretary for Educational and Cultural Affairs at that time was John Richardson. (Deceased Dec.26, 2014) My new position was Program Officer in the Office of Youth, Students and Special Programs. One of the key goals was to counter the influence of communist nations on young political leaders around the world. I traveled with the American Council of Young Political Leaders and the U.S. Youth Council to meet with their counterparts in Europe. The American political activists thought they were well-informed. However, it was fascinating to watch members of the German Bundestag and young British parliamentarians win debates. I was also responsible for high school exchange programs which included: The American Field Service, Youth For Understanding, The International Christian Youth Exchange and The Experiment in International Living. These exchange programs had partners in Western Europe, but not in Asia, Africa or Latin America. The State Department offered grants to the exchange programs to increase their involvement in countries outside of Europe.

The so-called Turkish invasion of Cyprus took place in 1974. Our office was tasked to get these high school students back to the U.S. safely and we did. I went to NY to brief outgoing U.S. exchange students. I thrived in that job and no doubt that is when a very bright light went on. I said to myself, this is the work I would like to do. My then boss, Dick Arndt said you I should become a cultural affairs officer. I followed his recommendation and immediately pursued the path to becoming a traditional Foreign Service Officer.

*Q: Now how many Blacks, Negroes in those days, were in that office?*

ELAM-THOMAS: None. I was it. There were, however, two African Americans in relatively senior positions at that time. One - former U.S. Ambassador to Trinidad & Tobago Richard Fox who was then the Executive Director of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (CU). The other was former U.S. Ambassador to Haiti William Jones who was at that time A Deputy Assistant Secretary in CU. The third was former ambassador to Liberia and South Africa, Edward J. Perkins. He was then working in the office of the Executive Director for the Near East Asia Bureau. Another gent named William B. Davis was a Russian speaker in United States Information Agency (USIA) who was in a senior position in the Office of Exhibits. I had to assume that as a fluent Russian speaker, he took no prisoners. Whenever I had a meeting with him on a project, I knew I had better have my brief well prepared. These four gentlemen prepared me for the Foreign Service Oral Exam. As a former reserve officer, I had to take the oral exam. At the time, I thought they were unmerciful as they drilled me for the upcoming oral exam. Not only did they provide me with a heavy reading list, they asked questions based on the readings. When I took the orals, I found myself before a panel of serious-looking diplomats. Three hours later, I exited the orals and prayed. The preparations paid off for I passed the exam. Even though I had minimal interaction with these gents, I got to know all of them much better through the mentoring program of the Thursday Luncheon. These men were indeed the trailblazers for African Americans currently in the U.S. Foreign Service. William Davis not only spoke Russian, but he was conversant in Czech. When

Sec. Albright addressed the Thursday Luncheon Group, Mr. Davis was seated next to her and as he spoke to her in Czech, she was duly impressed. As I observed that interaction, I became even more excited about my burgeoning Foreign Service Career.

*Q: How were you received overall? Let's go back to before you passed the orals, before you'd come in as an FSR, a Foreign Service Reserve Officer.*

ELAM-THOMAS: The welcome was cool to say the least. Everyone in the ECA Bureau knew I had worked in The White House. I understand that all now, but what I knew I had to establish credibility with my new office colleagues, many of whom were older than I. Upon reflection, my then secretary sounded as if she should have been a patient in a nursing home. She was so elderly and frail. I did not dare ask her to make copies for me. I thought oh my heavens, this woman is almost old enough to be my mother. I must respect her. I turned that situation around and all of my colleagues came to respect and acknowledge my work. My brother taught me that, that you need to treat each person with dignity and respect and you can learn so much from them. Believe it or not, one of my former secretaries in that Office of Youth Students and Special Programs, currently lives in Boca Raton. She is now 98. My husband and I paid her a visit in 2008 and I spoke with her on her birthday in 2014. Each time we speak, I marvel at her clarity, her positive spirit and her joie de vivre.

*Q: This is the most interesting and unique introduction to the Foreign Service particularly for a Black officer and specifically for a Black female officer in those days because you were going up against two ceilings in the days when a career for a female officer, regardless of color-*

ELAM-THOMAS: That's right.

*Q: And here we have a black female coming from the White House*

ELAM-THOMAS: I had been a secretary. Many of the Civil Servants were not at all thrilled with my arrival. I may have been imagining things, but I honestly felt that their goal was to make me uncomfortable. They tried, but did not succeed.

*Q: That was their reaction to you, not as a Black woman but their perception that I was a political type burrowing in.*

*You mentioned some names of Black officers.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

*Q: You mentioned Ambassador Perkins*

ELAM-THOMAS: Ambassador Fox, Ambassador Jones. I mentioned another person.

*Q: John Anderegg?*

ELAM-THOMAS: No, Bill Davis.

*Q: Bill Davis. And who was the other person, John Ander?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, John Anderegg.

*Q: Anderegg. How do you spell his name*

ELAM-THOMAS: A-N-D-E-R-E-G-G. He's not African American.

*Q: Oh, he's not, okay.*

ELAM-THOMAS: However, he is a member of the Thursday Luncheon Group (TLG)

*Q: Yes*

ELAM-THOMAS: He has been for years. Over the years I have observed his genuine commitment to merited career advancement of TLG members.

*Q: I know John Anderegg*

ELAM-THOMAS: He was one of my bosses. Jim Donovan was another. And the other African American officer who helped me prepare for the Foreign Service was Robert Dumas, Director of USIA's Personnel. Bob Dumas and Bill Davis were the two founding members of TLG

You may have noted there were no women in this group of mentors. There were very few senior women in the Foreign Service at that time. However, there is one woman who made up for the absence of all the women who were not career diplomats at that time. This was a Foreign Service Secretary who I thought was the head of the Economic Section of the American Embassy in Paris because of the way she carried herself each time I saw her. Her name: Mary Pearl Dougherty. I will provide you more info on her later.

*Q: Do you know how many other colleagues were taking the oral at the same time as you were and what percentage of you were accepted? Well let's say the exam.*

ELAM-THOMAS: To be honest with you I have no idea.

ELAM-THOMAS: I must mention that a week prior to the oral exam, I was promoted to the next higher grade at USIA. However, the "powers that be" at the Board of Examiners did not accept that new grade after I passed the examination. I was informed that they examined me at the FSO-5 level. They said they were not authorized to promote me to that new grade despite my record. If I wanted to be a career FSO, I would have to accept entrance at the lower grade. I did. When I mentioned this episode to Ambassador William

Swing, he said, "You did what? There's no rhyme or reason for them to say that they evaluated at the FSO a five level other than the fact that you got a four in a promotion. Once in the career Foreign Service, I never got the promotion salary. I cannot help but think this was yet another subtle message re women and minority candidates. Does that sound familiar?"

*Q: That sounds very familiar, very familiar.*

ELAM-THOMAS: It gets better; you haven't heard the rest yet.

*Q: Well let's talk about it.*

ELAM-THOMAS: I spent eight years without getting promoted despite good reports and despite having learned a hard language - Greek. Yet, I remained a career diplomat until 2005.

*Q: Okay, we'll get there in sequence.*

ELAM-THOMAS: I spent four years in Athens, received what I perceived were excellent evaluations reports and worked diligently as the country affairs officer in the European Area for Greece, Turkey and Cyprus. To add insult to injury, a member of my selection panel (since deceased) made the cardinal error. He told me I was on the promotion list before the list was published. When the official list was distributed, I could not find my name on it. I just knew there was an error. Having served on several selection panels since, I understood that the Selection Panel sends the top candidates for promotion, but the number promoted depends on the budget available at the time. There is no guarantee that all of the names submitted will be above the line determined by budgetary factors alone. Now panelists are given serious briefings and must take a solemn oath which eliminates the leaking of information that transpired decades earlier. I was so frustrated and disappointed in the mid-80's that I came very close to resigning. Fortunately, a dear friend, Ofield Dukes, now deceased, counseled me to remain in the service and to continue to excel. He also reminded me never to allow anyone else to define me. Yes, he was yet another pivotal individual in my navigating this complex and competitive Foreign Service.

*Q: That's interesting. Now, when you joined that was still when we had the Bureau of Cultural Affairs, which was still a part of the Department of State? This was prior to the transition in 1978, I believe it was.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes you are correct in late 1978 or 1979.

*Q: Seventy-nine, yes, '79 when we transferred CU to USIA. And you made that move.*

*Let's talk about your first – What was your very first assignment after you get in?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Assistant Cultural Affairs officer in Dakar, Senegal.

*Q:* Did you ask for that?

ELAM-THOMAS: At this point I cannot remember precisely how that assignment came about. This was before the Open Assignments System was instituted. I do not recall asking for it. In 1968, I traveled to Senegal with my brother Clarence. Earlier Clarence was part of a Congressional Delegation to visit Senegal with Massachusetts Senator Edward W. Brooke.

Excited about the prospect of returning to Senegal, I was sobered when told my duties included serving as President Léopold Sédar Senghor's English tutor. Ambassador Frances Cook had just left Dakar as Cultural Attaché and she was President Senghor's tutor. While few challenges frightened me, the thought of teaching a head of state English did. I was most anxious, but that did not deter me from taking the assignment.

Problems with the existing Public Affairs Office (PAO) resulted in few bidders for the CAO assignment. Fortunately the late Blake Robinson, a former Fulbright Director in Liberia, took the assignment as CAO and he taught Senghor. I was so relieved. As indicated, the PAO-Dakar at that time was demanding and had minimal management skills. The work environment was far from positive. Despite numerous challenges with the work setting, I completed my tour. The daily contact with Senegalese academics, journalists and other professionals made helped me put the office situation in perspective. Also the U.S. Ambassador then was O. Rudolph Aggrey. An African American of Ghanaian descent, he was a scholar and diplomat and one for whom I had the utmost respect. My official commission as an FSO arrived while I was in Senegal. I was honored that Ambassador Aggrey swore me in as a full-fledged Foreign Service Officer. To return to that post 28 years later and occupy the same position as Ambassador Aggrey was absolutely amazing.

*Q: That is an interesting parallel within one's experience.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes. It really is. I had forgotten about that.

*Q: What was your most- and I know that most people don't think when you ask them- what was your most significant contribution to explaining U.S. policy, expanding U.S. culture and society in a foreign culture as a junior officer? Nevertheless, there must have been some unique experiences that- and in your case in particular since you went back years later, that you could appreciate.*

ELAM-THOMAS: While Assistant CAO in Dakar, I was frustrated with my attempts to set up an American Studies Program. Each time I approached someone at the Ministry of Education I had to first meet with the French "Conseiller Technique." In 1975, Senegal was still a recently- independent nation. The French remained for many years in the role of technical advisor at every ministry. Our attempt to gain Senegalese cooperation on an American studies program was an uphill battle.

In order to circumvent the influence of the technical advisors, I used my interactions with ministers and key educators at representational event to lay the groundwork for such a program without the interference of technical advisors. I highlighted the value of the broad knowledge of American society their students would gain from American Studies Programs and how it could help improve the Senegalese educational system.

I also noted that I would include respected Civil Rights advocates from the U.S. who could provide an historical context for what transpired in the U.S. I was so frustrated with the slow progress we made towards getting an American Studies Program at the University of Dakar. Imagine my delight to return 28 years later to participate in the 19th Anniversary American Studies Conference at the University of Dakar. The focus was on the American Legal System. As ambassador, I was the closing speaker. Approximately 250 participants from other universities in Sub-Saharan Africa attended. I was delighted to see the fruits of my work at those representational events 28 years later.

Subsequent to this Oral History Interview, I attended a Salzburg American Studies Seminar in October 2010. After four days of in-depth discussions on Continuity and Change in U.S. Foreign Policy, I expressed my disappointment with the absence of participants from sub-Saharan Africa. I made a commitment and provided a scholarship to ensure there will be a Senegalese participant within the next two years at that prestigious seminar. I am pleased to report that one attended the 2014 Seminar and another will be selected in 2015.

*Q: Side b, interview with Ambassador Harriet Elam-Thomas, January 2- I'm sorry; June the 2nd, 2006.*

*Ambassador Elam-Thomas, what I'd like to do is, before we leave Senegal I'd like to get some impressions from you about the embassy staff and the Senegalese reaction to the embassy staff. I would like to find out from you how many Black ambassadors had there been when you were first assigned there and you can also talk about the subsequent number of the ethnic mix of ambassadors. I'd like to talk to you about (tape malfunction)...*

ELAM-THOMAS: Prior to Ambassador Aggrey there was Ambassador Mercer Cooke (who lived in the same condominium building where I lived in Silver Spring. What an elegant gentleman and scholar as well. How I enjoyed being in his presence listening to him speak well before I had any idea I might serve as Ambassador to Senegal. After Ambassador Aggrey there was Ambassador George Moose. Ambassador Walter Carrington, a political appointee, under the Carter Administration served for a very brief period since Carter served only one term. As for women ambassadors: Katherine Shirley (1991-1992) the wife of the USIA's former Counselor, Jock Shirley. He was then ambassador to Tanzania. Ambassador Richard Roth was my immediate successor. Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs - Janice Jacobs was the third woman ambassador to Senegal (2005-2007). Marcia Bernicat was our ambassador from 2008-2011. Senegal has welcomed four women ambassadors and three male African American ambassadors.

*Q: Let's talk about the staff makeup at the embassy, that is, both the Foreign Service national as well as the American staff and what kinds of interactions you enjoyed and what were the reactions of the Senegalese to the different ethnic groups within the staff.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Well the foreign national staff was predominantly Senegalese, but there were several from Guinea Bissau. After the 1998 coup in Guinea Bissau, the U.S. Embassy was closed and some of the staff came to the embassy in Dakar. Other colleagues were Togolese or Lebanese. I was impressed at how they all worked together. Interestingly enough, Senegal is a predominantly Moslem nation. However, its first post-independence president was Leopold Sédar Senghor, a catholic. I am sure as other embassies; we celebrated Christian and Moslem holidays. Inter-faith and inter-racial marriage was not unusual in the 70's. Many Senegalese were trained in French universities. Religious conflict, with the exception of the Casamance region, was minimal. I often tell my students and friends that Senegal is not as well-known as Rwanda and the other conflict regions of Africa precisely because there has not been a major religious or ethnic conflict. Senegal did get positive coverage in the news after the Ebola outbreak for containing the one case and then serving as a transit site for medical equipment.

The 534 embassy staff was standard at that time for a mid-sized post. The U.S Agency for International Development had the largest component with 223 staffers. The AID Director, Don Clark, portrayed what I considered one of the most positive images of genuine commitment to AID's mission. Respected by the indigenous population and all of the Senegalese ministers, Don Clark led a superb operation during my time as Chief of Mission (COM) Dakar. Perhaps his marriage to the daughter of a former diplomat from Burkina Faso added to Don Clark's credibility among the Senegalese. She was equally effective in establishing a highly respected environment for all of the USAID and Embassy employees. It was not unusual that Dakar's Country Team was comprised of career diplomats. I was delighted to find that the economic and political section heads upon my arrival were women. The political officer, Deborah Malac became our Ambassador to Liberia and has comported herself with distinction during the 2014 Ebola crisis. The Deputy Chief of Mission, Terence McCulley is now on his third ambassadorial assignment as the U.S. Ambassador to Cote d'Ivoire

*Q: Security Officers and Security Assistance?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Major Robert Gaddis led the Office of Security Assistance. The Defense Attaché was an African American Marine Lieutenant Colonel Todd Coker and graduate of the Naval Academy. Retired from active duty, he was a consultant to the Ivorian Government and in 2014 returned to the U.S. as a civilian DOD employee in the Office of African Affairs. Other Country Team included the Peace Corps Director, the Federal Aviation Agency's regional representative, USAID's Inspector General Director and Treasury Department Representatives and the standard office directors in the embassy.

As I entered my first country team meeting, I did not feel a genuine sense of warmth. They were politically correct and stood respectfully. It is not unusual for a new team in any setting to be restrained as they welcome new leadership. However, I felt a strong need at that moment I did not need to prove myself any more. I had been confirmed by the U.S. Senate, led a U.S. Government agency and had worked for 37 years in the career service. During that first meeting, I politely set out the ground rules of my management style. They would all be required to adhere even more strictly to the rules and regulations. I would not accept security breaches and would not welcome any attempt to circumvent administrative procedures. Drafting had to be impeccable for my name was at the bottom of every official message. No one in Washington would consider that that a message may have been written by a Foreign Service national for whom English was a second language. This was the assumption made whenever a cable came in when I was a Country Affairs Officer for Greece, Turkey and Cyprus. I knew that the standards for messages coming from my embassy would be strict. Vehicles were to be used for official reasons only. I instructed the technicians who installed phone lines at the Ambassador's residence that he must include a separate phone line for internet access. At that time we used the dial up system. He was surprised and said, he never did that before. I cannot help but wonder if other chiefs of mission did not make the distinction re phone usage. I knew I could not take that chance. By the time I arrived in Dakar, I had an unblemished career for 37 years and I did not care to tarnish it at that point. During my two years as Counselor of USIA, I became aware of improprieties and other sometimes innocent rule infractions which destroyed the careers of senior diplomats.

A year and a half after my time there the first DCM moved on and I took special pains to select a new DCM. That person happened to be a person of color whose reports were filled with positive examples of his management skills. After having read Ambassador Princeton Lyman's recommendation, I made my selection. Alan Latimer's performance in Dakar followed the positive pattern chronicled in the evaluation reports I reviewed. However, I noted certain new challenges arose in the management section of the Embassy. Sadly, upon reflection, I cannot help but wonder if the action of several officers in that section were not comfortable with the two individuals at the head of the Embassy who happened to be African American. This is just my feeling, for I cannot offer concrete facts to prove my suspicions.

I also found it interesting that no one ever questioned male ambassadors for selecting other males who looked like them as their DCMs. When the new DCM instituted a tracking program for embassy equipment, residence furniture, etc., the resistance to this new approach from the GSO and the Facilities Management Officer reached the Department. When I received a call from the Director General indicating that she would send out an arbitrator, I said, there was no need for Washington to become involved. I could handle the management of this post. I resolved the issue and The Department did not send anyone out to the post. The newer DCM left post with a significant level of respect. His research of salary surveys over the past twenty years in Dakar resulted in an 18% salary increase for the Foreign Service Nationals. I insisted that the DCM make the announcement to the 250 FSNs. The Embassy Dakar staff respected us. They knew that they could not play games for we ran a very tight ship. When I left, the Senegalese said at

a reception hosted by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Culture, it was a special time in Senegal.

*Q: Contrast that with your first assignment to Senegal.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Very different. I was a junior officer when I arrived in Dakar in 1975. Only hard work would bring me credibility. When I returned on January 3, 2000, I arrived to a more sophisticated and developed Senegal. While many former contacts were deceased, several others held positions of significant authority.

While on the first flight to route to Dakar as the new ambassador, I saw the former President Senghor's chief of protocol Samba Ba. It was a delightful coincidence. My husband and I were in business class and he was in first class. Whatever he did after our brief conversation aboard the flight resulted in a memorable arrival in Dakar. The flight attendants insisted that my husband and I disembark first. We entered the VIP lounge with the press awaiting. Samba Ba spoke about my time there as a junior diplomat and somewhat upstaged the designated welcoming party from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

*Q: Oh my God.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, I must say it was "Divine" intervention. I thought there was a chap in Charles de Gaulle airport who reminded me of Samba Ba. Since I had not seen him in 28 years, I was not sure. Early on Samba Ba was a dashing young man always attired in his white military uniform. Throughout my time as Ambassador in Dakar, Ba was extremely supportive and very discreet. He never asked for special favors for he knew the burden placed on those in "high" places. I certainly appreciated his discretion. It was truly a wonderful way to return to Senegal.

*Q: Were there any unusual challenges you wish to share?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

In a private meeting with me, a young Assistant GSO who happened to be African American asked if he could have a firearm. I immediately said: "Why are you in this office?" His response: "Well because you know I thought if I asked you... I stopped him in mid-sentence and said, "The DCM's office is directly across the hall." I rejected his request. Before he left, I queried him as to why in the name of heaven he did not go through channels? I learned he had gone through channels and received a negative response. He thought by coming directly to me, he might get a positive response. Oh how wrong! That was not only the first challenge he faced with me.

On the second occasion, he informed me he lost keys to the Embassy warehouse. I had all I could do to maintain my composure and instructed him to inform the Regional Security Officer (the RSO). When the young officer said he might find them at home, I barely allowed him to finish his sentence. I told him his first stop was to the RSO and then to his residence to search. I am sure the young FSO thought that I was the worst person on the

planet. It is my pleasure to report, he is now doing very well as a mid-level officer. The admonitions he received and the example I portrayed seem to have helped get his career on a positive track. He is doing extremely well and I am very proud of his accomplishments. Early on in my career I supervised two other young male officers. These young men received sobering and honest evaluation reports from me which caused them to question my support of African American officers in the Foreign Service. They were in their early twenties at the time. Both have retired after satisfying and highly successful postings in Europe, Latin America and Asia. When they questioned me about my reports, I told them if I don't tell you the truth others may not. This highly competitive system is set up for you to fail for the slightest deviation from the norm and also for unwise choices in connection with your work. In retrospect, I think they are glad I was honest.

*Q: A follow on with respect to the challenges dealing with the Senegalese in your capacity as ambassador.*

As indicated, the country team experience was sobering. However, the Senegalese not only welcomed me with open arms, but they knew I would be totally candid in my assessment of their commitment to an improved educational, health and economic program. I often reminded that their government's expenditures on health and education were not sufficient. As a result, they did not meet the World Bank's requirement for assistance for countries considered Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC).

*Q: Yes.*

ELAM-THOMAS: In 1996, The World Bank and the IMF determined which countries would be categorized as HIPC nations and eligible for debt relief. Those nations were monitored carefully to ensure the newly available funds from the debt relief was used to improve education and health facilities. The World Bank Representative investigations in collaboration with the embassy's economic and political section and economic officers determined that Senegal did not meet that requirement. During my consultation visit to the Department of State, I met with the then National Security Advisor Dr. Jendayi Frazier and informed her of the World Bank representatives' report. While Senegal had made some progress, education and health institutions showed minimal improvement. I advised that the USG should hold off our support for Senegal's receipt of \$40 million from the World Bank. President Abdoulaye Wade was a personal friend of the World Bank's President then James Wolfensohn. Wade called Wolfensohn. Shortly thereafter, Wade announced that Senegal would receive the \$40 million. Despite the sincere efforts of the bank representative and the embassy colleagues, our recommendations served little purpose. Once again, we saw the impact of a personal relationship.

Despite that frustration, I was as candid as possible whenever I met with President Wade. I doubt many other ambassadors who would tell a head of state 20 years my senior. "Mr. President, you don't want the Europeans to think you can't run your country." I cautioned Wade that despite his pronouncements to the contrary, many observers would believe he wanted more aid than trade. I also reminded him that observers wanted Senegal have the

same economic success as political success. The international press lauded Senegal for smooth democratic elections and transition of power. If only the much-needed improvements in education and healthcare could merit similar coverage.

Senegal is a star performer in terms of multiparty elections thanks to the legacy of President Senghor. He had the wisdom to step down while respected and called for elections

*Q: Well we probably will come back to some unique experiences and incidents in Senegal. Let's move to your second assignment after you entered Foreign Service and I believe that was to Turkey? What was your second Foreign Service assignment?*

ELAM-THOMAS: No, Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire

*Q: Abidjan.*

ELAM-THOMAS: I went to Abidjan. And that was a pivotal assignment because I served under the wonderful tutelage of Ambassador Monteagle (Monty) Stearns. This U.S. ambassador and his wife were highly respected by all levels of the Ivorian community. The Ivorians admired and indeed loved them. I had never seen such sincere admiration for an ambassador in my career. Stearns continues to play an important role in my career to this day. I use one of his books in my Honors Diplomacy Class at the University of Central Florida.

*Q: Did you not serve in Mali?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, I went to Mali; however, I was there for a three-month Temporary Duty Assignment (TDY).

*Q: Abidjan was the next full time assignment after-Dakar?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, after Dakar, Abidjan was my next post.

*Q: How did that happen?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Good question. I guess I just was in the right place at the right time when the Assignment Officers were searching for one with French language skills and I knew I was to be worldwide available. I did not question the assignment.

*Q: Or you just accepted what you thought- You had signed up for worldwide assignments and this is what-came up?*

ELAM-THOMAS: That's right. Yes and it's funny, they were all in Africa. Isn't it interesting?

*Q: Yes.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Very interesting.

*Q: Because I think that what's going to happen we're going to arrive at a point where you are aware of the fact that there are other horizons other than Africa and so you start asking for them, but so far you have not been asking for them.*

ELAM-THOMAS: That's right. At that time in my career, I had no idea of how to bid strategically on assignments. Despite my naiveté, I thoroughly enjoyed each assignment. In those days, FSOs were not required to bids in all geographic regions. Also, the U.S. Information Agency officer talent pool was much smaller than the State Department and the bidding process was far less complicated. Again, this was before the Open Assignments System was instituted in USIA as well as State.

*Q: Well obviously language was probably the dictating factor here.*

ELAM-THOMAS: You're absolutely right. I spoke French so Abidjan was a natural follow-on post.

Then called the Ivory Coast, Abidjan was considered one of the better posts in Africa. The U.S. had significant interests there for the economy was more diverse than Senegal's. Abidjan had a commodities trading board. The Ivorians were savvy businessmen. At times I thought they were more French than the French. I found it curious that in 100 degree temperature, they were often attired in three piece suits. They did not sport traditional dress as often as the Senegalese. Their personalities were far more complex and I found them more difficult to read than the Senegalese.

As I continued to watch and marvel how Ambassador Stearns operated in Abidjan, I began to realize our diplomatic work was important. Genuine outreach through speeches, representational functions and program events incorporated what I believed were the best diplomatic practices. My career goals crystallized. Stearns had such rapport with the Ivorians from all walks of life. To me, it was unbelievable. As a Bostonian, I was fascinated that this Brahmin-like American from New England was so humble. He truly bridged cultural gaps in a manner I never imagined. His fluent French, his knowledge of U.S. as well as Ivorian history and his engaging personality served as a model for effective diplomats. I often tell young diplomats and my diplomacy students to observe carefully senior officers whom they admire. When Ambassador and Mrs. Stearns left Abidjan, ministers, elected officials and embassy contacts were at the airport to say farewell. I had not seen such an outpouring of respect and immediately aid to myself, this is what diplomacy should be. Stearns was always dignified. A former Marine he stood ramrod straight. I have remained very close to him and his wife. Sadly, Ambassador Stearns has lost his eyesight to macular degeneration and suffers from degenerative heart disease. On a visit with him and his wife at their Cambridge, MA residence in April 2014, he shared with me news of the Phoenix Award he had received from the Greek Government a month earlier and the fact that he had just finished his second book on the late Greek Prime Minister, Andreas Papandreou. Their daughter is now on her fourth or

fifth FSO tour with her FSO husband in 2013 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. She says she credits me with helping her succeed in the Oral Exam. While she passed the written exam twice it was not until the third try she got through the orals after she spoke with me on some of the idiosyncrasies of the process.

*Q: Before you leave the Ivory Coast, what was your position there?*

ELAM-THOMAS: I was the Cultural Affairs Officer (CAO) or cultural attaché in general diplomatic parlance. There were two younger assistant cultural attachés. By chance, both were African-American males. They were intelligent, charming and, at times, thought they could charm their supervisor without taking on some of the less glamorous responsibilities of their positions. William V. Parker and Don Q. Washington are the two officers I mentioned earlier on in the interview. Both of them have retired after highly impressive diplomatic careers. They made me proud.

Now back to Abidjan- what was the rest of your question once again?

*Q: The question was your position and the next question will be the most significant contribution that you made.*

ELAM-THOMAS: I believe the most significant contribution I made was to send an Ivorian journalist to the States who had been a harsh critic of the United States.

*Q: Tell me about that.*

ELAM-THOMAS: His coverage of the U.S. exhibited blatant skepticism about U.S. foreign policy initiatives. Despite his arrogance, I was determined to learn why he had such a negative view of the U.S. Granted, our foreign policy positions in many countries are not always welcomed. Since he had never visited the U.S., I asked him how he could make such critical assumptions without seeing the country with his own eyes. He had no response.

The late PAO John Garner was very supportive of this nomination of the journalist. With John's help we embassy committee approved the nomination. Garner was also another FSO who provided me with excellent advice on how to manage a sizeable post. Whenever he traveled, he designated me as Acting PAO. I was very proud to take on that task and appreciated a boss who had such faith in me. The best lesson I learned from John Garner was not to micromanage. He passed away in February 2010, but we stayed in touch for many years after I left Abidjan.

Let me return to the journalist with anti-American views:

Once the journalist returned to Abidjan after his travel to the U.S., he did not totally change his views nor did he become pro-American. His analyses, however, were far less strident and more balanced. The Ambassador and our mission colleagues recognized the

value in sending him to the U.S. All agreed that the USG gained more by exposing this journalist to the U.S. than if we sent someone who was already pro-American.

*Q: Did you have any- Did you notice any differences in your interactions with the Ivory Coast contacts vis-à-vis earlier interactions with the Senegalese? You mentioned the stark contrast in a very proud sense of nationalism, that they were more French than the French.*

ELAM-THOMAS: In the mid to late 1970's when I was there, I thought the Ivorians were less nationalistic. I now understand that many of the Ivorians emigrated from surrounding areas and that explains what I perceived as a lack of real national pride. With close to a dozen indigenous languages and an equally-large number of ethnic groups, French is their lingua franca.

*Q: Yes, so that was your view of the Ivorians.*

ELAM-THOMAS: And the Senegalese-

*Q: And the Senegalese were Senegalese.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, they were.

The University in Abidjan was very well appointed. The French invested heavily in Cote d'Ivoire to benefit from the diversified economy. Then Ivorian President Houphouët-Boigny was a medical doctor not a politician. Unlike Leopold Senghor, he was not a poet or an intellectual. The French still respected Houphouët-Boigny as well. The varied origins of Cote d'Ivoire's population may explain why they seem to cling to things French more so than the Senegalese.

*Q: Thank you very much. We will pick up on that theme in the next session and we'll take a break.*

*This is tape three, side one, oral history Ambassador Elam-Thomas, June the 2nd, 2006.*

*Ambassador Elam-Thomas, we have completed the assignments in Senegal; we have completed the assignment in Ivory Coast. I believe you had an interim assignment next that followed in Mali. Can you talk a little bit about that; what was the purpose and what were the highlights of that assignment? What were the highlights of that assignment?*

ELAM-THOMAS: I was sent to Mali on a TDY (temporary duty) as Acting PAO while the post awaited the designation of a new PAO. It was a wonderful opportunity to serve in this history-rich African nation. I traveled to Timbuktu and Mopti where I viewed the remainder of universities which existed well before the oldest U.S. universities. Sadly many of Mali's historic sites were destroyed in the 2012 conflict. While in Mali, I worked closely with the ministers of culture and education on educational exchange programs. It was very somewhat intimidating when I learned that the senior foreign

national assistant in the public affairs office was the niece of the then Malian president. American FSOs had to be circumspect in any reference to the existing Malian government. I must admit, it was not the ideal work situation. The President's niece was a tall imposing woman and walked with grace, pride and dignity. I was very careful not to destroy the credibility of our program by an inappropriate reference to the Malian government or culture. In fact, upon reflection, I may have been too careful and too diplomatic. Per the Malian responses to the programs which I coordinated during my short stay, the initiatives were well received. Fortunately, we did not have any major political crises. In the developing world where there was often much skepticism about the U.S., the mere existence of a public diplomacy program which resulted in heightened interest in the U.S. was considered an accomplishment.

I remember wondering why the PAO's residence had a swimming pool since the water supply was minimal. The electricity was sporadic. I so enjoyed reading and certainly had plenty of time to read while there. What was I to do without stable power. I resorted to my trusty flashlight many evenings. An AID colleague suggested that I carry flashlights everywhere and to pack a higher wattage light bulb for the hotels I might use while traveling throughout Africa. At times I wondered if I had returned to my ancestor's days when in fact it was 1976. It was mutually beneficial for me to visit villages and the families of Foreign Service National employees for again I experienced the genuine hospitality which helped me learn more about their traditions and their rich history. However, I'll admit, I was pleased to return to Senegal. Even though I did not remember having done anything significant during my three-month stint in Bamako, the Chargé, Stephen Dawkins' evaluation report on me indicated the relationships established through carefully-targeted programs proved beneficial. When Dawkins came to speak during my time in The Senior Seminar in 1994, he reflected positively on my 1976 TDY assignment to Bamako.

*Q: Now does it strike you as being somewhat unusual, this was your second Foreign Service assignment abroad; the first one you were the assistant cultural attaché, second one you are the cultural attaché and in an interim assignment you're the PAO?*

ELAM-THOMAS: No. The Assignments Officer thought I could handle such an assignment and I did. To be most candid, I did not find Bamako terribly challenging for the U.S. Embassy in Dakar was much larger and more complex. I think I understand the deeper meaning of your question. My work in Dakar must have demonstrated an ability to take on more challenging tasks such as Acting PAO in Bamako. When I returned to DC after Senegal, the European Area Director, Jodie Lewinsohn asked to meet with me. She asked that I consider an assignment as Branch PAO in Milan, Italy. Honestly, when I reflect on it, I cannot believe that I turned down that assignment. I told her I was happy in French-speaking Africa. At that point in my life, I was not keen on studying Italian. I had no idea that I would eventually learn Greek and Turkish.

*Q: Well that makes it even more interesting, the fact that obviously you had come to someone's attention in Washington that felt that regardless of where this was the fact is you were a principle officer in your agency for an interim period so obviously what you*

*had done in the first two assignments had come to someone's attention to say that even if it was only for three months.*

ELAM-THOMAS: I guess so.

*Q: And this is an interesting segue that you mentioned that you had an offer for a non-Africa assignment and in those days it was not usual, it was not normal for African American officers to have assignments outside of Africa, the Caribbean, some part of Latin America, most- that was where most of the assignments were but you had been offered very on a European assignment, at which time you felt you were very comfortable where you were and what you were doing.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

*Q: What was your next assignment after the Mali assignment?*

ELAM-THOMAS: I finished my tour in Dakar and went to Cote d'Ivoire. When I finished that assignment, I received a Jefferson Fellowship from the United States Information Agency (USIA) to attend the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. I earned a Master's degree in Public Diplomacy in one year. The program was rigorous. I don't know quite how I managed for I took eight courses and wrote eight papers. I became a hermit and studied four to five hours each night after classes. Dr. Willard Johnson, a tenured professor of political science at MIT, taught the course on U.S. Policy towards Southern Africa. He was the first and only African American professor I ever had. Fletcher engaged him as a guest professor several years before I arrived. Johnson was incredibly knowledgeable, serious and demanding. All of the students wanted to please him and we worked doubly hard to get good grades. I was inspired to do my best particularly because I was so proud of him and I did not want to disappoint him. He was probably prouder than I when he attended the Simmons College commencement 15 years later when I received an honorary doctorate from my alma mater. Ambassador Stearns and his wife were there as well.

After I completed all of my academic requirements for the master's degree, I took the French language test. One of my classmates was a UN interpreter and we conversed frequently in French. Since Fletcher did not have language instructors as part of their program at that time, they asked one of their French speaking economic professors to administer the exam. Coincidentally, that professor, Dr. Abdul Aziz, had traveled to Athens while I was there as CAO on a speaker program. He was a friend of the PAO in Athens. I did not pass the written portion of the exam to his satisfaction (I found that curious since I had received a 3/3/in French from FSI and had served for 7 years in French-speaking countries. Perhaps I was nervous, but I did not think I was.) After my second attempt, I passed the written and oral portion of the French exam administered by Prof. Aziz.

*Q: Was he a native speaker?*

ELAM-THOMAS: I do not believe he was. I believe Arabic was his native language.

Each time I think of this, I am frustrated. If I met the State Department's language requirements to serve overseas in French, how could this graduate school professor prevent me from obtaining that Master's degree? As I said I took the exam a second time for a non-native French speaker.

*Q: I was going to ask you, you had already satisfied the State Department's language proficiency requirements at a professional level, a minimum of three/three.*

ELAM-THOMAS: That's right. When I completed the exam, I realized then that academia can be very political. Something was going on; however, I could not put my finger on it. For sure, I would not return for a doctorate. When I graduated in 1980, I said, the only way I will ever get one it will be an honorary one. I had no idea that years later, I would receive four honorary doctorates.

*Q: How did you come to be selected to study at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy? Did you apply for it?*

ELAM-THOMAS: I applied for the fellowship and Ambassador Monteagle Stearns wrote what I thought was an incredible recommendation letter. USIA's selection committee met and I was the 1979 recipient of the Jefferson Fellowship.

*Q: Do you know how many others were competing for the same fellowship?*

ELAM-THOMAS: No but I know there was only one Jefferson Fellow each year and I was the 1979 recipient.

*Q: And traditionally we had- the United States Information Agency had a diplomat in residence at the Fletcher School. Was there a diplomat in-Residence then?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, Hank Ryan.

*Q: Hank Ryan. Were you in touch with him while you were there?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes. He was a wonderful elder statesman. Ryan had retired from the Foreign Service many years earlier and has since passed away. As a Latin American specialist and I learned much about the U.S. policy towards Latin America during my visits to his office. Hank Ryan always welcomed young FSOs from USIA and State whenever they came to Fletcher. For years he had been a legend in USIA and I was honored to be in his presence.

*Q: Well what's after Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy?*

ELAM-THOMAS: After Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy I returned to Washington and was a Career Counselor in USIA Personnel. I wondered why I was

assigned to be a Career Counselor. After all, I had just studied foreign policy, conflict resolution and international relations in graduate school. I soon realized that conflict resolution and finding the right person for the assignment required the aforementioned expertise.

*Q: I know that there are professional considerations even now, years later, that you're not at liberty to discuss but in general, what were some of the experiences that you gained from for your own professional development and what were some of the mentoring experiences you might have had during that assignment?*

ELAM-THOMAS: I can remember a mid-level officer who was one of my clients. He was on the "threshold" of becoming Officer Counselor (FEOC). When his name was not on the promotion list, he came to my office and said this career was no longer worth it. He said to me he had faced many personal and professional challenges and was terribly depressed. In essence he was going to take his life because he did not make it into the Senior Foreign Service and he dashed out of my office. I literally ran down the stairs and took him in my hands and said, "Nothing related to this promotion list is so important. No profession should define you." To this day, none of us can second guess the final choices of Selection Panels. When I told him of other sobering challenges other FSOs had faced, one whose child (only 9) had just died of cancer and the USG would not cover the cost of flying the family back to the U.S. to be together, he sounded as if he would reconsider his desire to commit suicide. After I gave him a few more examples of even more devastating personal crises which FSOs had overcome, he calmly left the premises. This reality check helped keep this colleague in the service. Honestly, I was not trained for such experiences, but one draws on whatever necessary during crises.

Many FSOs believed the system was not fair to single women. They saw evidence that large posts like Mexico, Hong Kong were given to tandem couples. In those settings USIA did not have the concern of one spouse supervising the other. One female client said, "I am ready to learn Chinese but you're not going to send me because Beijing was a tandem post."

It was extremely difficult to encourage clients to bid on Bahrain, to Qatar and other-Doha in the early 1980's. I learned to do so with total transparency. I could not be disingenuous when I described these posts. They would be challenging and they needed to be staffed. I had 225 FSOs in my talent pool. Seventy five of them moved through the system the two years I was there. One was Marjorie Ransom, who was the first woman PAO in Egypt. Most were stellar performers. I will never forget one client, Tom Johnson. He went to Liberia and sent me a thank you note because he really wanted that assignment. This was one of the more challenging of my career positions. When one person got his/her assignment, there were six to ten others who did not. Career Counselors walked a fine line being a diplomat within the Service. Fletcher's training was valuable.

*Q: Did you find yourself in a unique position not only with your constituents-*

ELAM-THOMAS: For 42 years, I remained unique. Very few of my colleagues looked like me. However, at times it was more challenging being a woman rather than being a person of color.

*Q: -Not only did I mean unique because they did not look like you, but also with the various area directors who had a particular desire for a person to follow a particular assignment track?*

ELAM-THOMAS: How did you know that? Yes, that was often the case but I can honestly say that they may have tried to apply subtle pressure on me. They quickly learned I had a strong sense of integrity. Perhaps I was less vulnerable than some of my white counterparts because I knew I had to follow strict rules of the assignment system. If the person had the qualifications, studied the language, knew the region and had the appropriate earlier assignments, they were competitive. I was not the final arbiter for the assignments. I had to represent each candidate based on their performance and not corridor reputation. I prepared carefully for each Assignment Panel to ensure each candidate received fair consideration given the facts.

*Q: Were you ever concerned about how this would impact on your own career especially when the fact is that you were only going to be in this position yourself for one, two, three years at the most and many thought you would set yourself up for a good assignment?*

ELAM-THOMAS: I did. I worried about that because I knew that no matter where I went people would say you're in personnel so you're going to get yourself a good assignment. I was surprised when Ambassador Monteagle Stearns invited me to dinner when he was Vice President of the National Defense University. He and his wife told me of his nomination to be ambassador to Greece. He wanted me to be his CAO. I told him I was honored, but that the assignment system did not work that way. I would have to bid on the assignment. I also told him that others would perceive this posting a very special assignment in Europe and since I was a Career Counselor. He said, "I still think you should bid on Athens." I did not want to bid on this because I knew how it would be perceived. Finally, I did include my name on the bid list. When I was not selected for the assignment I was somewhat disappointed because I had no desire to learn Greek. I also mentioned this to Ambassador Stearns. He said my French was fluent and that I could learn Greek. As I sat at the dinner table, I looked at posters in Greek and thought, my heavens, is he really serious? I reflected on the faith this Ambassador had in me and that is why I went ahead and bid on the post. In less than six months, three months, Peter Synodis moved from the cultural attaché job to the press attaché job. Another Career Counselor called me and asked, "Harriet how is your Greek? You are going to Greece." I said, "Don't play with me." He said no, you've been paneled; you're going to Greece. Assignments can change at the last moment. Nothing is written in stone. Depending on the needs of the Service you may be going in a totally different direction than you thought initially.

I remember going to Counselor Deidre Ryan's office because I didn't get the assignment to Greece. She said it was a very difficult choice between me and Peter Synodis. She said

she wanted me to meet with Jim Hackett, the assistant secretary for management, for administration. I met with him and he thought I should go to Cameroon because it was the Switzerland of Africa. And I said Mr. Hackett, "I've served in Africa, I've been in Abidjan, I've been in Dakar. I have no desire to see the Switzerland of Africa. I said I've been in the Paris of Africa; I don't want to go to the Switzerland or Geneva of Africa. I think I did say I think I've had enough of serving in Africa. That's it. He sent a memo back to personnel with a note on it indicating they should find something good for Miss Elam; she's impressive. For some reason, I was not encouraged when I saw that note.

*Q: So then you were off to language school?*

ELAM-THOMAS: For a year of language school and then I went to Athens.

*Q: Where did you go to language school?*

ELAM-THOMAS: At the Foreign Service Institute.

*Q: How many of you were in the class?*

ELAM-THOMAS: There were six of us.

*Q: How did you find your training?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Difficult for many reasons.

*Q: Did you find it challenging for you individually or difficult as a language?*

ELAM-THOMAS: The language learning environment was challenging for me individually and difficult in terms of grasping the Cyrillic alphabet and well as the language. During my first week, the senior Greek teacher said to me, "We want you to do well." He patted me on my shoulder when he made that comment. I bristled at that act which I perceived as being patronizing. Remember, I was much younger and this Simmons College graduate did not need someone at FSI telling me that I needed to do well. That day I was determined to pass my Greek examination. I was 42 years old. The synapses did not work as smoothly as they did when I was 21. I passed the exam and got a 3/3 in Greek (written and comprehension). I was the only African American in the class. Of the six students, two did not take the training seriously. For me, a USIA officer, I knew we could not function in the role of CAO, IO or PAO without the Greek language. We were not allowed language waivers and I knew I had to get the coveted 3/3. If I thought Greek was a challenge, trust me Turkish was a far more difficult. I'll tell you about that later.

*Q: Let's go to Greece.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Greece was my shining moment. I honestly believe this is the assignment which proved to me that my work had merit. Perhaps I was so engaged in

moving Greeks away from their inherent anti-American focus I did not realize that my boss, the PAO perceived my positive rapport with all levels of our Greek contacts threatening. During my eight years dealing with Greece and Turkey I did not get promoted. Four of those years were spent in Athens. One line in the evaluation report indicated that, "...she was so well received that they thought she was the PAO." There were other similar references to the wide swath of contacts I had in Greece (not just Athens). In my naiveté, I thought this was a compliment. Later, thanks to the counsel I received from the then Deputy Director General of the Foreign Service, Ambassador William Swing who reviewed my evaluations, I learned such comments and lack of specific references explained why I had not been promoted. The PAO did not describe how I met the U.S. Embassy's goals and objectives. While I provided that info in the notes given to the PAO, he did not incorporate them into my report. I certainly learned a very hard lesson. From the Athens assignment forward, I made good use of the last page of evaluations which give the employee an opportunity to highlight his/her successes or challenges.

I had devoted a year to learning Greek. Upon my arrival, I worked diligently to improve America's image, created credible ways to remove the misperceptions Greeks had of America, and heightened the respect for American artists of all genre through their performances and exhibits. For four years my Greek contacts confirmed my work in their news reporting and interviews done with me. Ninety percent of the guests invited to my representational events attended. I gave almost as many public speeches as the Ambassador and **two** of them in Greek. I received frequent invitations to the homes of the embassy's coveted "A" list of contacts. I used every opportunity to educate Greeks about African Americans in science, education and technology. Two of the Fulbright lectures I presented were in Greek with members of the Greek Academy present. As I mentioned, Greek journalists wrote positive articles about my work with the academic, artistic and business communities during my time in Athens. However, now I understand that the PAO did not appreciate my taking some of the limelight from him. When I returned to Athens in 2005, after a month-long stint as the Dukakis Lecture at the American College of Thessaloniki, one of the journalists sent me a note in which he said, "When you and Ambassador Monty Stearns were here we called it the golden age of diplomacy." I sent a copy of that note to Ambassador Stearns.

While many of the Greeks demonstrated in front of our embassy once a week, we did not let that deter us from our work. At that time the then Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou's wife, who was an American, would also express less-than-positive views about the U.S. This was Papandreou's first wife who was from Elmhurst, Ohio.

The Greeks had also an clever way of welcoming you into their orbit. However, I soon learned they often had an ulterior motive. They were deep thinking, serious, philosophical people but they also wanted to be sure their little "Yorgos" (George) would get into MIT. With their financial wealth, all they needed was a letter of recommendation from the Cultural Attaché or the Ambassador and this child would gain entry to one of America's most prestigious educational institutions. The hardest thing was to convince a

Greek that a letter from a USG official would not be welcomed at the many very independent and private U.S. institutions.

On balance, despite not being promoted, I had four absolutely wonderful years. My study of Greek educational system opened our eyes to the challenges that all European educational systems face. Their method to teach by rote and memorization minimized creative and analytical thinking. My service as the ex officio member of the Fulbright Board which allowed me to interview candidates was enlightening, instructive, and educational.

*Q: At what level of access did you have in the Greek- with the Greek government? Was there a minister of education?*

ELAM-THOMAS: There was a minister of education and a separate minister of culture. The revered Greek film actress and political activist, Melina Mercouri was the Minister of Culture. She epitomized Greece for many of my generation. Her role in *Never on Sunday* was legendary, but her commitment to artistic freedom and the return of the Elgin Marbles from the British Museum were the issues which kept Melina in the forefront of the political and artistic scene for decades.

*Q: Did you feel any retribution from the PAO because of your access, either at the government level or to certain levels of academia, high levels in academia?*

ELAM-THOMAS: No, I did not. If it existed, the action was so subtle I was unaware. I certainly had the access. Melina Mercouri always acknowledged my presence whenever we attended an event in common. I have fond memories on one occasion when I accompanied Ambassador Stearns to see her in preparation for the 1988 Olympic Games. She was her usual charismatic self. Ambassador Stearns with his patrician bearing dignity was to gain confirmation from her of the Greek's role in the Los Angeles Olympics. I chuckle each time I think of this for I truly think Ambassador Stearns was so enchanted listening to Melina that he almost forgot the purpose of our meeting. Finally I politely interrupted and said, "Mr. Ambassador we're here to talk about the Greek participation in the Olympic Games." Just before he began that discussion, Melina was about to light a cigarette. Honestly, I've never seen an ambassador move so quickly to be gallant and light her cigarette. I will admit, she was mesmerizing. She charmed me, so I don't doubt she charmed everyone in her presence.

*Q: Side b, Ambassador Harriet Elam-Thomas, June the 2nd, 2006.*

While we're in Greece and the fact that you had extraordinary access in addition to obviously successes in what you were doing there, what were some of the highlights of that assignment? I know that there probably were many things that were exceptional as far as your professional reward but can you separate out one or two highlights in the order of promoting American culture, society and the articulation of American policy?

ELAM-THOMAS: *Yes I can in just a moment.*

With regard to my assignment in Athens, Greece, there are so many positive things that took place that it's hard to single out any one. Two come to mind. One was my work with Melina Mercouri and Boston Opera Company Director Sarah Caldwell. These two women had incredible personalities and I often use this experience as an example to show how culture and politics cross one another. During the time that we were working on a production of "Medea," an opera production that was done in Boston, costumes being made in Greece, material being woven in Greece, we collaborated closely with the ministry of culture. Sarah Caldwell would call only a day or two in advance before her arrival in Athens and wanted to meet with Melina Mercouri. And at one point the American military bombed a certain part of Southeast Asia and there was a significant interest on the part of the Greek government that this was not the right thing for America to do. I knew that it was going to be a very tense meeting.

We enter Mercouri's office, Melina says to Sarah Caldwell, "I can't even talk to you; I may have to go out and fight the next battle myself." Of course Melina was being overly dramatic, but we got the message. Sarah Caldwell responded, "Madam, I didn't bomb anything; the U.S. Government did." I had to chuckle to myself. The meeting was not productive. U.S. military action had direct impact on a major cultural undertaking. Caldwell made a costly trip from Boston to Athens for one meeting. When the tension re the bombing issue diminished, Caldwell made a subsequent trip to Athens.

One of the traditional tasks of the Cultural Section was to highlight the best of American arts. Whether Leonard Bernstein, Mikhail Rostropovich, Dance Theatre of Harlem, the New York Ballet, the New York Philharmonic or Alvin Ailey Dance Company, all of them performed in Athens under USG sponsorship while I was in Athens. I met Kurt Masur, Chick Corea, Buddy Guy, Herbie Hancock, and Wynton Marsalis. As most of my CAO colleagues, the list of recognized American artists in all genres could go on and on. I treasure the fact that Rostropovich spoke to me in front Ambassador Stearns and said, "Thank you for all of your efforts on my visit. I know the cultural attachés do all the work." I felt 10 feet tall just from that genuine acknowledgement. It was simple, yet sincere.

About a year later, I had another indication of the role of culture in diplomacy when the Embassy's Cultural Section prepared for another American performing arts group's participation in the annual Athens Festival. Ambassador Stearns' successor, Ambassador Robert Keeley was justifiably concerned about the rampant anti-Americanism still prevalent in Greece. To counter or at least minimize the strains in our relationship, Ambassador Keeley asked me to negotiate television rights of The Dance Theatre of Harlem's (DTH) performance at the Herodes Atticus Theater. It was Keeley's belief that country-wide telecasts of the performance would present a more positive view of America, its artistic achievements and its diversity.

Of course I set up the initial negotiation with the impresario with the help of my trusted senior Greek Executive Officer. I had no idea that we would have to negotiate the cost from \$110,000 down to \$40,000, which is all the Greeks could pay. In two-and-a-half

days we succeeded despite the very real possibility of DTH canceling all performances. Am I glad I got my 3/3 in Greek for it certainly helped save the day in this instance. Just as I began to feel good about myself, lo and behold we learned that the Greeks wanted to pay the \$40,000 fee in Greek drachma. What could a U.S. dance company do with Greek drachma? Eventually we worked it out and the funds were deposited in U.S. currency to DTH's American account.

Ambassador Keeley's request resonated with my views regarding the role of art in diplomacy. The performances aired for two weeks after the company left. There were press articles which not only covered the live performance, but noted the televised performances in their reporting as well. I could not help but think to myself, how ironic that a predominantly African American dance company was able to present a more positive image of American abroad. The dancers established almost immediate rapport with the multifaceted Greek artistic community. Workshops and master classes allowed for sharing of expertise, new techniques and mutual respect.

*Q: Your relationship with the rest of the staff there, the American staff, I take it, was very positive.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes. Our offices mounted a blockbuster exhibits which was usually done only in the former USSR or in Eastern Europe. A special line-item in the Foreign Affairs Budget was designated for such exhibits, but only for countries behind the "Iron Curtain." Remember, I served in Greece from 1983-1987 well before the Berlin Wall came down. This exhibit was entitled, "The History of Filmmaking in America." We transformed the entrance of The National Gallery of Greece to resemble the entrance of a Broadway Theater. Wherever the exhibit was shown, it highlighted the Oscar-winning roles of actors from that country and usually there was the actual Oscar which the actor or music composer had received. You may remember the film Chariots of Fire. In 1982, Vangelis Papathanassiou won the Oscar for the composition of the score Chariots of Fire. Interestingly enough Vangelis did not travel to Hollywood to accept the Oscar for he suffered from the fear of flying.

Whenever such blockbuster exhibits came to the post, it was a tradition that either the exhibit director or trusted Cultural Section head returned the Oscar to the owner at the end of the exhibit. You can be sure I convinced the exhibit director that such duty was indeed mine. I loved the film and the music, and this was one time I was going to "pull my weight" as Cultural Attaché. When I arrived at Vangelis elegant British residence, we spoke about Erica Jong, author of Fear of Flying in connection with his phobia. We also spoke about Markella Hatziano, a young Greek opera singer whom I feel proud of "having discovered." Vangelis was concerned about Markella's agent known not to be the most reputable one in the business. I shared Vangelis' advice with Markella who soon found a new agent. Through my collaboration with Sarah Caldwell, I was able to facilitate Markella's audition with a U.S. opera company in Texas and since then, Markella has had been performing throughout the U.S.

*Q: Yes, I know.*

ELAM-THOMAS: For several weeks, I worked closely with many then I considered elderly Greek men, curators, builders, engineers, set directors and designers. The U.S. Government gave the museum electric window blinders we had to install to block Athens powerful sun. These blinders were extremely expensive, but we knew the museum needed them, but the cost prohibited the museum from purchasing them. After we visited several potential sites, we agreed that The National Gallery was the optimum location. Such a prestigious location in the center of Athens came with a cost, the gift of the blinders.

This major exhibit was approved for Athens even though Greece was not behind the Iron Curtain. Why - because Melina Mercouri charmed then USIA Director Charlie Wick. No further explanation is needed.

*Q: Did Charlie Wick visit Greece while you were there?*

ELAM-THOMAS: I believe he did although I honestly cannot remember if I was posted there when he came. He certainly did during the time I was desk officer for Greece, Turkey and Cyprus. During that Washington assignment, I wrote speeches for Director Wick whenever he had to address audiences with a relationship to Greece, Turkey or Cyprus.

*Q: What after Greece?*

ELAM-THOMAS: After Greece I returned to Washington and served two years as Desk Officer for Greece, Turkey and Cyprus. While on this domestic assignment I learned that even though you are a career diplomat many assume that you are a staff aide solely because of your gender. The automatic assumption was that most if not all women in the Department were administrative assistants, budget & fiscal officers or other support staffers. Few women were in the so-called "substantive" positions. Whenever I went to the State Department building for weekly meetings, I thought colleagues walking down the hall deliberately found ways to ignore my presence because I was female. I now know that seems to be the culture of such a huge bureaucracy and I was being overly sensitive at the time. I will admit, I enjoyed being able to report on three countries in those meetings. No doubt because of a much larger employee pool, the State Department had a different officer for Greece, Turkey and Cyprus. I was fortunate enough to have the portfolio when Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou had an affair with his then-mistress who later became his wife. Not only did I report on continuous political conflicts with Cyprus and Turkey, but also on how the Prime Minister's extra-marital affairs might impact on U.S. negotiations on a host of issues.

After the three years as the desk officer of Greece, Turkey and Cyprus and visits to all three posts. I was intrigued to go to Turkey. Since Director Wick had used almost all of the travel funds for the European Area very few if any desk officers were able to travel to their posts. I was determined to visit my posts so I got approval to use my frequent flier miles to make the trip. I could not be an effective desk officer without visiting the

officers doing yeoman work in the field. That travel was one of the wisest decisions I have made. That face-to-face contact confirmed my sincerity to be supportive of all my colleagues in the field. I remember reading in an evaluation that the PAO in Turkey said they felt we had an advocate who was right here on the ground with us every time we sent a message asking for follow up on issues in Washington.

Whenever I got a request from a PAO I went to the functional bureau to see how we could provide that post with what they needed. I did not send it down in a memo; I hand carried it to the responsible individual, engaged my colleague in conversation and demonstrated my respect for the role they played in keeping our overseas operations running. I was the desk officer who was never in her office because I delivered the requests personally. If you get a memo, it will remain in your in box until you complete other urgent tasks. It is much easier to decline a request if there is no face to face encounter. I got to know many of the budget and fiscal staffers and directors. It seemed easier to get post funding for well-justified requests because these officers often said, "We never see the desk officers, but we see you." I told the new Pickering Fellows with whom I met it is important to recognize the value of the support staff, admin, logistics, the dispatcher and certainly the drivers. You cannot make a demarche to any ministry at home or abroad if you don't have a functioning vehicle and a driver who takes you there.

*Q: So as a result of that assignment thus comes Turkey?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

*Q: And back to language school again.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

*Q: Talk about being selected for Turkey. Did you ask for it?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Once again, I almost again felt as if this assignment came to me. When I was in Istanbul, I was so impressed that the then Consul General William Rau who was fluent in both Greek and Turkish that I thought I could do the same. After the Athens assignment, I honestly do not remember the need to fight for any of my future assignments.

I will admit, I was getting older but thought that if I could master a language and the Cyrillic alphabet, Turkish would be much easier. Oh how wrong I was. Once I learned the Greek alphabet, the sentence structure was the same as in English. Turkish, however, presented an unexpected challenge. The syntax, the construction of sentences was totally different. From my perspective, it was worse than German which also placed verbs at the end. Turkish is an agglutinative language, which means you add a suffix to the word to change the meaning. You could have one word with 15 suffixes which would make up a sentence. Turkish is an Altaic not an Indo-European language. To wrap my brain around all of this at age 47 was a challenge. I spent half of the yearlong language training at FSI. During that time some of my classmates did not seem to take the language learning process seriously. After the first half of the 44 week program, I called the language

coordinator at USIA to express my concerns. Once I recounted what transpired in the class, I was enrolled in a private language school. For the last six months I studied with an incredibly patient and effective instructor. Interestingly, my Turkish teacher was married to a Greek. It was far from easy but I learned Turkish and got my three/three in Turkish. Let me tell you what prompted me to work even harder to learn Turkish. Three weeks before my Turkish exam Nelson Mandela gave a speech a joint session of Congress. I used every former contact I could to get a ticket for that speech. As I sat in the Senate Gallery on the steps which divided the rows, but near the late Judge Leon Higginbotham (one of the top candidates to replace Justice Thurgood Marshall) I was in awe as I listened to Mandela. I said to myself, if he could spend 27 and a half years in jail without bitterness, I can pass this Turkish exam. For the next three weeks I became a hermit and studied more than my usual 3 hours a night. I passed my Turkish exam the first week in July 1990. That inspiration from Mandela was pivotal in my succeeding in Turkish. And I often quote Mandela's statement: "When you speak to a man in a language he knows, you speak to his head. When you speak to a man in his native language, you speak to his heart." For most of my 42 years in this profession, I have tried my best to speak to the hearts of our hosts in each of my posts.

*Q: And then you went off to Istanbul?*

ELAM-THOMAS: For four fabulous years.

*Q: And your position?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Branch public affairs officer in a city that was larger than Ankara, the capital. Istanbul is often referred to as the New York of Turkey.

*Q: Did you find that it was difficult or not difficult working in a cultural business center of a country where the capital was less than active thus the embassy and your relations to the embassy?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes and no. Ambassador Strausz-Hupé came to Istanbul once a month. The embassy maintained an apartment in Istanbul for the business and cultural life was more vibrant than in Ankara. I knew I should not to alienate my Ankara colleagues for they controlled Istanbul's program budget. Whenever I proposed a program I made sure that Ankara would be given the option of inclusion.

*Q: What were the highlights of the assignment?*

ELAM-THOMAS: There were many. However, once again the impact of an exhibit comes immediately to mind. The I Dream a World Exhibit: Portraits of Black Women who Changed America. Brian Lanker, a Pulitzer Prize winning photographer, mounted the fruits of his 1974 project into an exhibit in 1989. Of the 225 original pictures, he selected 75 large scale photos of contemporary artists, lawyers, performers, writers, teachers, politicians, civil rights proponents and others. In 1989, when I saw the exhibit at The Corcoran Gallery in Washington, I said to myself, "This exhibit must be sent

abroad.” I was a mid-level USIA Officer, but decided the idea of USIA sending this abroad was worth exploring with the USIA’s Exhibits Office. That conversation led to others seeing the exhibit and they confirmed the powerful and positive message such an exhibit could bring to our international audiences and Istanbul as well as Izmir were two of the posts fortunate to host the exhibit.

The Turks came to the exhibit on the eve of the beginning of Ramadan. I realized I had to do something significant to show our appreciation to those who would come out to an American exhibit on the eve of that important holiday. My decision was to give my opening remarks in Turkish. The Turks were pleased and the press mentioned my remarks in the press the next day. Our Turkish hosts were also very pleased that Ambassador Richard Barkley traveled from Ankara for the opening and gave remarks as well in English. That night, the exhibit hall was located in a prime location downtown Istanbul, was filled. I will admit I was relieved. To ensure we would have a steady flow of visitors to the exhibit, our staff coordinated secondary school and university student visits as well as others who attended art schools in Istanbul. We also include appropriate bibliographies with the exhibit brochures to encourage additional research about the women highlighted in the photographs. The exhibit met our goals to illustrate the role these women played in the Civil Rights Movement and how their efforts served as the catalyst for the Women’s Movement and other minorities groups in the U.S.

The second which comes to mind involves a highly sensitive political issue: an allegation about the U.S. and the PKK (The Kurdistan Worker’s Party – a terrorist group). An avowed fundamentalist Turkish newspaper published an article which claimed the U.S. had provided food for the PKK terrorists. The Ankara-based PAO called to deliver Ambassador Abramowitz’s instructions that I meet with the editor of the fundamentalist newspaper and tell them the statement was not true. Rather than blindside the editor, I instructed our senior Turkish press assistant to alert the editor of the reason for my visit. Given the sensitivity of the issue, I wanted to be sure my interlocutor would be prepared to hear the U.S. position. During the meeting I provided the editor and his staff with several examples of the disinformation campaigns which had slurred America in many other countries. When they heard of the other fabricated stories, the editors realized they had fallen for the misinformation I had described. The examples I gave were credible and some had also appeared in Turkish media. My Turkish assistants and I presented all of this information in Turkish. Perhaps my ability to conduct that entire meeting in Turkish had some impact on the result of that hour-long session. That really does not matter. The next day, the newspaper printed an apology in the first section of the paper. Our press assistant said that in his 30 years of working at the American Consulate in Istanbul, that was the first time he had seen a written apology.

The third experience which comes to mind was an American studies conference. The topic was the literature of African American writers. Toni Morrison won the Nobel Prize for literature that year. The Turkish professors knew more about Toni Morrison than I could ever know. Our officers had coordinated the travel of two U.S. literature professors. Their topic: The image of African Americans in U.S. print, electronic and television media. During one of the panel discussions, a professor from Northeastern

University included in her remarks a statement which indicated that “The Cosby Show” while impressive, it was not representative of Black America. The professor had no idea how I might react to such a broad generalization. She knew I was a career diplomat who was the Branch Public Affairs Officer, but she had no idea of my family background. Why did she say that with me in the audience? I waited for the conclusion of the panel and decided I was not going to be the “consummate” diplomat. I was going to be Harriet Elam. I proceeded to tell them about my family. I informed her that I came from a family of five lawyers, a judge, a librarian and yes, a career diplomat. In fact, there are more professionals in my family. I said my nieces and nephews attended Yale, Princeton, Harvard, Duke University, Radcliffe and Vassar. And oh how I wish to meet this professor as I am editing this oral history transcript for the nephew who graduated from Harvard is now the Vice-Provost for all undergraduate education at Stanford. As we all know, there are a many families just like mine

*Q: Did you find- it's interesting that two overseas assignments were juxtaposed like that, Greece and Turkey, both very interesting cultures and their culture in and of themselves being so close. That must have been an exciting highlight in your own professional career to be able to work in two cultures almost within the same timeframe, in their language, within their culture. What kinds of assessments were you able to make?*

ELAM-THOMAS: They are very similar. The religions are different but they have a long history of attachment. The founder of the Modern Turkish Republic Kemal Atatürk and former Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos were strong proponents of mutual understanding and agreement between those two countries. Despite the media reports to the contrary, I saw an attempt to move closer to one another. I have returned to both countries on three occasions beginning in 2005. During those visits, I noted significant improvements in the relations. The earthquakes that took place in the late '90s in Turkey and in Greece brought those two countries together. I have often thought that God delivered a message to bring those two countries together and the earthquakes set an mutually dependent and beneficial climate.

*Q: ...side A, Ambassador Harriet Elam-Thomas, June the 2nd, 2006.*

*Ambassador Elam-Thomas, we have just made a deep swing through the cradle of civilization and with the unique comparisons of the two cultures, Greece and Turkey, where you played vital roles as far as articulating U.S. policy and extending U.S. culture and society to both of these societies. What was on the plate next for you?*

ELAM-THOMAS: My next step was, in a way, to become a student of my own country because. I was selected to be a member of the Senior Seminar. This assignment, however, did not come about without input from the ambassador. After two months of not hearing a word from my initial application for a Senior Seminar, Ambassador Richard Barkley decided he would call USIA personnel and he did. He then wrote a follow up message in which he indicated he could not imagine a woman of this caliber awaiting this long for word about her next assignment. We faxed Ambassador Barkley's letter to USIA personnel director Jeffrey Lite. Within 24 hours, I received a phone call at about 11 p.m.

Istanbul time from Jeff Lite who said there's an ambassador who's very much interested and impressed with you. Ambassador Barkley said you are interested in the Senior Seminar; I don't remember seeing anything. I reminded Jeff, I faxed the completed form and justification to DC. I was led to believe that fax never transmitted. Rather than cast blame without evidence, I faxed the documents again and in August 1994, I became a member of the 37<sup>th</sup> Senior Seminar. We traveled throughout the U.S. to learn how domestic policy impacts on foreign policy. From the officers of major corporations in the World Trade Center to the poorest parishes in Louisiana, to NORAD, to the Sandia Laboratories in New Mexico and to major U.S. cities dealing with urban sprawl.

*Q: Today is June the 24th, 2011. This is a continuation of the interview with Ambassador Harriet Elam-Thomas from our last interview session, which was June the 2nd of 2006.*

*Ambassador Thomas, what we want to do now is to continue with your professional assignments while you were in USIA. We have covered your assignments to Mali, to Senegal, to Athens, to Istanbul. The one that we have not covered is Brussels; can you tell me a little bit about, number one, how you were selected to go to Brussels? Did you volunteer for it, what was your assignment there? I noticed that when we were talking about your experiences and expanding on U.S. culture, society, policy articulation, you had an opportunity to do this at our mission within NATO in Brussels.*

ELAM-THOMAS: My assignment was Public Affairs Counselor at the U.S. Embassy in Brussels.

*Q: It was the embassy, not NATO.*

ELAM-THOMAS: I understand the need to confirm my location for the U.S. Government has three separate missions in Brussels.

*Q: Okay, well, why don't we just start off with how did you go there? Did you ask for it?*

ELAM-THOMAS: While in the Senior Seminar, I noticed my State colleagues lobbied forcefully for whatever future assignment they desired. John Taft, who was then the president of the Senior Seminar and now the U.S. Ambassador to Russia said to me one day, "Harriet you need to go to Brussels." John was the President of the 37<sup>th</sup> Senior Seminar Class and I was the Vice President. John said, "There's a PAO job opening at the embassy in Brussels and I really think you should consider it." I said we don't usually do that in USIA. He understood my hesitancy and he called someone in the European Area. The next thing I hear is that USIA's EU area director suggests that I lobby for the position. This was far from what I would have expected, but I then learned that the ambassador was a political appointee. To add to the excitement, this ambassador thought I should travel to Brussels for an interview. Ambassador Alan Blinken was a Wall Street investment banker. His brother was the ambassador to Hungary.\

After much discussion on whether or not I should travel to Brussels, the incumbent PAO, Ashley Wills, convinced Ambassador Blinken that Harriet Elam did not need to come out

for an interview. Trust me, Mr. Ambassador; she is capable of handling this post. Fortunately, the ambassador agreed with Ashley Wills. The very day I arrived, however, after dropping off my luggage and freshening up, I went to the embassy for this long-awaited “interview.” Early on in our first meeting, Ambassador Blinken said I have I probably have done something wrong today; I said that the Vlamsbaack Party is a racist party.

*Q: How do you spell it?*

ELAM-THOMAS: V-L-A-M-S-B-A-A-C-K. It’s a Flemish word, Vlamsbaack Party. I said Mr. Ambassador, you can’t say that. That’s the last thing you can say. Well it’s the truth, he said, and the Belgian prime minister said it was as well. We are probably going to get some flak about that in the press soon. What a welcome. The first day I arrive, probably the first probably person of color to be the Public Affairs Officer and the first task before me may be to refute the ambassador’s all-too-candid statement. I told the ambassador that his best approach would be to ignore any reference that appears in the press. Sure enough the next day an article appeared in the press. We said nothing and, thank heavens, the story died. That experience prepared me for the former Wall Street banker who operated the embassy in a totally new fashion from all the career ambassadors with whom I had worked. He admonished his senior officers to find ways to legally to accomplish his goals and reminded us that in the private sector, there are teams of lawyers who research ways to accomplish whatever goal and do so legally.

My colleague in the Foreign Commercial Service and I became Ambassador Blinken’s “go to team” whenever he wanted to see tangible evidence of his ideas. We had independent budgets, staff and other resources we could bring together to satisfy one of Ambassador Blinken’s signature projects: the establishment of a U.S. Trade and Investment Center in Brussels. The “center” was an information center for businessmen from the Newly Independent States (NIS) who explored ways to enter the U.S. market. The USIA Library had a small section that we reconfigured to house computers and separate carrels where the clients could research American companies. Once the center was up and running and we produced a video which highlighted the services available, Ambassador Blinken was thrilled. I shall be forever in debt to my FCS colleague the late Terry Flannery for that success and other positive aspects of my Brussels assignment.

Blinken liked to give speeches and therefore a lot speechwriting came with this job. I had not served with an ambassador who ate lunch in the embassy cafeteria. He would engage the visiting parents and embassy guests in conversations. I am sure they remembered that embassy visit. He hosted dinners for the Country Team and senior staff which in my experiences was unusual.

The Belgians ran a vibrant Fulbright commission. They selected first rate candidates. I have to remember, these candidates attended universities in an industrialized nations. My earlier experiences even in Greece and Turkey never mind the developing world could not match the caliber of candidates. The Belgian Fulbright Commission helped manage the Luxembourg mission’s Fulbright cultural- Fulbright program. While there were a host

of challenges as we worked with the political appointee ambassador to Luxembourg, we met them and selected good candidates from Luxembourg as well.

*Q: This sounds - This is a most interesting observation. This is a political appointee-*

ELAM-THOMAS: Correct.

*Q: You may not have known that you had a feel not only for management and leadership but I'm hearing you say that you were totally integrated into the country team as the PAO.*

ELAM-THOMAS: I was part and parcel of the embassy and I truly enjoyed this responsibility.

*Q: And how did you feel about the receptivity of the rest of the country team? Did they accept you as a fully integrated entity on the country team?*

ELAM-THOMAS: We had a respectful and professional relationship. The DCM happened to be a woman and the most senior staffers of that embassy were women. The Chief of Station was a woman, the Deputy Defense Attaché was a woman and the PAO was a woman. When President Clinton announced Madeleine Albright as Secretary of State, we called the Ambassador Blinken and expressed collective delight. And told the ambassador we wanted to celebrate. He said, "I'm waiting for you for with champagne." That was an incredible boost for female officers. The Belgians were very pleased with Blinken. He retains a positive relationship with key members of Belgian society. The ability to communicate that warmth came so naturally to him and if he, again, if he did not know the nuances he would defer to the professionals. How refreshing!

*Q: It's most interesting.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Blinken and his wife have stayed in touch with me for 20 years. He attended my wedding, my 70<sup>th</sup> birthday gathering and he has hosted me and my husband on several occasions at their elegant East Side New York apartment.

*Q: What was the focus of the embassy vis-à-vis trade and commerce and policy advocacy? I ask that because of the fact that this is a tri-mission and I heard you say that one of the successes that you enjoyed was pairing up with the FCS, the Foreign Commerce Service and incorporating their catalog, their foreign commerce library in with the USIS library. Was the focus on trade?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, the focus was on trade and investment.

*Q: Okay.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Setting up this center with that focus could have been dicey because Ambassador Stuart Eizenstat headed the U.S. Mission to the European Union. I was a bit

concerned that Eizenstat might consider Blinken's initiative as stepping into Eizenstat's turf regarding European economic and business interests. Fortunately, that was not the case and the Newly Independent States businessmen made excellent use of the center.

Ambassador Robert Hunter was our U.S. Representative to the U.S. Mission to NATO. Imagine serving in a country with three high profile political appointee ambassadors, all of whom have a reputation for excellence in their field. Trust me; we had to dance a very delicate diplomatic dance internally to maintain collaboration among the three ambassadors.

Ambassador Marc Grossman alerted me when preparations were being made for the annual NATO ministerial meetings. Marc knew how to deal with the potential sensitivities of all three gentlemen as he arranged for the motorcade with then Secretary Christopher from the airport. At one point Marc said, "Can you imagine what a task I have before me with respect to who rides with the Secretary from the airport?" I jokingly replied, "Marc you can make a stop along the way to switch the ambassadors so that all get to have face-time with the Secretary." I did not envy Marc's position.

Christopher was an avid tennis player as was Eizenstat, Marc warned Eizenstat not to bring his yellow pad to the tennis court to discuss work. The Secretary wanted to relax and to play tennis. We were told that Ambassador Eizenstat brought his yellow pad just in case the opportunity presented itself to discuss an issue. I have no idea what transpired, but I smile when I think how personal idiosyncrasies must be considered.

*Q: Now how about your relations with your- did you have a counterpart relation with the other two missions, U.S. missions?*

ELAM-THOMAS: There were three PAOs since there were three missions in Brussels. I was considered first among equals because the embassy PAO had budget oversight for both the USEU and NATO missions. My goal was to minimize inevitable tensions particularly since both PAOs were women. I employed more of my diplomatic skills with respect to internal negotiations than outside of the mission. I recognized all of us were operating in a predominantly male oriented profession and we all needed to succeed. I had to work very carefully not to alienate either one of them. Sometimes it was very difficult. These challenges prepared me for my next/unexpected Washington assignment as USIA Counselor and to coordinate the integration of USIA into the State Department.

*Q: Before we go back to Washington, this is an interesting observation here because where we do have several missions we find that the U.S. mission to that host country was in charge of bi-lateral relations. As you've already pointed out, the embassy had the responsibility of providing the resource support to the other missions. You obviously had separate budgetary guidelines for each mission. Was there any lesson learned area that you found useful as you're about to delve into your next assignment?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes. I had to learn to listen more to the other perspective. I know I give speeches about listening all the time. In this instance, I had to practice what I preach.

I had to understand the different kinds of demands to support their day-to-day operation. When they recognized I really heard their concerns that action helped minimize the inherent tension that I knew existed. Each female officer dealt with male counterparts who were not always supportive. We tried to manage our operations well. My listening was critical to supporting the U. S. Mission to the EU and the U.S. Mission to NATO.

*Q: I noticed in reading some of your background material that you were a member of the U.S. delegation to the 25th United Nations General Assembly. At what point in your career did that happen?*

ELAM-THOMAS: It was in 1971. As a program officer in the Office of Youth, Students and Special Programs in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) before the bureau became part of USIA.

*Q: Before integration.*

ELAM-THOMAS: No, not the USIA-State integration which took place in 1999. The ECA Bureau was always part of the State Department. All Cultural Attaches were seconded to USIA to take on their overseas assignments.

About a year after I had been in the office, I was selected to be the youth delegate during the 25<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly (UNGA). Then Ambassador George Herbert Walker Bush was the chief of the U.S. mission to the UN. Arthur Fletcher was one of the delegates. Bernard Zagorin was the other. While editing this document, I learned that Zagorin passed away March 18, 2015 at 95. He was the person to whom I reported. I was tasked to write a report on the potential impact of the youth delegates who attended the 25 UNGA.

Each morning I sat in the General Assembly sessions and listened to heads of state deliver their country's message which sounded so much like boiler plate that I had to force myself to stay awake. I began to wonder if these sessions were more photo ops than substance. Later during my first week, we attended sessions of the Economic and Social Council as well as other working group meetings. All of a sudden, the topics were interesting and I realized that the action work of the UN takes place in those sessions. I also noted that the few young diplomats present were not considered even worthy of recognition. It was as if to satisfy some new requirement the youth delegates were there merely to window dress.

In my report I recommended a far more inclusive work-oriented plan for the youth delegates. Rather than have us provide our views in separate messages to the committees, we should be allowed to be an integral part of the committees with assigned topics to research and analyze. We wanted to have a platform to remind the clearly aging members of the delegation that our views would have merit particularly since we were the next generation of world diplomats.

Ambassador Zagorin's response to my report was positive. I just came across a note from him in which he said we will certainly share the findings with other members of the U.S. Mission to the UN. From his perspective, the recommendations I made had merit.

*Q: Well what were some of the major issues that they addressed?*

ELAM-THOMAS: To be very candid with you I do not remember for this document was written in 1971 or 1972. I do remember there were many newly independent nations from Sub-Saharan Africa. While their heads of state were venerable older men, many of their delegation members were my age.

*Q: I think for the record it would be useful if you could just expound just a little bit about what does a U.S. delegation- what does it do, what are their interests, responsibilities?*

ELAM-THOMAS: The delegations are there to inform other member nations the U.S. position on a host of international issues from human rights, to nuclear weapons to human trafficking, etc. Our Permanent Representative (the ambassador) could not possibly cover all of the issues alone and thus the U.S. Mission section heads led the charge on their subject areas. No doubt each section had to meet with the various interest groups present at this UNGA session. Those interest groups were of course lobbyists. From our observations of the senior officers, we learned how some of these lobbying groups provided critical information on issues which were highly technical. It was there that I learned that these interest groups offered a valuable service to diplomats when it came to drafting highly complex scientific proposals for consideration of the full UN membership. U.S. delegates were briefed each morning and had their talking points and U.S. positions to share with other member nations. The goal was to garner as much support for our interests from other delegates and this was often done through one-on-one conversations. Delegates also had to be prepared to articulate our perspectives in various working group meetings.

There were many high profile "representational" receptions during that UNGA. I could see how such settings were far more conducive to informal negotiations than sitting in a conference room. These social gatherings often took place in the Delegate's Lounge or reception areas. With today's tense security climate, I doubt that many receptions are held within the UN buildings.

*Q: And the way these delegations are structured they receive their instructions from the departments, from international organizations or did they receive them from the permanent mission?*

ELAM-THOMAS: They received them from the department of IO (Bureau of International Organization Affairs). There were subject matter experts: e.g., environmentalists, nuclear physicists, chemical engineers, medical doctors and others with critical expertise. The SALT talks were on the agenda well before we had to address the sophisticated weaponry that we have now. However, the delegation members got their instructions from IO.

*Q: And what was a highlight of that assignment that you had as a member of the U.S. delegation? What did you take away from it as far as your own professional development?*

ELAM-THOMAS: That America wasn't the only game on the planet. There are knowledgeable, talented, well versed communicators from every part of the world. I sat in awe listening to delegates from the Caribbean, from Asia and Latin America as they explained their country's position often in superb English. Without a doubt, English may not have been their first language. I was only 30 or 31 and found this incredibly impressive. I quickly realized I had to sit back and absorb the fact that the United States is not the only country capable of producing representatives/diplomats. Many of them were far better informed than I was because they had done their research. If they had not done it, they were equipped with excellent staffers to provide them the information needed. Of course ninety percent of these individuals were male. That also struck me. Again, this was 1971 and I should not have been surprised. Fortunately, there are a few more women in key UN positions today.

*Q: Well I thought it was very useful for you to note this as a part of your oral history because it is an important part of the professional role of a diplomat that not all diplomats unfortunately have the opportunity to participate. It's the ultimate form of articulation for U.S. policy.*

ELAM-THOMAS: You are absolutely correct. If I may, let me fast-forward for just a moment while I remember? As counselor of USIA I organized and was part of a more senior U.S. delegation to a UNESCO meeting in Stockholm. The U.S. had pulled out of UNESCO for we were dissatisfied with the management of that UN organization. When we attended the Stockholm meetings, we had observer status only. However, the U.S. was allowed to state our position during the plenary sessions. As we entered the elegant conference setting, we were directed to our places in the back of the room where all observer delegates were seated. That was a sobering experience for each one of us. The Vatican was an observer, but they were used to the seating. For the slightly self-assured academic scholars and myself all seated in the back of the auditorium, it was a brand new experience.

Fortunately my work as a cultural attaché put me in touch with a host of anthropologists and cultural experts at American's foremost museums including the Smithsonian. Therefore, I had little difficulty in selecting credible delegates to this meeting. We all agreed it was a humbling experience.

As I exited the meeting session during a break, I met one of my top contacts and respected interlocutors from my time as Branch PAO in Istanbul, Turkey. In the early 1990's Dr. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu directed The Islamic Research Center. Ihsanoglu Headed the Organization of Islamic Cooperation from 2004-2014. He was an unsuccessful candidate in the 2014 Turkish Presidential elections and in 2015 announced his candidacy to represent Istanbul's District 2 for the Nationalist Movement Party.

Ihsanoglu and his wife have remained in touch with me especially during Christmas and Moslem holidays since my time in Turkey. I was honored to be invited to celebrate the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the OIC at the UNGA in 2012. I was told that the invitation came specifically at the request of Dr. Ihsanoglu. I attended the reception and briefly met the current Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In October 2013, Ihsanoglu invited me to attend another event in Washington, DC when he received a lifetime achievement award from the East-West Institute in DC. I mention this meeting because this international setting, as the UNGA, provided me and a host of other attendees that kind of access.

*Q: This is a most interesting observation and I wanted to ask you about that and I think back to the delegation that went to San Francisco in 1945 where- and Ralph Bunche was a member of that delegation and he had been working very closely with Eleanor Roosevelt on Declaration of the human rights articles. And without going into the details for this oral history but he did collaborate with a delegation from New Zealand on the incorporation of the human rights articles.*

*Did you have any of those experiences, particularly with UNESCO when we were not a member on collaborating with any other delegations on positions that we felt very strongly about?*

ELAM-THOMAS: I do believe we did. The others listened attentively for after all we are still the United States of America. I counseled our delegation to comport themselves in a very careful manner. If we wanted to have our language incorporated in the final communiqué, we should not alienate our colleagues. We should always begin our interjection with, “We would like to suggest that you consider this point in light of your perspectives...” I did not think it would be helpful to begin each interjection with: “the United States delegation in its observer status believes such and such ...” While delegations may be accustomed to hearing that formal language, but craft your statements in a less provocative manner. Our group followed that suggestion. Ambassador E. Michael Southwick was the ranking delegation member at that time and he made the presentation. I must say it was difficult to be the outsider looking in. Once again this was a humbling experience.

*Q: Well you mention that this happened, that you had this experience when you were the counselor, which for the record was the senior most career position in the United States Information Agency and in fact you were the last acting director of that agency before it was incorporated and folded into the State Department. Was this your next assignment after Brussels?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes it was. I received a call from then-director Joseph Duffey while I was in Brussels. He asked that I return to Washington to be the Counselor of USIA. I was absolutely flabbergasted. I said to myself, what have I done to deserve this? We were all keenly aware that USIA would be part and parcel of the Department of State by 1999. I also was seized by the fact that Counselor was the senior career position at USIA. The Director and Deputy Director were always political appointees. As I mused about this

officer, I got a call from Asst. Sec. Patrick Kennedy who said, they needed a consensus builder in this position. He emphasized what I already knew that the transition would be difficult. They wanted a career officer who could work effectively with the Department of State throughout this complex process. I kept thinking of the many elements: personnel, budget, and geographic, regional and functional bureaus. Never mind the mammoth task of melding two very different cultures. I spent much time researching corporate mergers and was even more sobered by the challenge, but I accepted the task.

*Q: Did you bring in any outside consultants?*

ELAM-THOMAS: No we did not bring in outside consultants. I relied on the recommendation of various case studies from the private sector to serve as a kind of template. I was painfully aware that the flexibility which existed in the corporate world did not obtain in the government. I would have to work within limited parameters and that was it.

To be most candid with you there are many USIA colleagues who will never be able to accept the fact that there is an institution that was their home for 40 years will never exist again. To be even more candid, I know their concerns had merit. However, there is no turning back no matter how many studies have been written. USIA no longer exists in today's environment, but USIA's steady, multifaceted approach led to successes during the Cold War era and resulted in the fall of the Berlin Wall and the USSR. We should always be proud of that positive legacy.

The challenge: Approximately 6,600 people USIA staffers sought guidance from the Counselor's office on how to mesh their work in the new environment. They lost budget and program control and yet they were gaining access and providing input to the decision makers in the Department, something much needed to improve overall programs.

In preparation for the actual merger, I traveled abroad to several PAO conferences in different geographic regions. On a few trips, Pat Kennedy accompanied me to lessen the anxiety as he outlined and explained the intricacies of the process. Again and again, I thank the senior USIA policy officers, budget officials and area directors for arming me with sufficient information to further allay justified fears and uncertainty from our respected colleagues in the field. When I reflect on the complexities, it is mind boggling. Imagine trying to mesh, country plan objectives, personnel systems, warehouses and the ever complexities of human beings. I had more food for thought than an appetite for it. The USIA staff was incredibly supportive. Bean counting does not work when you are dealing with changing a person's position and opinion on the USG's stance on an issue. How do you quantify changing behaviors? You are not tracking the number of adjudicated visas. You are not recording the number of passports issued. Fortunately, there were USIA colleagues who were able to craft a way in which we could make credible predictions of the value of the agency's work over its 40 year history.

Suppose 500-1000 people attend a theatrical, orchestral or dance performance. How can you indicate how this cultural experience changed opinion about the United States? The

Miller Crouch's USIA's former EU Director and senior policy person, helped us craft a credible report which met that requirement. Steve Chaplin was another who helped me understand how our goals and objectives could be integrated into the Department of State. The area directors were superb colleagues at a very difficult time. Their steadfast support in making sure I had all the data necessary every time I entered an integration meeting at State. That support strengthened my resolve to be totally supportive of them in whatever way I could. I remembered how several of my predecessors treated area directors and I did not wish to repeat their mistakes. The area directors and senior policy officers are the brain trust of USIA. They must be respected. Their careers led to a proficiency in a host of foreign languages, cultures and tradition and governments. My career assignments as with many meant I had minimal insight into the NEA region or the East Asian region. I had not studied those languages. Those area directors knew their regions were walking encyclopedias re those areas. I will never forget the excellent presentation which was done for me to give on how USIA would reach the Muslim community during the first Gulf War and shortly after the bombing in Bali. Their expertise was critical and I knew that my State colleagues were impressed with their in depth knowledge of those regions.

Shortly after my arrival as Counselor, the 1997 the financial crisis in Thailand gripped much of East Asia. It raised fears of a worldwide economic meltdown. At the time, Thailand had acquired a burden of [foreign debt](#) that made the country effectively bankrupt even before the collapse of its currency. As the crisis spread, most of Southeast Asia and Japan saw slumping currencies, devalued stock markets and other asset prices. Indonesia, [South Korea](#) and [Thailand](#) were the countries most affected by the crisis. [Hong Kong](#), [Laos](#), [Malaysia](#) and the [Philippines](#) were also hurt by the slump. The impact on all exchange programs in the region and Fulbrighters assigned to those countries meant we had to make wise decisions on how to handle all of these things.

I relied on the East Asia area director and deputies who prepared excellent briefs, recommendations. It was if they had been accustomed to crisis management along with the standard information and cultural programming. I knew that detailed research was done before we mounted a program in any geographic region, but I was not sure my State colleagues knew this. I was exceedingly proud of my colleagues. Throughout this crisis,, they demonstrated that USIA was a far more “substantive” organization than most of our State colleagues realized in the past.

*Q: You've decided to answer a question that I didn't ask and I was going to ask it; I'm going to ask it so you can go on and expound on it because this is one of the challenges of the history of public diplomacy and with USIA and later the Department of State being lead agencies on its execution. What were the major challenges in making- there had been changes before as you've already spoken about and the old CU, Bureau of Culture and Education Department was part of State and then it became a part of USIA. There was the Office of the Inspector General, which actually moved to the Department of State before USIA went out of business in 1996, some three or four years before Department of State had the responsibility of oversight.*

ELAM-THOMAS: That's right, that's right.

*Q: So there was always this fluidity of focus on the execution of public diplomacy in all of the program planning. This probably is the historical highlight in the U.S. Government of refocusing this mechanism and the execution of public diplomacy. What were the major challenges that you were faced with other than the logistical kinds of things that you've already recounted here. There are mindsets involved, not only within USIA, those who had come to think that this was the only way it could be done but there was also a mindset in the receiving such proposals and you had to deal with that. Can you talk to that for a minute?*

ELAM-THOMAS: One must remember that the people with whom I interacted were the senior leadership in the Department, many of whom were political appointees. There were also career officers at the next level. I knew I had to craft my approach to each group separately. Interestingly enough, the mindsets and perceptions of the career USIA and State career officers proved to be hardest to change. The political appointees were much less wedded to a 40-year history or attachment to USIA.

For State officers, policy formulation was the primary concern. In their minds, how USIA articulated or promoted that policy was secondary. It was always hard to get our area directors' input early on in policy deliberations. My goal with this integration was to increase if not ensure that our input/opinions were discussed and given a fair hearing prior to launching an advocacy campaign in places like Iraq, Afghanistan or Pakistan. Of course this was well before 9/11, but we were still feeling the results of the first Gulf War.

*Q: Advisors and trainers?*

ELAM-THOMAS: No, I was not referring to advisors or training. USIA did not have the role of the more recent Strategic Communications units which came into existence at DOD after 9/11.

*Q: What we had- We did have the incursion in Iraq with Kuwait.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, that's right, we had advisors at that time

*Q: Ninety-two?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Ninety one or ninety two. I cannot remember.

*Q: Ninety-two.*

ELAM-THOMAS: My constant goal was to demonstrate to State colleagues the value of conducting public opinion poll research before we took action in a country and before we envisioned any USIA program for the country. State officers did not seem aware that we placed such value in advance research or that we did such research. As they learned how we operated, they understood the soundness of our approach. This was an "ah-ha"

moment. I was relieved for after I had attended senior meetings four days out of five a week in the State Department chaired by Strobe Talbott or Tom Pickering chaired I no longer received a bemused look when I spoke about press analyses and public opinion research. I purposely minimized reporting on performing artists or exchange programs unless they had an immediate political impact. I reminded the senior State colleagues that all USIA programs were mounted only after careful analyses of target audiences. The assumption that public diplomacy was in essence public relations persisted and we had to dissuade our State colleagues from that misperception.. Many political appointees often thought that the terms were interchangeable. That is precisely why there was an increased interest in branding. Some thought one could bring the Madison Avenue approach to winning friends and influencing people. They quickly learned conventional product marketing and advertising campaign approaches do not work. America is not a product to be sold. The emphasis on standard logos for all USIA posts abroad did not work. Videos showing the successes of Muslims in America fell on deaf ears. Nothing can replace the face-to-face encounter to really change perceptions of America.

Throughout the integration process, I used all of the diplomatic skills I could muster in Washington, DC. I know I did not always succeed for I was saddled with an unenviable position. As with political campaigns, each side would cling to its ideology. Never the twain shall meet. In preparation for my teaching, I have read scores of articles and studies on Public Diplomacy. Some by American and several are written by foreign authors. I am encouraged by the fact there are more tangible of effective Public Diplomacy programs in the U.S. and abroad. Of course these successes reignite the views of the former USIA officers who long for the rebirth of the agency.

*Q: Who did you choose as the main State colleague who would give USIA's interests a fair hearing?*

ELAM-THOMAS: In State?

*Q: Now I know I'm getting away from the point*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, yes.

*Q: They had to make the merger happen.*

ELAM-THOMAS: I knew they had to make it happen so I worked with the assumption that I need not waste precious time trying to seek an advocate for USIA's position.

*Q: But someone else had to receive it and then make sure that the new structure understood it and whether it was the undersecretary of whatever, who was your target?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Well I may not have had a target but I had an advocate.

*Q: Okay, who was your advocate?*

ELAM-THOMAS: It was Marc Grossman.

*Q: Marc who? For the record do you want to say who- what he did?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Marc Grossman was then an area director and he became undersecretary, as we now know. My confidence in working with Marc confirms what I always believe and that is the value of relationship building. We served together in Turkey from 1990-1994. He was Abramowitz' DCM at the time. We all know Mark's career and even in the late 1990's, he had access to the movers and shakers in the Department. I kept Marc informed of most of USIA's integration progress. He helped me navigate the manner in which to facilitate USIA's smoother integrations to State. Fortunately, when Marc was EU Assistant Secretary, Brian Carlson was USIA's EU Area Director. The calm, studied approach of Brian to be the first PD Director in State's European Area was a model for the integration of the rest of the bureaus.

*Q: You mentioned that he was an area director. There are some who would say that there was unevenness in terms of area director integration after USIA's official transfer to State.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

*Q: In the execution of public diplomacy among the bureaus. Some bureaus integrated it directly into their structure, other bureaus say go there, do whatever you do, just don't get in my way, and other bureaus fully integrated the USIA area directors. Wasn't this your responsibility.*

ELAM-THOMAS: No it was not.

*Q: But did you anticipate this?*

ELAM-THOMAS: We did. And as a result of a key decision based on recommendations from none other than Miller Crouch, Brian Carlson was the area director to be the first to physically move his entire bureau to State. Brian had the right personality. He worked in concert with Marc Grossman and the result was a success story. Candidly, I must say, it is one of the few that turned out to be a success. The other area directors tried, but none of them succeeded in fully integrating the way Brian Carlson did with Marc Grossman. It was masterful and both of them deserve the credit for the success.

*Q: The undersecretary for public affairs- of public diplomacy and public affairs came after the consolidation?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes. Evelyn Lieberman was the first one.

*Q: Lieberman was the first.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

*Q: I don't remember how long after '99 her position was created.*

ELAM-THOMAS: She came aboard before the actual ceremony handing of the keys to state took place on October 1, 1999. Albright, Lieberman and I took part in that ceremony in front of USIA. Lieberman did not remain in the position from October 1999 to January 19, 2001

*Q: So the people you had, from USIA in preparation for this transition included: Janet Brambilla, Rick Ruth, Miller Crouch, Stan Silverman?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, that's correct.

*Q: Anyone else?*

ELAM-THOMAS: I don't think Steve Chaplin had retired yet and he was critical to the move.

*Q: For the record, Janet Brambilla was head of personnel.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, she was. Also Rick Ruth was our policy guru and I gather Rich is still working in the front offices of ECA at the Department. He is a Civil Service employee and thus would not have to retire at 65.

*Q: He's back in ECA now.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

*Q: I'm asking these lead questions because again, I think that this is an important historical record.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

*Q: -and that in as such your own career and your contributions. Did you find that there was an understanding of PD work? Well. How did you perceive of the- what was now called the undersecretary of public diplomacy and public affairs? What was the intent of that office? It certainly was not in a supervisory role. It was not in a management role, either. It had no budget. How did you see that, the development and all; what was the purpose of that office as a part of the consolidation process? What was the original intent?*

ELAM-THOMAS: I'm not sure what the original intent was but my perception was that it was created to appease USIA. If there we not an Under Secretary with that title, your work would not be considered equal in value to all of the other bureaus. As for the original intent, I would not venture to say that I know. There have been six individuals in that position since 2001. Few of them remained more than 20 months.

*Q. Except for Karen Hughes.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Except for Karen Hughes, that's right.

*Q: I think that this is a key, one of the key elements from the State side of the house and I realize this might be getting ahead and outside of the purview of your professional responsibilities but what I wanted to do is to see if there were any conceptual ends in the creation of that office, whether they were going to leave it up to the area directors to define the execution of public diplomacy as they perceived.*

ELAM-THOMAS: I would think that the area directors would be the only individuals who could define the execution of public diplomacy programs. The Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, no matter how well versed in the media, media analysis, etc., could begin to understand the complexities of audiences around the world. At the time of this interview, I believe Judith McHale of the Discovery Channel was in that position but left in 2011. Charlotte Beers the Madison Avenue guru succeed Evelyn Lieberman and remained from October 2001 until March 2004. The list goes on and at the time of this edit, Richard Stengel is the Under Secretary.

*Q: Karen Hughes left?*

ELAM-THOMAS: She's just left, that's right. Once again, I remind the readers that America is not a product. We are dealing with human relations and behavioral patterns. To have an impact on either requires different skills and sensitive approaches. Your interactions with interlocutors must be sincere. As Americans often think that you can win friends and influence people by the mere fact of our presence and our present stature in the world. Other cultures are steeped in history and they consider historical precedence before they take actions. We don't have that lengthy history. We must recognize that if we're going to develop a sincere relationship with someone from Iran, from Iraq, from France. Whenever you travel in Europe, you see visible reminders of World War I. In the U.S. you do not have daily reminders of a war on your soil. Sadly, we now have Ground Zero. We dare not rely on a high tech approach to establish a meaningful relationship with audience members. Unless we delve deeply into our host audience's culture our messages may not bring the behavior change which we wish. We all know traditional diplomacy takes time and effective public diplomacy takes a very long time. The inevitable question remains, do we have the patience to gain the results we want.

One example which comes to mind on the mistakes we have made since the integrations is Karen Hughes' video for Muslim audiences. The PD team produced a film about the successes of people of Islamic faith in the United States. When I visited one of our posts in Doha he noted that none of the media outlets would show the film. It should not be surprised that the film was perceived as patronizing. No one bothered to reflect on how it would appear that all of a sudden Muslims in America had positive things to offer America. We tend to ignore the history of other parts of the world. I think we're beginning to learn, and I'm not sure we've totally learned that yet.

*Q: Well I think that what we should do, and incidentally when do you want to take a break? Why don't we take a break right now?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

*Q: And we will come back and we will transition from this part into general career highlights.*

*Okay. Why don't we continue with your role as the senior career person in USIA and in fact you were the acting director.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Acting Deputy Director not Director. Joseph Duffey left and Penn Kemble became Acting Director and I became the Acting Deputy Director.

*Q: Acting Deputy Director during the consolidation of the public diplomacy, i.e., USIA, into the Department of State. What were some of the major personnel challenges you were confronted with in making sure that the transition of the infrastructure stayed intact, and that includes not only from the personnel perspective with a capital P but also looking at the very enviable training program that USIA conducted and how it was assimilated or re-assimilated into the overall structure of the Foreign Service Institute.*

ELAM-THOMAS: We covered some of this a bit earlier, but now to the some of the details which I did not mention.

With State's FSI's a university-like setting and large student body, we knew our training program would have to meld into FSI's existing curriculum. There were, however, areas in which USIA did longer and more in-depth courses because we had fewer people to train and the officers had to know intricacies of cultures to be effective. To my pleasant relief, the integration of both training programs was smoother than I ever expected. Dr. Katherine Lee directed our training operation and she worked effectively with her State colleagues during the transition. I was glad that FSI leadership recognized the strengths of PAO, IO and CAO courses. We focused on the ever-present cultural sensitivities and traditions critical to our officers gaining credible access to target audiences. State welcomed the USIA training teachers and kept the USIA trainers in charge of PD-related courses. It has been encouraging to see that most of the PD courses to this day are taught by former USIA officers. Granted this assessment is a very personal one. I have no idea what might be the view of future State Department inspectors.

The story of USIA's final two promotion panels was not as smooth as the training program story I just related. Our USIA budget included sufficient funds for a credible number of promotions at the various rank with particular emphasis on the SFS ranks. When I presented the final list of officers recommended for promotion to my DG colleagues at State, I met significant resistance. The Director General, based on the analyses of their numbers crunchers asked, "How can you approve the promotion of these individuals at this point with integration on the horizon?" I responded, "Because we made

certain our budget would provide adequate resources for the FSOs who genuinely merited promotions. Why should they be denied advancement in the hierarchy merely because of the integration? After all, at that time we were still an independent agency.” Two years in a row I had to make that case with the Directors General. I had to use all the diplomacy I could muster. I must admit, near the end of both meetings, I wasn’t terribly diplomatic. Something tells me the DGs did not expect such a firm response from me, but I held fast to my position. I finally got the necessary “go ahead” from the DGs and both promotion lists were approved.

As I reflect on my career, it is interesting that I have served on several Selection Panels. Of course I met the legal requirement for women and minorities and that is probably why I had this experience a bit more often than others. The last time I was a panelist was during my time as a diplomat in residence at the University of Central Florida. I noted that many former USIA officers were not only competitive with their State colleagues; they received high scores from State officers and public members of the panel. Why? These officers were experienced human resource managers and financial managers. They had been responsible for program budgets before the integration. Such skills were not part of a political or an economic officer’s portfolio.

*Q: Before we move away from this historic assignment as counselor, I’d like to go into your assignment as diplomat in residence at the University of Central Florida. Before we go there, are there any other significant observations during the period as counselor of the Agency that you’d like to address?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Not at the moment.

*Q: Good.*

*How did you get the next assignment, which was your final assignment as a career diplomat, as a diplomat in residence at the University of Central Florida? Was it something that you sought out or something that just happened?*

ELAM-THOMAS: I did not seek this assignment. Trust me, after running an embassy and dealing with the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, I was ready to retire. That was what I thought. Then Director General, Ambassador Ruth Davis, called and said to me Harriet, “We need to have more women and minorities in this business and I’m convinced that I’m still here on the planet because there’s still work for me to do.” Anyone who knows Ruth Davis understands that you should not decline or reject this request. Ambassador Davis had rallied back after a major health challenge. I agreed to do the job for a year and began the domestic assignment with the same enthusiasm I had given my overseas assignments.

As a kind of “cultural immersion,” I met with all UCF deans. Of course I noted that at that time only one of the deans was a woman. That has changed in the 12 years I have been here. Whenever I made presentations on Foreign Service Careers, academic colleagues would refer to me as a kind of Pied Piper for foreign affairs. With their

refreshing honesty, students would say when they heard an ambassador was coming, they did not think they would see a woman. I did not the perception most held of diplomats; an elderly white haired gentleman in a pinned striped suit. I was approachable. Upon reflection, I was probably too accessible and found myself overly programmed. During the first four months at UCF, I gave about 42 presentations not only on campus, but at Rotary Clubs, Bar Associations, civic groups and at educational conferences.

The work was satisfying. Prior to my arrival on this campus, I would venture to say few of these students knew about the State Department or diplomacy. When I mentioned The State Department at career fairs, some students thought they could find my office in Tallahassee, Florida's capital. They thought it meant the state of Florida. The students now have a view of the world beyond Disney and Universal. They are now genuinely interested traditional diplomatic careers, The United Nations, The Peace Corps, The World Bank and other NGOs. Few knew the meaning of Non-Governmental Organizations. (NGO). I finished one year thanks to excellent support from our Human Resources and Recruitment colleagues. To ensure my message was inclusive of all in my audiences, I would preface my remarks/my pitch with, "I am here to speak with you about inclusion and a truly diverse foreign service. That means men and women in the Foreign Service who didn't go only to Yale, Princeton, Harvard or Stanford. That means white males as well as women and minorities. There's a wide spectrum of universities in the United States from which we need to draw our talent. So I don't want all the white males to get up and leave the room." I got such a treat watching the faces of my audience members relax. They seemed to welcome my candid remarks at the outset of my talks. Since my arrival on this campus we have had four Pickering Fellows and two Rangels. All are not minorities and those who are not have been first generation college attendees. I estimate there have been 20 who received State Department Internships. Four of my students who have gone on to graduate school have attended the London School of Economics, George Washington and American Universities and other respected schools of international affairs. The thank you notes and descriptions of students' graduate study or exchange experiences and comments from political science professors confirm the information I have shared had relevance.

After my first year at UCF I was ready to leave. UCF President John Hitt asked if the State Department would allow me to spend a second year. His letter to The Department with a request for my extension was approved.

At the end of that second year I reached that magic age of retirement. Lo and behold, I receive another letter from President Hitt expressing his interest to establish a Diplomacy Program. Two years of work the State of Florida's bureaucracy, almost equal to the U.S. Government, UCF received approval to offer a Diplomacy Certificate Program. In 2013, the program has proven successful enough to be designated as a minor in the Political Science Department. The new Security Studies Program has also been designated a minor.

I have been most fortunate to work in a very welcoming environment, the Office of Global Perspectives. The Director, John Bersia, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist is

President Hitt's Special Assistant for Global Perspectives. President Hitt hired John in 2000 with a vision to internationalize the University of Central Florida.

The past ten years have been amazing. I never expected to have this totally new window on America and life in my own country as I have since my arrival at this university. I have been most gratifying.

*Q: So you transitioned from Diplomat in Residence to Director of the Diplomacy Program?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

*Q: Do we still have a diplomat in residence?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, I believe the 2014-2015 DIR is at University of Florida in Miami.

We have had them at FAMU for Florida A&M University. As of the 2014-2015 academic year, the Diplomat in Residence hold the position for Florida International University and Miami Dade University. It has been a pleasure to see engaged younger FSO present to audiences the multifaceted elements of Foreign Service careers with such enthusiasm. I have listened to two of the DIRs not-resident in Central Florida make realistic yet convincing presentations of FSO careers and watched with great delight the genuine interest which their talks inspired.

*Q: Now when you went into the assignment as diplomat in residence did you replace anyone or was it a newly established program?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Very good question. I was the first Diplomat-in-Residence in Florida. It was a newly established program. I covered all of Central Florida and the universities in Tampa.

*Q: So you established it and then you went on and built on it.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes. I attribute my success in this new venture to my dear USIA colleague the late Pamela Corey Archer. Pamela was the model for most of the new DIRs in 2003. During the Washington Briefings for DIRs, Pamela offered excellent tips on how to effectively reach students during information session. This was before the Department produced the sophisticated videos/DVDs which they now use and which could convince many to think very seriously about a diplomatic career. We were always in competition with the private sector/corporate world who have the financial resources to do a high-tech production to entice candidates to work for their companies. We certainly miss Pamela's incredible energy and commitment to the university students. She left an enduring legacy and would be proud to see the current Florida DIR in action.

*Q: For the record, do you want to just explain, we've been talking about Dips in Residence. And for the record this is a continuation of an interview with Harriet Elam-Thomas, June 24, 2011.*

*You want to just explain in a couple of minutes what the diplomat in residence program is and any other information as far as how expansive it is?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Diplomats in Residence (DIRs) are career Foreign Service Officers located throughout the U.S. who provide guidance and advice on careers, internships and fellowships to students and professionals in the communities they serve. DIRs are available to answer questions and share insight with those interested in Foreign and Civil Service careers, internships and fellowships. I believe the initial focus was to inform those university students not attending Ivy League schools and major urban universities throughout the U.S. The Department was operating under the view that the majority of young officers in the existing talent pool attended those institutions.

The Department wanted to reach out to schools with significant minority enrollments, women and first generation university attendees. Again early on this mean universities in Oklahoma, New Mexico, Florida and others located in the Mid-West, North West and Southern part of the U.S. If we were to bring to the negotiating table only the perspective of those trained at these Ivy League schools, they may not offer the diversity of thought needed when negotiating in the developing world. For example, during my 42 years in this business, I met only two Native Americans. We now operate in a world where the leadership includes individuals not from the western industrialized nations. Our overseas colleagues are from Asia, Africa and Latin America, the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. By incorporating individuals from all economic, ethnic, racial and gender groups, The State Department could be far more effective in establishing genuine rapport with their host counterparts.

*Q: I sense from your response that what we are really talking about, we're not talking about something as simplistic as an extension of a recruiting program, that this is an outreach program.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Correct.

*Q: One of the major goals of DIRs: To educating our young college students and through them the community not only what diplomacy is, but providing the next generation a broader understanding of the global world in which we live?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

*Q: And I also sense from your response that you carry the same enthusiasm and motivation from a career diplomat on articulating U.S. policy, culture and society to audiences abroad to also extend them that same type of understanding to domestic audiences. You seem to have enjoyed being a diplomat in residence whose goals were a bit different from being a diplomat. Am I right?*

ELAM-THOMAS: You couldn't have captured that better. In fact, I happened to see before I walked into here today, I received my last "evaluation" report as a diplomat in residence. In the hopes that the observations noted in it may be helpful to those who might find themselves working as a DIR at the University of Central Florida.

*Q: Are you referring to the State Departments evaluation reports?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes. This is an excerpt written by John Bersia, my host in the Office of Global Perspectives. "The Special Assistant for Global Perspectives at the University of Central Florida observes that Harriet Elam-Thomas has become a mini institution on the campus. Her contributions went far beyond the conventional DIR duties. Students used her presentation style to give their own presentations not because that may have resulted in higher grades, but because they admired her leadership style. She was hands on when necessary, disciplined and action oriented. After careful consideration of all options, the students believed they could succeed if they emulated the ambassador's practices.

And in the box for employee comments, I noted that it takes a nation to embrace its greatest asset. America is comprised of a multi-cultural citizenry that truly reflects today's world. My work as a DIR in Central Florida demonstrated that the Department is on the path to ensure we have diplomats which really represent all of America. As I addressed Florida-hosted university conferences on international affairs, moderated panels on human trafficking, addressed UN themed programs, Rotary Clubs, and addressed UCF leadership training institutes, I delivered a subtle yet profound message. Yes I, even I (an African American women who grew up in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement of the 60's) could become a successful diplomat, speak three foreign languages and represent the United States with credibility and integrity abroad.

*Q: This is a long ways from the little Elam girl who was brought up in a loving and supportive family who also was very fortunate to have very supportive siblings who played a major role in getting the little Elam girl to this final chapter in this oral history of Ambassador Harriet Elam-Thomas. Thank you so much.*

ELAM-THOMAS: I thank you for having taken the time to be with me. It seems fitting that in October I received The 2010 Onyx Global Award in Central Florida. The students who paid tribute to me in a video for that ceremony confirmed that my work had value. They now considered themselves open to the world. Once again, I say a very special thank you to you.

*Q: And a thank you to you again, Ambassador Harriet Elam-Thomas. This concludes the interview on June 24, 2011, which was commenced on June 2, 2006 by Jim Dandridge.*

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*Q: Okay today is February 16, 2017. This is Mark Tauber and we are resuming our interview with Ambassador Elam and, can you pronounce it for me so I get it correct.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Sure. I use Elam-Thomas. During my entire professional life, my colleagues knew me as Harriet Elam. While I wished to keep my maiden name, I wanted to be respectful of my husband and decided on the hyphenated version of Elam-Thomas.

*Q: Okay so now what we are going to do in this interview is we are going to return to your tenure as U.S. Ambassador to Senegal and we generally ask how did it end up that you were selected for Senegal? Was it something you went after or did events simply end up you were recommended for it and that is what happened?*

ELAM-THOMAS: As Counselor of the U.S. Information Agency, I reviewed all submissions to State for senior assignments. About ten months in my position, Secretary Albright sent a message to Director Joseph Duffey and USAID Director Brian Atwood to include more women in the lists of proposed nominees for DCM and COM assignments. In light of Albright's directive, Director Duffey informed me that the next USIA submission to the secretary of state would include sent a much shorter list and that my name would be on it. To guard against the perception of self-aggrandizement, I never considered putting my name on any of the lists submitted to Duffey.

Shortly after the list was sent, USIA received the list of potential COM assignments. It included Cyprus, Senegal and several other countries. Because I spoke Greek and Turkish spent 17 years of my career in the Levant, I feared the Clinton administration consider it a wise political move to send a woman of color to Europe. Inevitably, I would encounter a Cypriot official who knew me from my earlier Fulbright Commission-related visits to meet with education ministry official in then the green zone when I was CAO in Athens. I informed the then Director General Edward "Skip" Gnehm, that I would welcome the opportunity to serve in Senegal or Cyprus. I knew the Department was under pressure to demonstrate more diversity in European assignments. However, I assured the Director General I would not mind returning to a country where I served as a junior diplomat. I did not say specifically Senegal because there were two or three other African assignments on the list. That is how the process began.

*Q: Aha*

ELAM-THOMAS: Several weeks later, I received the positive news. I learned that Wendy Sherman and two other Albright senior staffers strongly supported my nomination. I attended the Department's senior weekly staff meetings. When I reported on the detailed plans and analyses that preceded USIA programs worldwide, my State colleagues expressed a heightened interest in and respect for the role public diplomacy play in reaching the Department's goals. It was an "aha" moment for my State colleagues and for me.

*Q: Interesting, okay, so you then you are selected. Now did you need training for Senegal, at least perhaps in the French language?*

ELAM-THOMAS: No, I served in several French-speaking countries; the most recent was PAO Brussels.

*Q: Ah, okay.*

ELAM-THOMAS: From 1975-1977 I was the assistant cultural attaché. Former Ambassador Frances Cooke was the cultural attaché prior to my arrival. She taught President Leopold Senghor English and I was to continue the lessons. At 31 and despite my White House experience, I was more than anxious. The thought of teaching a head of state English frightened me terribly. Upon reflect, I believe Frances' task was to refine President Senghor's already respectable command of the English language. When I got word from USIA personnel that Blake Robinson a former professor and Fulbright Director in Liberia became cultural attaché, I was thrilled and relieved.

*Q: Okay great. All right so now your recollections go back you know, to Senegal in the 1970s. Therefore, you did not need any language training. What about senior training or ambassadorial training, did you get any of that?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Oh yes, we did the "charm school". FSI leaders do not like that term and I understand. While it is a two-week course of interagency briefings, there is a significant focus on how to comport yourself. For most career appointees, the course was less critical than it was for political appointees.

*Q: Right, of course, so basically, your preparation period for Senegal was relatively short.*

ELAM-THOMAS: It was short and that was fine. I will speak later about how my earlier tour facilitated my access as COM 28 years later. It was encouraging to work with senior Senegalese officials who were alums of the International Visitor Leadership Program 25 years earlier. Few FSOs get to see the fruits of their labor in the country where they served a generation later.

My arrival as COM coincided with Senegal's 2000 presidential elections. Our Washington colleagues wanted to ensure a smooth transition of power. Fortunately, my French language skills added to my effectiveness from the moment I returned.

*Q: All right, so you have your training period, about how long did it take you to get confirmed?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Surprisingly, not as long as so many others nominees. I was nominated in late July and the Senate confirmation hearings were in mid- August. By mid-September, we were confirmed. I was with the group of nominees which included: Tibor Nagy, Delano Lewis, and Jimmy Kolker.

*Q: Wow, so that is quite fast, that is quite fast for...*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes

*Q: All right, so at this point, rapid nomination confirmation, what was your family thinking?*

ELAM-THOMAS: They were thrilled. Very few outside my immediate family knew of my engagement. I did not wish to subject my fiancé to this security process even though I knew he was a member of Trinidad's "special branch" of the police service.

*Q: Okay.*

ELAM-THOMAS: My brothers and sister, all now deceased, are all 18, 19 and 20 years my senior. On December 3, 1999, my brother Judge Harry J. Elam swore me in. He was a Superior Court Judge in Boston, Massachusetts and he proudly exercised that task just two months after he walked me down the aisle on October 3, 1999.

*Q: Wow, wow, what a lovely time for your family.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes it was. Sadly, my parents and two siblings were deceased then. While my only sister was still alive at that time, she had Alzheimer's disease. My parents passed away when I was 33. I arrived on the scene when they were much older. Family members were duly impressed to witness the 400 guests who attended the ceremony in the Ben Franklin Room. They doubly moved as they watched my brother administer the oath of office.

*Q: All right, so at this point you go out to post in, say, January is it?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes. I arrived around January 6 and presented my credentials about one week later.

*Q: And this is the year 2000?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

*Q: Okay so now when you arrived what were your basic instructions for your tenure?*

ELAM-THOMAS: I arrived two months before the presidential election. I was instructed to meet with all opposition party candidates, be neutral and strongly encourage a smooth transition of power. The US government wanted Senegal to be a model for the democratic process. During the first five weeks in Dakar, I met with about 14 candidates. We all know, the smaller the country, the greater number of candidates.

*Q: Sure, sure.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Naturally, several preferred not to come to the chancery. I fully understood and scheduled sessions at the EMR in the garden area to help minimize the guests' concern about recorded conversations. Abdoulaye Wade, the eventual winner, met with me at the embassy. Ever the professor, Wade decided to give me a 90-minute history of his 20-year quest for the presidency. Wade saw himself as the Mandela of West Africa. As I listened, I thought to myself, "You are no Mandela", but I did not say that. After all, I was and I still am a diplomat. The Department was satisfied with our reporting.

During the run-up to the election, I had another positive example of work our USIA colleagues did two decades earlier. The PD Section hosted a panel discussion with Senegal's Minister of Interior, General Abdou Cissé. The topic: integrity in journalism. How refreshing to note the objectivity and professionalism of Senegalese journalists. That was not the case in 1975. General Cissé described the unique efforts made to ensure transparent elections. The ballots were printed in Israel to minimize fraud. If you were to copy the ballot, the color of the paper would change immediately and indicate a false ballot.

*Q: Yes, no we do not have that but before we go too far on into the actual election process, what were your impressions of the candidates?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Two or three candidates appeared to be credible potential heads of state in a Senegal. All of them revered the legendary founder, Leopold Sédar Senghor. Most were graduates of France's elite universities. Wade was equally impressive; an economist, an historian and a shrewd politician. He did not suffer fools and seldom exhibited humility. Perhaps that is required in the developing world. Wade's stature and Senegal's historic place in West African history resulted in Wade's being elected as one of the first heads of The Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS). He was a master of giving the impression of progress even though concrete examples of that progress were hard to find. I was disappointed when Wade changed the constitution to allow him to return to office for two more terms.

As for other viable candidates, I would place Abdoulaye Bathily and Landing Savané at the top of the list. I was pleased to reconnect with Landing Savané who attended a luncheon in my honor on June 4, 2016 in Dakar.

In late May – mid-June 2016, my husband and I accepted former U.S. Ambassador to Senegal, James Zumwalt's invitation to return to Senegal. We spent the first week of the three weeks visit at the ambassador's residence. Ambassador Zumwalt hosted a luncheon for me with 16 of the Senegalese staff members who were embassy employees when I was COM. In mid-January 2017. Ambassador Zumwalt retired and currently is the CEO of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA in Washington, DC.

While in Dakar, I spoke to mid-level managers at the Center for Strategic and Diplomatic Studies in Dakar. Serendipity played yet another role in my coming to know Ambassador

Zumwalt. One of his childhood friends served on the Orlando Philharmonic Orchestra Board when I did. Shortly after he was named the new ambassador to Dakar, she asked if I could put me in touch with Zumwalt. That connection resulted in the kind invitation for me to return to a post after a 13-year absence. That is enough for the moment on that score.

*Q: Okay, yeah but you sized up the candidates and, you know, some of them you thought were, you know, reasonable, others I imagine were you know were either young or not particularly impressive. What were the key issues going on in that race at the time? What were the candidates' main areas of focus let's say?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Poverty reduction of course and World Bank as a HIPC (Highly Indebted Poor Country) country were at the top of the list. All candidates desired to maintain Senegal's historic aura (erudite, scholarly despite their poverty, and politically stable.) Few African nations at that time could match the prestige of President Leopold Senghor. Few could match a leader who was a philosopher, a politician, a poet and a member of the French Academy. Senghor was also co-creator of the concept of Négritude, an important intellectual movement that sought to assert and to value what they believed to be distinctive African characteristics, values, and aesthetics. The candidates also focused intently on increase foreign investment in Senegal.

*Q: Yeah, okay. Very good. All right so the elections begin, I imagine you had election observers out in the various polling places.*

ELAM-THOMAS: I persuaded The National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the AF Bureau not to send election observers to Senegal. That was one of my personal successes. My conversations with the candidates confirmed for me that Senegal's elections would be violent or suffer from voter fraud. The French trained their former colonists to be sophisticated, cultured, and serious. Senegal may be a developing country, with a number of political and educational leaders, but it is not prone to violence. Senegal is still fraught with poverty and suffers from sporadic power outages and water access. Despite all, I did not believe there was a potential for violence. NDI did **not** send observers.

*Q: All right, so that is actually very interesting and you were not terribly worried that there would be enough fraud that it would make the election questionable...*

ELAM-THOMAS: Seventeen years ago, the presence of cell phones helped secure peaceful elections in Senegal. Journalists and election officials called headquarters from even the most remote voting sites to report any improprieties. Once again, we were able to use the successful election as evidence of effectiveness of the impact of earlier USIA programs.

*Q: Very good. I see. That in itself is a very sort of interesting development because it affects more than just elections but we can look into that later. So the election then takes place, and is the winner accepted?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Abdoulaye Wade was the undisputed winner. Fortunately, we did not have former leaders who refused to concede the election as recently with The Gambia and Cote d'Ivoire. The Senegalese accepted the election results that also highlighted the importance of an independent media.

*Q: Okay, so now once the election is completed. It was just for president. Or - - were there also legislative elections?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Oh yes, there were legislative candidates. Wade won the necessary seats to hold a majority in the parliament.

*Q: Okay so he comes into power then, with a mandate, and enough support in the legislature to carry out an action plan. Okay at this point I imagine once everything is settled and he is in power, you go and talk with him about his agenda.*

ELAM-THOMAS: I did indeed. In our first meeting after his election, Wade spoke of the increased number of Senegalese students studying in the U.S. Their English language competence allowed them to move away from studying only in France or the French-speaking provinces in Canada. This news was excellent proof of USIA's English teaching programs. After that meeting, I was optimistic that I would face fewer obstacles than in 1957. However, I quickly reminded myself that Senegal is a former French colony. I should not count on the size, creativity, military strength and the economic prowess of the United States to supplant the role of the French. Wade's wife is French. The wife of the late founder Leopold Senghor was French. Their children will always be loyal to Senegal and France. The Senegalese are highly unlikely to place the U.S. before France in their deliberations on international issues. French military bases are still located in and around Dakar. Again during our May-June 2016 Dakar Visit, our host Dr. Kone-Diabi said, "There is still such a strong French presence here. We will never rid ourselves of that burden."

With that knowledge, I was determined to have positive, close collegial relationship with the French ambassador. I never wanted the French to think that the American government was trying to dissolve the deep ties between the French and the Senegalese.

Wade always spoke about his desire to increase foreign investment, improve education and health care in his country. He often had grandiose plans that he articulated well, but few of those visions materialized.

*Q: And why was that?*

ELAM-THOMAS: As noted earlier, Wade was a French-trained lecturer, scholar and economist. He also attended Boston University to study economics and despite his English capability, our meetings were always in French. Wade spoke elegant French. Again to confirm my respect for the French-Senegalese connection, I thought it was to tell the French Ambassador Jean de Glinasty why the French held a special place in my heart. I said: "I have your country to thank for my fluency in this language and for my becoming a diplomat." I explained that in 1962, that a French family in Lyon welcomed

me warmly. I was a member of The Experiment in International Living. That was not the case as I grew up in Boston, Massachusetts. The French accepted me without prejudice. Of course, 1962 was before the influx of north and Sub-Saharan Africa to France. My host mother took time with me to make sure my French be grammatically correct. My French sister, Paule Sassard-Serusclat, was not as rigid. She was happy to have a friend who at least struggled to be fluent in French and she did not correct me. Paule has been my friend and in my life for 55 years.

Always conscious of the Senegalese-French connection, I was almost overly sensitive about how I comported myself with my French counterparts.

Whenever I received Washington's instructions to make a demarche to "The Palace," I knew to select my words carefully.

*Q: Right, right, sure. That is quite interesting that things, even in the early 2000s, are still, the cultural overlay of the French is still there.*

ELAM-THOMAS: It is.

*Q: But then the activities that you want to carry out during you tenure, how did that go down with him? How did that go down with the president?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Surprisingly well. To be most candid, I used my African American heritage and femininity to be uncharacteristically direct with President Wade. My predecessor and immediate successor were both former Peace Corps volunteers. Both spoke Wolof and they knew Senegal probably better than I did. However, I doubt they would have felt comfortable in saying to Wade: "You don't want the Europeans to think you cannot run this country." I do not know where or when I mustered up the nerve to make this statement. I continued to offer him more unsolicited advice in that same conversation with this observation: "You do not want them to think that you always need a handout." At some point in most of our meetings, Wade frequently highlighted the aid they received from France, Japan and other nations. The implication was "What could the United States USAID do for me this week?" From my perspective, this dependency mindset was not healthy for a nation that gained its independence from France in 1960. USAID's worldwide goal is to mount sustainable programs which, after a mutually agreed upon time, the host countries manage on their own.

*Q: Right, right.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, however, if almost every aspect of your lives relied on the influence and help of the former colonial power for decades, it may be difficult to change that mindset. I decided, as an African American woman, I would be very honest with him. He actually listened and did not flinch one bit. My reminder of the poverty still present in Senegal seemed to resonate, albeit very briefly. I hoped that Wade would understand that requesting "handouts" at this stage of their development would be counterproductive to the progress needed.

*Q: Right, now so then how did you work with your USAID mission? What were the major projects that you were working on with them?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Our USAID Director Don Clarke asked me to chair the private sector coordinating group that comprised all of the donor countries giving assistance to Senegal. The challenge was to see how they could reduce the 33 steps needed to establish companies in Senegal. The complex French bureaucracy was still in place. The private sector group reviewed the joint study done by USAID and World Bank and made recommendations on how to diminish the steps. During the subsequent 18 months, we worked with the appropriate Senegalese government officials and reduced the requirements to 22 steps. Granted, that still seemed like a lot, but it was a significant step towards facilitating foreign investment.

Per our recommendation, the Senegalese government established a clearinghouse unit to guide new investors on how to navigate the relevant ministries.

Early on in President Wade's administration, White House sent Gene Sperling, then Director of the National Economic Council under President Clinton. A strong supporter of women's economic development, Sperling is famous for his observation during Bill Clinton's campaign, "It's the economy, stupid." Sperling was the first White House representative to congratulate Wade on his election. Wade wisely included three young Senegalese economists who had just returned to Senegal from their positions at JP Morgan Chase. They joined the meeting and made relevant comments whenever Wade asked them to speak. As soon as Sperling and I returned to the official car, he said, "This is Kennedy-esque." The young economists felt so inspired with Wade's election that they left their U.S. jobs to return to Senegal to contribute to their country's development.

*Q: Hmm, interesting.*

ELAM-THOMAS: The only woman of the young economists became the coordinator of this new clearinghouse. An experienced banker, I am not certain if she was earlier with the World Bank, but she clearly knew the challenges of economic development. Wade trusted her with that responsibility. Sperling was impressed. The NSC's Africa Director, Jendayi Frazier was also impressed with Senegal's potential to be that "shining" example of free and fair democratic elections. Because I lived there and continued to see that poverty continued in the vast segments of the society, I was not as impressed.

*Q: All right, now take a moment, when you say poverty and economic development, what were the principal exports, at the time you were there, what were the principal industries or money-making activities that Senegal had?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Very few. Peanuts and fish.

*Q: Wow, so that had not changed since basically since the last time that you were there.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Not at all.

*Q: That is too bad because you know while it is wonderful that they did have you know a clean election and that they did stand up for accepting the results, they did not have the diversification in their economy that would have helped.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Conversely, The Ivory Coast was the agricultural capital of French-speaking Africa. The Ivoirians had coco, coffee, pineapple, cotton and fishing. They had a commodities exchange. Senegal could not compete with the Ivoirians for those items did not grow in the Sahel land that covered much of Senegal's land mass.

*Q: Yes, and they did not have enough English language skills to host call centers or things like that.*

ELAM-THOMAS: No. That is an excellent point. Senegal could not benefit from that economic potential from new technology development as Ghana or Nigeria.

*Q: Okay, but then the other thing, this is a small question, but just out of curiosity, in convincing them to make investment easier by reducing all of the requirements were you using things like transparency international and the other measures of ease of creating business there?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

*Q: And did they take it seriously? I mean were they concerned...*

ELAM-THOMAS: They did because they wanted to be a success story on the economic front as well as the political front. The Senegalese relished White House and NSC attention.

I did not hesitate to report that the World Bank determined that Senegal did not reach the requisite standard for the Heavily Indebted Poor Country designation. The Senegalese Government could not show significant progress in improving their educational and health care delivery system, Wade was clearly disappointed. I met with Jendayi Frazier who was the head of the NSC Africa Bureau at that time. The study found minimal improvement of their education and healthcare delivery systems. When I told the Senegalese Desk Officer at State of my desire to meet with the NSC Africa Division, he wondered if I thought it was worth my effort. I stated it was imperative that I share my information with the NSC. I needed to remind the AF Section of the NSC high marks on the election outcome did not suffice. Senegal's economic development was still a work in progress.

*Q: Okay.*

ELAM-THOMAS: "I met with Dr. Jendayi Frazier (who later became Ambassador to South Africa). She reminded me that I should not be too harsh on the Senegalese. Once again, she described the successful election and peaceful transition of power. Honestly, it

seemed international organizations were enamored with Senegal after Wade's election. I can understand why because so many other African nations' elections were not transparent.

*Q: And what that would do is it would allow them into a World Bank initiative to reduce their poverty, you know based on various indicators. In addition, what Senegal was telling you was that they wanted to be that but they were not really the poorest of the poor.*

ELAM-THOMAS: That was my interpretation.

*Q: And they could not qualify for that kind of debt relief.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Correct.

*Q: So, then the next question is how did you or could you work with your econ and commercial elements in the embassy to, you know, foment a little bit more economic activity there?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Well one way is that there must be easier air access to the country. The airport must have FAA approval. The country must be willing to sign the Open Skies agreement. While Senegal's airport was not as bad as Nigeria's Murtala Muhammed Airport, it needed significant upgrades in order that foreign travelers would feel safe.

Back then, several major international carriers did not allow their planes to initiate from Dakar's airport to the U.S. Air Afrique (which no longer exists) was one of the few such carriers to fly directly from Dakar to NYC. Primarily because the airport was not as secure as it needed to be. The late Edward Jones, FAA's Director for Africa, had offices at the U.S. Embassy in Dakar. Jones was diligent in his efforts to upgrade the security of the Dakar airport. We made several official visits to Dakar's airport. We inspected the baggage check-in, the baggage transport through the basement of the airport and eventually on to the carrier. We were shocked when we saw that the computers that monitored the planes' landings and departures were inoperative. The curtains in the window overlooking the runway obstructed the view. The more I saw, the more I became more skeptical of my future departures from this airport. Fortunately, my husband accompanied me along with the FAA regional director on two of these visits. Since my husband was in security from his time as a member of Trinidad & Tobago's special branch (intelligence) of their police service, the Senegalese authorities and FAA regional director welcomed his presence. A trained critical observer of his surroundings, my husband noted a boutique that included a large display case of decorated knives and daggers for sale **after** the travelers passed through the security checks. He immediately informed the airport director that such a souvenir booth was contrary to their security efforts. Travelers could easily purchase these items as souvenirs and carry them aboard flights. The airport director subsequently removed that boutique. We later learned that the boutique's owner was a family member of the former President Abdou Diouf.

*Q: Ahh*

ELAM-THOMAS: Honestly, I was appalled and could not understand how the airport functioned. Religious leaders in their robes did not pass through the standard security checks. I thought to myself, these individuals could have taken weapons and other contrabands for that matter on to the flight since they did not go through the standard security screening. Granted, our initial visits to Dakar's airport took place before September 11, 2001. Security is far stricter now than it was in early 2000. After two years of negotiations, the Senegalese parliament voted to be party to the Open Skies Agreement. Tim Forsyth of our economic section was the key officer assigned to this initiative.

ELAM-THOMAS: Once again, we knew the Senegalese wanted to have a high profile in the international arena and gain Western respect. The airport situation was pivotal to that recognition. Senegalese officials were masters at communicating high ideals in international conferences. However, they were seldom as effective in realizing their proposed projects.

*Q: Yes, okay, okay.*

I insisted that our senior FSNs (now LES staffers) attend most of the embassy meetings in their subject/functional areas. In that manner, the FSNs I demonstrated that the American officers recognized expertise and respected their opinions. We saw improved Senegalese loyalty within the mission and added to our effectiveness with parliament members. I am convinced our respect of FSNs facilitated our eventual successes with the Open Skies Agreement and other key bilateral issues.

*Q: Right, Locally Employed Staff (LES).*

ELAM-THOMAS: They attended almost all meetings. They felt valued and that translated to each of the ministers with whom we had to interact on economic issues. Then we made sure that our embassy offered Public Diplomacy (PD) speakers that highlighted the value of sound economic policies in Senegal as well as the United States. We included the U.S. successes and disappointments as examples during these economic programs and earned heightened credibility with our Senegalese audiences. In essence, the U.S. could learn from past mistakes. We did not hide the fact that America continues to grapple with poverty, inadequate access to education and health care and crime. I did not hesitate to speak about my youth in Boston and described at risk areas that surrounded my neighborhood. Fortunately, we had many effective community organizers and organizations that helped alleviate that poverty, that lack of education and health care. Senegal was not as fortunate.

*Q: Yes, that is the vital thing. It is that yes that you had an experience with poverty but you also had experienced volunteerism and community engagement.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Also, to my knowledge, none of the community organizers wished to feather their own nest. That was not the case for Senegal. Sadly, in the developing world such altruism is hard to understand much less replicate when corruption abounds.

*Q: Yes, especially you know, I mean the French approach was not voluntary.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Despite what seemed like unusual delays, our FAA and economic section colleagues secured Senegal's approval of the open skies agreement. On a subsequent visit to Washington, I met with then Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater to present the news. He commended the Senegalese for their efforts and President Wade was glad to learn that the U.S. Ambassador to Senegal met with the Secretary of Transportation to report Senegal's acceptance of the open skies agreement. Yet another example of Senegal's high profile within the USG.

Embassy Dakar added another success on the economic side. The Africa Growth and Opportunity Act encouraged the Senegalese to raise certain standards so that their agricultural products and textiles could enter the United States with a lower tariff.

*Q: Right, right, right of course.*

ELAM-THOMAS: As for more U.S. investment, the owners of The Limited and the Gap came to Senegal. They were interested in producing denim in Senegalese factories. The absence of continued power in plants ruined that potential investor to Senegal. To produce denim, you needed a constant supply of water and power, neither of which Senegal could offer.

*Q: And, you know, business people when they come to do the risk analysis. The presence of a reliable water and power supply will be first on their list of questions.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Absolutely.

*Q: So what progress did you see Senegal making in terms of modernizing their economy and being able to attract more investment while you were there?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Perhaps you remember the Iridium satellite phones. A delegation from Motorola came to Dakar and met with President Wade. Although Wade gave them his full attention, given the strong hold of French-based companies in Senegal, I doubted that an American-owned company would gain easy access to the Senegalese markets. At that time, I was amazed at the prevalence of the little flip cell phones. For 18 months, I worked with my Swedish colleague to then the whole cell phone issue played a key role. The Senegalese would not allow western nations other than France to bid on the cell phone licenses.

*Q: Well that is too bad.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Millicom, a well-respected international media and telecommunications company, met hurdles at each attempt to bid on cellular licenses in

Senegal. Since Millicom and an American telecommunications jointly owned the company, I worked closely with the Swedish ambassador and Senegalese officials to demonstrate the value of a more open market in that industry. After 18 months working with my Swedish counterpart and the representatives of an American cell phone company, we secured the Senegalese government's approval bid on licenses. As I edited this document, I found the August 2002 decree from the Senegalese Government signed by the Secretary General of the Presidency which not only allowed the bidding process, but confirming Millicom's ability to operate in Senegal. I was pleased to see that in 2006, Millicom's company (now operating under the name Tigo) became the second largest mobile service provider and currently its equity holding in Senegal is 100%. I saw many signs of telecommunications offices in Dakar with the Tigo logo when I visited there in May 2016.

*Q: Was Senegal beginning to put up cell phone towers?*

ELAM-THOMAS: To be most candid, I do not know. I remember our internet connection was always through dial up access. However, the little flip cell phones were everywhere. It seemed all sales men and women in the market places used one of the little phones. Many were the Nokia brand. While not "smart" phones, the Nokia phones were invaluable in this developing nation. No doubt, the existence of cell phones aided the members of the Mouride Brotherhood. To prove the value of this new technology, I witnessed examples of how such phones could save lives in villages, heighten agricultural production, enhance supply ordering and enhance money transfers.

*Q: Yeah, and they can also find out what agricultural products are being purchased for at the farm and so they have knowledge about what the middle men are doing and you know it does have a significant effect on economic activity, but growth. While that is helpful, for growth you still need a little bit more, you know you still need a little bit more investment, you still need a little bit more diversification. Was AID working with them to diversify into other crops perhaps?*

ELAM-THOMAS: They were. Don Clark was the AID director at the time and his team placed significant emphasis on crop diversification. He worked hand-in-hand with his team and I noted a level of mutual respect between him and the Senegalese I did not witness in any of my earlier assignments. Therefore, I was not surprised to see Don Clark during my 2016 visit to Senegal. He returned to Dakar from retirement to serve as Acting USAID Director during the summer leave period. Of course, you can diversify a crop only as much as the soil will allow you to do so.

*Q: I see, okay. What about tourism?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Fortunately, Senegal is a draw for many African-Americans and African-studies scholars. The Island of Gorée, less than a mile from Dakar, hosts the Slave Museum and the "Door of no return," both highlight the dark history of the Atlantic Slave Trade. In my recollection three U.S. Presidents: George W. Bush, Bill Barak Obama visited the site. It is often the backdrop for speeches from major dignitaries.

However, it is truly a mecca for African Americans visiting “the Mother Continent.” Senegal’s first president, poet and philosopher, Leopold Senghor hosted the first black arts festival that took place in 1966. In fact, our embassy’s Public Diplomacy section invited Walter Carrington in the summer of 2016 to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that festival. So it must have been 1966. Okay so this was 2016. Last year they invited him to go back for that 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. To return to your initial query regarding the economy, tourism continues to play a significant role in Senegal.

*Q: No, I understand. So, not to dwell too long on the economic side, were there human rights issues that you had to deal with?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, Hissène Habré, former President of Chad remained in a Senegalese prison for 22 years and sentenced to life in prison in May 2016. Guilty of human-rights abuses, including rape, sexual slavery and ordering the killing of 40,000 people, he is the first former head of state convicted for human rights abuses in the court of another nation.

While seldom noted in the Senegalese media, this nation is indeed guilty of a major human rights abuse, trafficking in children. Known as “talibé” they are the young boys who visitors to Senegal will see begging in the streets. They are not begging for their personal needs, but because Islamic leader require them to bring a significant amount of money back to them every day. Despite public announcements that the current Senegalese government is going to crack down on talibé abuse, my research for a Human Trafficking presentation in the fall of 2016 showed no concrete evidence to curb this practice.

Despite a horrendous tragedy, I saw significant evidence of Senegal’s respect for human rights with respect to the Christian population that resides mainly in the Casamance Region of the country.

Literally, a week after the Department did a joint training exercise on crisis management and we were engaged in the exercise it for a week out on the island of Gorée. Six days later, a ferryboat sank and almost 2000 people lost their lives. Le Joola was a Senegalese government-owned roll-on/roll-off ferry that capsized off the coast of the Gambia on 26 September 2002, with 1,863 deaths and 64 survivors. This loss was considered the second-worst non-military disaster in maritime history

*Q: Oh my God.*

ELAM-THOMAS: The majority of the victims were Christian because The Casamance Region is home to most of Senegal’s Christian population. If this event took place in another religiously divided area, it may have resulted in the total breakdown of community. In Senegal, the result was much to the contrary. The entire country paid tribute to the victims. I joined my other diplomatic colleagues for a two-hour open-air ceremony and witnessed expressions of sympathy and unity expressed by an imam, a Catholic priest and a protestant minister. This positive example of Senegal’s human rights record remains foremost in my mind.

*Q: Ah, I see. Where is the Casamance?*

ELAM-THOMAS: It is on the other side of the Gambia River, which, as you can easily see on a map, divides the country. During both of my tours in Senegal, I never heard of political prisoners nor did I learn of other human rights abuses other than the talibé situation. Despite the sad outcome, the absence of conflict was encouraging.

*Q: Absolutely, I mean it would be one of the rare countries where there's you know relative intercommunal peace.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes and the term “relative” is important. Senegal is not well known worldwide because, unlike scores of African nations, Senegal never had a coup d'état. It has not suffered from an epidemic, e.g., Ebola.

*Q: Right, right. Okay, but there is one other aspect, which is the regional aspect, to what extent while you were there was Senegal playing any role in the region? In either West Africa or in the OAU [Organization of African Unity] and so on?*

ELAM-THOMAS: It played an important role. Wade was the chair of the ECOWAS [Economic Community of West African States] from 2001-2003. In that capacity, he was called upon to resolve Madagascar's 2002 election conflict. Ravalomanana & Ratsiraka both claimed the election was rigged. Neither candidate received an absolute majority. The French ambassador and I worked with input from our relative embassies on the sidelines at The Hotel Meridian until 2 a.m. The data we provided and negotiation points helped Pres. Wade to convince Ratsiraka to step down. Wade relished this victory and my colleague and I were pleased we were able to make this contribution to both Senegal and Madagascar during our tours as ambassadors. At our urging, Wade also agreed not to attend an OAU Meeting in Libya. Our embassy alerted him to be doubly cautious of potential Libyan influence on Senegalese imams. Wade tightened Senegal's borders to help minimize the flow of Libyans in and out of Senegal. While that was one of our successes, we could not convince Wade to vote against Libya's having a seat on the UN Human Rights Council. The seat was vacant, but Wade let us know he could not agree with the U.S. request. He was committed to vote with the African heads of state in the UN.

*Q: I see, okay.*

ELAM-THOMAS: That was one of the few disappointments regarding our requests for Senegalese support on UN issues. Wade allowed several U.S. Military training programs for their Senegalese counterparts. Although, the Africa Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI) was in its infancy when I was COM Dakar, Senegal was asked to help resolve conflict or provide humanitarian aid to their neighbors in Sierra Leone or Liberia.

*Q: That is no small thing. However, what you just mentioned is sort of an aside to 9/11; to what extent did things change in Senegal or with our relationship with Senegal after 9/11?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Well Wade became very, very concerned. He recognized that my earlier warnings about the vulnerability of mosques in the remote regions of Senegal. They may have unwittingly hosted visiting imams preaching radical messages. To clarify the difference between Islam practiced in Senegal from the rest of the Islamic world, I thought it best to include the following historical notation: Islam is the predominant religion in **Senegal**. Ninety-two percent of the country's population is [Muslim](#). Sufi brotherhoods expanded with French colonization, as people turned to religious authority rather than the colonial administration.

*Q: Sure.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Let me return to how things may have changed after the September 11 attack.

My meetings with President Wade focused increased border security and more intelligence sharing. During this periods immediately following the 9/11 attack, I seized an opportunity to give Wade a bit of candid advice. I reminded him that we could no longer be complacent with threatening countries in the West African region. He agreed and volunteered to speak out forcefully against the September 11 attack. In fact, Wade hosted a West African regional meeting on that subject. On October 17, Wade hosted the Africa Meeting. The Hotel Meridien (built by the Saudis for an OIC Meeting in the 1980's is a state of the art conference center.) The hotel continues as the site for many West African Meetings.

On the eve of President Wade's departure for a G-20 meeting, I learn from my colleagues in another section of our embassy that two of their senior leaders from Washington, DC wish to meet with President Wade. I was imperative that they meet with him before he left for Italy. We scheduled the meeting at 8:30 p.m. that evening thanks to my rapport with Wade's personal secretary who almost immediately scheduled the appointment. It pays to build credible relationships. I make it a practice to give respect and honor to the secretaries of all principals with whom I meet at home and abroad.

*Q: Absolutely.*

ELAM-THOMAS: And I did that with the head of state.

I also noticed that the French ambassador seemed to precede me or follow me whenever I visited with President Wade at the palace. I knew whatever I said to Wade would not remain solely with Wide. I always thanked Wade's secretary for setting the meeting. During my time as COM Dakar, we meet almost once a month. My predecessors noted that was unusually frequent. Of course, Wade was a brand new president and the U.S. certainly wanted to have a positive relationship with all of the ambassadors assigned

there. He often professed a desire for trade not aid, but in reality, he made sure aid came up during our meetings. Wade was/is known for being his own man, but he seemed to give weight to the advice I offered. His forceful stand supporting reparations for slavery at the Durban Conference on Race in 2001 and his public statement deriding Mugabe's sham elections way back then, were not popular with his colleagues. When I heard Wade's speech on Senegalese TV, I said to my husband, "It's amazing he's got all the points we talked about" that gave him. Much to my surprise, a few minutes before 11 p.m. the evening following his Durban speech, President Wade called me to ask, "How was the speech?" I responded that the U.S. was extremely pleased. That was the first of three times during my tour that I received a call from the President of Senegal.

*Q: That is incredible.*

ELAM-THOMAS: And so that was in one of my evaluations, then Asst. Secretary Walter Kansteiner noted, "How many people get the head of a country to call and say, "How did I do?" To elaborate a bit, I said, "Mr. President, I could not have been happier, my government is so appreciative of your willingness to make this point on racism at this international conference." I continued with Wade and stated, "Being of African-American descent, such a statement is doubly important." I could sometimes give Wade a reality check by using my gender and race. "What I say might have credibility in a community in the United States is not resident in Foggy Bottom or sitting in the State Department." Wade knew that I was from Boston. Wade attended Boston University's graduate school. That was a good connection. No matter how intelligent you are and how many degrees you have, you must establish a genuine rapport with your interlocutor. The day after September 11, Mrs. Wade paid a visit to my embassy office. She spent 45 minutes to offer her condolences and relate some of her experiences as Wade's wife while he was a student in Boston. President Wade was away from Senegal on that date. Then she says to me, "My husband lived in Boston where when I came they couldn't believe I was his wife (she is French). I said, "You went to Boston at a time when interracial marriages were not the norm." When she left the office, I established good rapport with her as well. I related how I was welcomed in France in 1962 and that her fellow citizens that helped inspire me to become a diplomat. We diplomats must capitalize on whatever we have in our wheel case to deliver credible messages.

*Q: Okay, now because of 9/11, did they begin to improve their own security situation, their own security management of the country bearing in mind that all kinds of radical groups could come in regardless?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Absolutely, they did. We provided solar energy powered laptops to help monitor their borders. We provided the Senegalese with a host of tangible and intangible assets and trained them on their use. We used this opportunity to encourage the Senegalese to have one central point to coordinate the security at Dakar's International Airport. It worked and by the time, I left only one person was responsible for the overall airport security.

*Q: Yeah*

ELAM-THOMAS: Several of Senegal's top military leaders attended U.S. military school in Leavenworth., Kansas. The top airport security director was a "take no prisoners" military man. It was not a peaceful transition to the centralized leadership. . They knew that all airport operations must flow through the new general. This individual remained in power for about 18 months after my departure. Later we learned that the general left. I surmised it was probably because he was not corruptible or because he did not dance to the tune of Senegal's new leadership.

*Q: Ahh, okay.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes.

*Q: Ahh okay so now...*

ELAM-THOMAS: Plus a heightened interest in security. They made sure their borders were more secure.

*Q: Did the airport eventually become a credible international airport?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes it did! That was one a satisfying farewell accomplishment. Now U.S. airlines can depart directly from Dakar to the U.S.

*Q: Right, in other words it was only...*

ELAM-THOMAS: It was only a transit airport. Flights to the U.S. could not originate from Dakar.

*Q: Right, so in other words, it became an FAA approved and they joined the appropriate international organizations and such.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, IATA [International Air Transport Association].

*Q: That is a major thing.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Well for me it seemed to take far too long.

*Q: Yeah I understand but when you...*

ELAM-THOMAS: Once again, The Senegalese National Assembly approved the long-awaited Open Skies Agreement. I received a note three days before I left. During the final month of my time in Dakar, I met with key officers of the national assembly to encourage them to put the item on the agenda. The then vice president of the National Assembly, Dr. Iba Der Thiam, assured me that the item was on the agenda. The parliament resolved to sign the agreement. Dr. Iba Der Thiam, now close to 90, attended a luncheon in my honor in Dakar on June 4, 2016.

I was not as successful in my bid to get the Senegalese to sign Article 98 of the International Criminal Court. One of Senegal's French palace lawyers made visited our political section and insisted on revisions that the USG did not approve. When I returned to Washington to serve on a senior promotion panel in the U.S. I found that six or seven of my fellow U.S. other ambassadors did not get their host governments to sign. The Article requests that Americans absolved from going before the International Criminal Court. I was relieved.

*Q: Yeah, it's a difficult thing to sell when the U.S. insists it will not be part of the ICC.*

ELAM-THOMAS: I thought we wanted the International Criminal Court to exist. Yes. We did.

*Q: We just did not want it to apply to us.*

*Q: It is a hard sell when you yourself refuse to join.*

*Q: Well, as ambassador you also host local art, local culture, and that kind of thing. Moreover, sometimes that can lead to other kinds of contacts other kinds of developments. What about that side of life?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Let me think for a moment. There was not a major performing arts center in Dakar when I served there. The Sorano Theater was a concert hall. It was not a large center. Actually, the Sorano Theater was the site of the closing ceremony of a continent-wide American Studies Conference. I was the closing speaker. I remember having limited success whenever I broached an American Studies program at the University of Dakar in 1975. The French *conseiller technique* attended every meeting I held with an education ministry official. Thirty years later, The University of Dakar hosted an Africa wide American Studies Conference. I was gratified.

*Q: Right, exactly. And that's true in a number of different ways, when I was a cultural officer in Hungary we tried to get the local universities to work more closely with the large corporations to just get basic ideas on the areas where labor would be needed. And to create courses so that Hungarian students could, even in college, would have a chance at a job right away because they were trained in areas local corporations needed. And just getting those universities to even consider that, you know they are coming out of many years of communism, and their own attitudes of what a university education is supposed to be, it was very difficult. But you know it's the same sort of idea that you come from certain cultural backgrounds and outlooks and it takes a while to broaden your perspectives.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Absolutely.

*Q: Now the other thing that I wanted to ask you, during this period of your tenure as ambassador, did you have to, in your public diplomacy, fight any of the urban myths that sometimes crop up?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Such as.

*Q: Oh, they could get particularly virulent; you know the sale of body parts that the U.S. was trying to buy children's body parts. The inoculations are filled with poison and you know these sorts of things.*

ELAM-THOMAS: The whole disinformation thing?

*Q: Yes.*

ELAM-THOMAS: No, I dealt with that in my time in other assignments. As CAO Athens, I dealt with that in Greece. In Turkey, we had one disinformation challenge, which, I believe, I described earlier in the Oral History Interview. I did not deal with disinformation issues in Senegal.

*Q: Today is April 4, 2017 we're continuing our interview with Ambassador Harriet Elam-Thomas.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Whenever the Public Diplomacy section invited me to a "speaker" luncheon, I jumped at the opportunity. The few times my schedule permitted such interaction, I felt totally in my element. Let me return to your disinformation question: No, that issue did not come up very often in Senegal (during my first and second time in Dakar). However, I did address that issue during my 1975-1977 tour in the Ivory Coast. During my COM assignment in Dakar, I was not aware of many disinformation stories/theories until the September 11 attack. I hosted a dinner for Senegalese journalists. In the course of the table discussion, one skeptical Ivorian journalist said, "We know that Jews in America did not go to work that day (9/11). I am not kidding. Seated at the head of the table, I was amazed that the journalist continued to expound on his view: "...That is why none of them (the Jews) were killed." I wondered about the source of his story. The next day my political colleagues informed me that this fabrication was on the internet. Several readers considered it true. As the discussion continued at the dinner table, another journalist chimed in and challenged this skeptical journalist. I did not have to open my mouth. Moments later, one of Senegal's respected anthropologists and human rights activists, Dr. Penda Mbow also spoke up. She immediately said, "Where did you hear that story? I have seen that on the internet, many of us have. You should know that that is not true. Children of Jewish parents lost their lives in that attack." As I watched the interaction, I could not help but smile to myself. I felt vindicated for the work our offices did years earlier in the cultural section. The embassy's political officer drafted an excellent reporting cable on the evening's dinner. I barely said a word for the Senegalese did what I could not have done. They were in and of the culture and quickly squashed that disinformation account.

*Q: I imagine. However, you did not have you know the...*

ELAM-THOMAS: I did not hear any reference to the alleged U.S. sale of body parts and other far-fetched tales while in Senegal.

*Q: I want to turn for a second then to the actual management of the embassy. Were there any major issues that you had to deal with while you were there that were internal to the embassy? You know personnel, sometimes there are personnel problems, or an enlargement or a change to regulations regarding housing guidelines. Did any of these issues reach you during your tenure?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, they did. At one point, I called Marc Grossman (then Assistant Secretary for European and Canadian Affairs). I said, "Mark, why am I dealing with family issues? I thought my charge as COM was U.S.-Senegalese relations. Yet, several Americans in this mission have multiple personal issues." He responded: "Harriet welcome to our world - we deal with Americans as well as our hosts." My retort: "That is not why I sent to Fletcher." He laughed, he said, "But that's all part of conflict resolution." Two mid-level to senior American employees acted as if they were frustrated students and exhibited anger management issues. One was a retired Navy SEAL and the other was head of another key embassy section. When I learned they used inappropriate language (vulgarity) in front of the Senegalese staff on several occasions, I called the two of them into my office. I would not tolerate such comportment before our national staff members." While the outbursts were not directed to the Senegalese staff, it was still inappropriate. The American officers disagreed with a new approach to maintaining the appliances and furniture for new arrivals. After a serious talk, the men agreed to be respectful to one another and shook hands as they left my office.

There were marital issues and other family concerns. I had no idea I would have to serve as the in-house psychologist. If I wanted our embassy to function, I had to use some of the conflict resolution skills learned at Fletcher.

*Q: Yes.*

ELAM-THOMAS:

The new approach to tracking our furniture and equipment orders continued to plague the warehouse staff. Heavens, you would have thought the world was coming to the end. Few managers welcome change if it means that one person has to rethink his/her approach to a long-standing tradition. This issue came to the attention of the Department. The Director General offered to send out an arbiter. As I contained my frustration, I said, "There is absolutely no need to send anyone to help me resolve this conflict." What makes my statement more remarkable; I said this to my dear friend and role model, Ambassador Ruth Davis who was DG at the time. I resolved the issue. Trust me, I may smile often and project a positive approach to many issues. That should never be equated with weakness. However, when you really cross the line of what I believe is morally correct, I will not bow to pressure. One of my former bosses now deceased learned that about "charming"

Harriet. I refused to put forth the candidacy of the spouse of one of our International Visitor candidates. The couple were personal as well as professional friends of the Athens PAO. When the PAO approached me a year later to consider sending her, I again refused. He would say, "There goes our CAO with her integrity lecture." I now realize I was threatening to him on several levels. Not only did I speak Greek almost as well as he did, I had a high profile with all of my Greek contacts and much-too-much press coverage. I was also Ambassador Stearns first choice to be CAO Athens. My success with the Greeks translated into competition with the PAO. Despite the successes regarding U.S.-Greek relations during a tense anti-American period and despite my receiving two prestigious awards from the Greek government my four years in Athens did not result in a promotion. I believe I indicated earlier, it was only after the Deputy DG, Ambassador William Swing reviewed my Athens evaluations that I learned the problem. The performance evaluations did not include specific examples of my work in improving U.S. Greek-relations to meet U.S. objectives. I also learned it was important for me to cover my own successes in the "officer's statement" portion of the report. Everyone needs someone to provide the advice I received from Ambassador Swing. However, it was Ambassador Edward Perkins, then Director General, who encouraged Ambassador Swing to meet with me. Whether one is in the public or private sector, one needs mentors. I have been fortunate to have several and that is why I continue to offer guidance to my students and new FSOs.

*Q: Yeah that happens and that is very sobering...*

ELAM-THOMAS: To return to the issue regarding the conflict resolution between the gents at the warehouse, I reminded myself, these are adults in their late 40's or early 50's. I was only nine years older than they were and I was a woman. Remember, I often said, it was more difficult being a woman than African-American.

In another instance, an American FSO came to tell me he thought he lost the keys to the warehouse. I was livid and said, "Why are you in my office? Leave right now and report this to our Regional Security Officer (RSO) before I pick up this phone myself. Get back to me within two hours. If you cannot find those keys within that time frame, you will need to change every lock in that warehouse." No doubt, he had never seen me as angry. Within the time allotted, he reported that he found the keys.

*Q: Yeah, you had some problems.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Thank heavens that issue was resolved. There were others, but no need to tax my memory to relate them to you now.

*Q: Well, you know unfortunately these challenges comes with the job.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, Marc Grossman reminded me of that.

*Q: Well you are also there for your judgement and your ability to manage an organization and sometimes you have to make the tough decisions.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Oh, I forgot to mention, we fired an FSN who was involved in visa fraud.

*Q: That's, well I mean in fairness that is an easy one. When you have really discovered that they are... then they have to go.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Absolutely.

*Q: That is straightforward. It is always more difficult when it is a behavior issue that is painful.*

ELAM-THOMAS: While I will admit my frustration at having to deal with the warehouse issue, I gain significant satisfaction on another score. Our embassy's effective negotiations with the Senegalese and Americans and Senegalese resulted in our acquisition of the property for the new USAID building. The inevitable human behavior issues caused me significant concern. These issues, I kept to myself given the importance of discretion and security concerns. I skipped many other issues in this discussion for obvious reasons. My husband understood for he had been in the special branch of the Trinidad & Tobago police service. Security is still his top priority. Before I went to deal with the warehouse/furniture conflict, my husband knew something truly bothered me. He summoned me to the residence balcony and said, "You see that moon up there, look at it. What is between you and the moon? Admire the beauty of the moon and be humbled in its presence and then deal with whatever is before you tomorrow." Only moments early, I said to myself: "Why did I say yes to this job? Why am I here? The title is fine and nice but these people are acting like children." That is precisely what I felt.

*Q: And you had that awful moment of what am I doing here.*

ELAM-THOMAS: I certainly did.

*Q: You cannot be the only ambassador who had that feeling.*

ELAM-THOMAS: I have plenty of company for I read some of the oral histories of colleagues. Some describe how they worked for the worst ambassador on earth. Only a few months before we did this addendum interview, I counseled a young FSO who is dealing with a challenging ambassador. Fortunately in August 2017, she will end her time as the head of the political section in this embassy where she works for a somewhat culturally insensitive (to put it mildly) political appointee. She thanked me for the advice as I recounted some of my less-than-positive experiences with ambassadors (career or political).

*Q: That is exactly what I was thinking. Well rather than, okay so at this point rather than look at details, how would you characterize then the entire period of your tenure there? As this will be now in your oral history, what would you say to people who are now thinking about now whether they are going to become ambassadors? What does it take to*

*do the job from your point of view, now that you know you have survived it and had some successes?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Always remember that you represent a country recognized for its ability to maintain a safe/secure world, resolve conflict, and manage humanitarian relief crises. However, do not assume that you will be welcomed with open arms as you begin a new assignment. You must make a genuine commitment to gain creditability. This requires more than smiles, firm handshakes and eye contact. Be aware and respect the lens through which your hosts view the world. Do not superimpose your values on someone else.

*Q: Now were there particular experiences in your professional life that were especially helpful for you as you conducted yourself as ambassador?*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes, my tours in Greece and Turkey taught me invaluable life lessons. During my lifetime, I have witnessed two nations that despite centuries of conflict came together whenever there was a natural disaster. Though they follow different religious, I found many similarities in their culture. I learned of the rich histories of African nations, which I knew little about thanks to my assignments Senegal, Mali and The Ivory Coast. The Boston school system did not include much if any history of Africa in my geography classes. I grew up before black is beautiful was the order of the day. With all of the respected institutions of higher education in and around Boston, I had limited exposure to the continents of Africa, Asia or Latin America. I only studied the history of Western Civilizations. No one taught me about the Songhai Kingdom or of the fascinating cultures in South East Asia, much less our neighbors in Latin America or Canada. The Foreign Service provided me with a welcomed new perspective of who I am. I learned that we, as Americans, had much to learn from the rest of the world.

*Q: Oh, the key experiences that helped you be ambassador.*

ELAM-THOMAS: When I became chief of mission in Dakar, I was determined not to make the mistakes some of my supervisors made earlier on in my career. I needed to listen and learn from my hosts. For example, in the Ivory Coast one of the cultural assistants told me, "You Americans try to democratize everything." I invited a driver to a planning session prior to the arrival of a speaker. The cultural assistant said that we do not sit in a meeting with drivers. I learned that The Ivory Coast and many other traditional societies are hierarchical. At the end of my tour, an Ivorian woman of blended French and Ivoirian descent said, "I could've been your friend but you always included everyone in planning meetings." She did not welcome my attempt at inclusiveness. Staff members were puzzled for I often made my own copies at the machine. I did not allow them to "do their job." In my naiveté, I thought I was adding to the efficiency of our operation. In the early days of my career, I much preferred to make copies than figure out how the personal computers worked. The lesson: never assume that everyone welcomed a democratic approach.

*Q: Interesting. Okay, I see what you are saying. Alright so at the end, as we now reach the end of your tour as ambassador, since then, what have been the benefits that you have been able to take with you from that experience?*

ELAM-THOMAS: The manner in which you deliver a message is as important as the words that you use. Body language, tone of voice transmit positive and negative messages. More often than you wish, you must deliver unwelcomed communications. You always represent that 800-pound gorilla. You need your counterpart's buy in. Humility can serve as the catalyst to gain agreement. My students remind me that such an approach may not be very honest. Throughout my career, I delivered difficult messages and, in most cases, I gained the needed outcome. I will admit, I did not imitate the Richard Holbrook approach.

In response to your question: I cannot limit the career benefits I gained only from my time as ambassador to Senegal. Over the 42 years in service to my country, the benefits include the following: I am less judgmental. Race, ethnicity, gender orientation, southern accents and religious preferences no longer influence my worldview as they did when I first graduated from college. Remember, I grew up in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement. I have learned that, despite America's military might, size and diversity, it is still far from perfect. On my first trip to Africa in the late 1960's, I did not understand why I was not welcomed with open arms. I quickly learned that African-Americans did not have the historical weight of a revered African Kingdoms. The Senegalese, Ghanaians, Malians and Ivoirians knew that my ancestors went to the U.S. but as slaves. I had no right to consider myself equal or more intelligent.

*Q: Interesting.*

ELAM-THOMAS: I learned that my international colleagues viewed me as an American not necessarily as an African American. That was refreshing. Again, I remind you that I grew up in Boston at a time when individuals, despite academic degrees and accomplishments, the majority of people who looked like me were not supposed to be educated as my family. As I gained more responsible career positions, I demonstrated my abilities to change the image of Americans and African Americans abroad. None of this would have happened if I remained in Boston after my Simmons graduation.

*Q: Excellent. The last question I will ask you and then we will wrap up: "You have mentioned you returned to Senegal. What have been the remaining ties that you have with Senegal? Because often ambassadors do retain a certain amount of relationship with the country that they have served in. Some return frequently, serve on boards and remain in touch with their former counterparts.*

ELAM-THOMAS: I have witnessed the joyful reactions of host country colleagues when former U.S. diplomats return to their posts. While COM Dakar, one revered former ambassador come to visit Senegal. Although not his intention, his multiple visits earlier when other U.S. ambassadors were present, overshadowed the work of the sitting COM.

For years, I did not think it was wise to return to Senegal. It seemed insensitive and I did not want to impose myself on a successor. In 2010, Ambassador Marcia Bernicat invited me to visit. Unfortunately, my husband became ill and we had to cancel the trip. In late 2014 or early 2015, I received an email from a fellow member of the Orlando Philharmonic Board, Terry Thorspecken. Her childhood classmate, James Zumwalt, was named to be ambassador to Senegal and she wanted to put him in touch with me. Ambassador Zumwalt also invited us to visit and asked me to give a speech while there. I accepted his invitation and we returned May 26 – June 14, 2016. We certainly covered our travel costs and enjoyed the first week of our time as guests in the residence. I believe I mentioned Ambassador Zumwalt hosted a luncheon with 14 of the FSNs (now LES staffers) who served in Dakar during my time as COM. The final two weeks we were guests of the Ambassador's neighbor who lived within walking distance of the new EMR. Our host in that setting was Dr. Aissatou Kone-Diabi, former Africa Deputy Director General of the World Health Organization. She hosted another elegant luncheon where Ambassador Zumwalt and his wife Ann Kambara (former FSO) met a host of valuable contacts for the remainder of his time as COM Dakar.

During our mid-2016 return trip to Dakar, we reconnected with Senegal's top architect, Pierre Goudiaby Atepa, the former Vice President of the Senegalese National Assembly Dr. Iba der Thiam and former Member of Parliament and presidential candidate Landing Savané. You will remember, Pierre Goudiaby Atepa helped us secure the needed authorization for water and electricity in the new AID building. Dr. Iba der Thiam was the pivotal contact that resulted in the Senegalese government approving the safe skies and open skies agreement in 2002.

Ambassador Zumwalt and his wife Ann Kambara attended the June 4, 2016 luncheon that Dr. Kone-Diabi hosted. I would estimate that Zumwalt met about eight new contacts. Several of them had direct connections with Guinea Bissau and Zumwalt traveled to Guinea Bissau the day after the luncheon. Our guests included now retired Senegalese ministers, academics, business people and cultural representatives. I was deeply touched when the owner of one of Dakar's jewelry stores, Lavina Roopchandani, noted she still kept the thank you note I wrote to her when I left Dakar in 1977. She and her son Deepak hosted a luncheon for us as well. I saw some progress in terms of road construction, but I still saw the need for much more progress to eliminate poverty.

I renewed my contact with scores of genuine friends in Dakar including Molly Melching. A former Peace Corps Volunteer in Dakar in 1975, Molly is the founder and director of TOSTAN, an international non-governmental organization based in Senegal Africa geared toward educating the people and ending female genital cutting. Fluent in Wolof Molly has lived in Senegal for 46 years. She raised America's image in a manner which will last longer than the work of the most revered U.S. ambassador. The 2016 visit allowed me to re-establish the genuine ties I made with Senegalese counterparts from 1975 to the present.

During my June 14, 2016 speech on Cultural Competence and Diversity in International Affairs at the Center for Strategic and Diplomatic Studies, I engaged in a Q&A session

with some of the 70 guests from French and English-speaking West African nations. The director of the center noted he remembered me from my time as Assistant Cultural Attaché and 13 years earlier as Ambassador. His observation confirmed the value of genuine relationships that can truly enhance America's credibility abroad.

*Q: All right, very nice, so your time is up I know you have to go on to another engagement...*

ELAM-THOMAS: If something else comes to mind, I have another 5 or 10 minutes. I cancelled the other two appointments today just in case.

*Q: Oh, all right good, because you had mentioned something that did capture my attention just now with the – and I was not going to ask because I thought we were at the end of our time – it was, oh right, it was the assistance that you got for the water for the AID mission.*

*Q: Because you know that says a lot about how you can work through the local government, you know how you made your judgements about who was actually going to be able to deliver and you know make something happen.*

ELAM-THOMAS: That is right the person was Pierre Goudiaby Atepa.

After the USAID Director at the time Don Clark reported he waited three months to get the necessary approval for water and electricity access to the new building, I called Pierre Goudiaby Atepa. Pierre pushed through two of the most difficult roadblocks to the construction of that site by reaching the directors of water and electricity to resolve that impasse. As an architect, Pierre knew the right person to call to clear the way. He remains close to Wade and the current Senegalese President Macky Sall. As a business man, I do not have an indication of his party affiliation. Pierre gets things done and that is all that matters. Again, this was not a UN resolution nor a U.S. foreign policy issue. However, this is also what ambassadors must do. The African Bureau was indeed pleased with this success. USG inspectors stated the older USAID building was in disrepair and a fire hazard. It was unsafe. It was critical that the 223-member AID staff work in a safe facility and we succeeded to make that happen. I honestly believe that the mutual respect that Pierre Goudiaby Atepa and I maintained helped this process. This architect knew how to work with diplomats and knew the protocol. For example, Pierre alerted me to Congressman William Jefferson's visit to Dakar. The congressional representative's staff did not alert the Department of State in advance. Fortunately, Pierre Goudiaby Atepa realized that protocol might suggest that the ambassador should be aware of the visit. Pierre invited me to a luncheon in Jefferson's honor and I decided it was wise for me to attend. After all the USAID building might not have had water and electricity without Pierre's help.

Granted, I remember seeing another U.S. ambassador's ire when a congressional staffer or member arrived in country without prior notice. The travelers did not think of the dangers should anything unexpected take place. The embassy would need to come to

their rescue. I am glad to report, this was the only time such an oversight took place during my time as COM Dakar.

*Q: Again, you were able to make the USAID move to its new building happen by cutting through whatever the bureaucracy was, and that is quite a serious accomplishment.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Yes. USAID moved to a new site and shortly thereafter, the Public Diplomacy Section moved to a more secure location. During my May 2016 visit, I was delighted to see USAID and the Public Diplomacy colleagues housed in the stunning new embassy compound located in seafront suburb of Dakar.

*Q: Ah of course because you visited and you have seen it.*

ELAM-THOMAS: The entire facility far more attractive than several of the new embassy or consulate buildings which have been built since the September 11 tragedy.

*Q: Well then, we can tie up with a final question of what have I missed? What was an experience or an accomplishment that I did not ask about that you think is important?*

ELAM-THOMAS: I covered security, USAID challenges, due diligence with Senegalese ministers on the open skies agreement, and, of course, the ambassadorial appointment. However, I forgot to mention that I served the rapporteur during a November 2002 White House Conference on Culture and Diplomacy. What prompted the organizers to fly me from Dakar to DC for this event? Perhaps my earlier role as Counselor of USIA had something to do with it. Secretary Madeleine Albright chaired the final panel and there I was on the platform with her and the following panelists: the renowned cellist Yoyo Ma, HRH Aga Khan, the Nigerian poet and playwright and 1986 Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka, and a representative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Their observations confirmed the impact of culture in diplomacy. Each described an experience when they reached an audience abroad and delivered a subtle but critical message about America. Few politicians or diplomats could have handled that task as effectively as the artists could.

During the earlier portion of the daylong conference at the White House, I sat next to Dan Kurtzer, our former ambassador to Egypt and Israel. Seated to my right, Arthur Mitchell, the founder and executive director of The Dance Theater of Harlem (DTH). I coordinated the DTH Visit to Athens in 1988.

*Q: And this was a White House conference...*

ELAM-THOMAS: White House Conference in 2000 on Culture and Diplomacy. Thanks to Google, I can confirm that it took place November 28, 2000.

*Q: Yes I remember that, there was another individual there who also did some reporting out that I believe we also interviewed.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Perhaps it was Ambassador Dan Kurtzer.

I covered more than the waterfront in this addendum to my Oral History interviews that began with Jim Dandridge. Jim was so patient and juggled his schedule to be available whenever I carved out time to be in Washington, DC.

No doubt as we close, I should clarify that during my COM Dakar time, Guinea Bissau was part of my responsibility. At the time of my assignment the U.S. ambassador did not present credentials to the government because our embassy was closed since the June 1998 coup.

My husband and I visited Guinea Bissau twice. On the first visit, we walked through our closed embassy that mirrored a time capsule. The clocks registered the very time and date when our staff evacuated the embassy. We noted the plastic wrappers of snacks still in place. It was eerie.

While I made the “official” calls on the then quasi leaders, my husband visited the only hospital in the capital. He saw the dire state of the facility and said he will never forget the sobering experience. The chief doctor met my husband at the entrance and said, “The only equipment that I have here is my stethoscope and two bare hands.” Thanks to the Defense Department’s security assistance program, our embassy requested and received major equipment and supplies for the hospital.

A few months later, we returned to Guinea Bissau to present the equipment and medical supplies. Visibly moved and almost tearful, the doctors expressed heartfelt appreciation for the sizeable and much-needed donation. They said, “You Americans are not as some perceive the police of the world. You have a heart.”

*Q: Yes - and delivering at least some medical assistance back then hopefully had some benefit later when of course Ebola breaks out.*

ELAM-THOMAS: That is correct. The former head of the political section in Dakar, Deborah Malac, was ambassador to Liberia during the outbreak of the Ebola crisis. As I listened to her interviews at the height of the crisis, she was always composed, never judgmental and the epitome of a well-informed career diplomat. Debbie has served as ambassador to Uganda since February 2016. God bless her. Another point for Oral History readers to learn is many of our American diplomats adopt children from around the world. The concept of “the other” is one that almost ceases to exist. We welcome into our families children of all races and ethnicities. It is my view that the majority of my Foreign Service colleagues are less judgmental. We live in a world that I wish existed in the continental United States. We seldom allow differences to keep us from having reasoned conversations. Our colleagues welcome the blended relationships which results in their offspring being far more open to different cultures, beliefs and lifestyles. Ours is an almost utopian worldview. It is hard for many Americans who have not traveled abroad to understand that perspective. I will admit, I sometimes find it bewildering when there are gatherings of people of one race/background in a room. I will also confess, I am

not well versed in American popular culture. No doubt, that is a result of my having lived outside of the United States for the majority of my adult career.

*Q: Yes, but you know as an ambassador you should have people who are able to bring you up to speed on popular culture. Your public diplomacy section and so on, should keep you current. You should not necessarily have to follow the lead People Magazine or The Grammy or Emmy celebrities.*

ELAM-THOMAS: You are correct. Years ago, our section received the videos of the Kennedy Center awards and I would set aside an evening with no interruptions so that I could soak up all of the highlights of America's art for two hours a year. Of course, that observation gave away my generation for such programs are now instantaneously available through live streaming. When I speak with young students about careers in international affairs, I tell them if I had to do it over again I would not change one bit.

*Q: Yes I agree with you, looking back on my career it's the same thing.*

ELAM-THOMAS: Now you know I will be 76 in a few months and I remind my hosts at UCF that it is time for me to retire. Their response: "No you should not leave for your presence at this university is invaluable." My response, "You certainly know how to make an old lady feel good." My daily interaction with 19 to 20 year olds, keeps me young. My dear colleague, Ambassador Tibor Nagy now vice provost for international affairs at Texas Technical University, says, "Teaching is fun. Our students come up with things that you and I would never even think of."

*Q: Right, exactly I agree with you it is ...*

ELAM-THOMAS: I have to say I am not well-versed technologically as some of my former diplomatic colleagues. I do not have a twitter or Instagram account and I rarely view my Facebook page.

*Q: Facebook and...*

ELAM-THOMAS: I can now find Facebook; I do not know how to do a message on Facebook without everybody reading it. Somehow, I have managed to survive without becoming an expert in the latest social media.

My apologies for a slight delay in completing this addendum. I appreciate the fact that my ADST colleagues believed I did not do justice to my time as COM Dakar in the first interview. In addition, I thought you were on a time constraint to complete this before the end of the 2017 Black History Month postings.

*Q: Oh no it wasn't that, it's just that the longer we wait the more unlikely, this is true not just for you but for anybody, the longer we wait the likelier it is stuff will come up and it gets lost.*

ELAM-THOMAS: You are most gracious. I hope this addendum will assist researchers and will inspire young women and men of every hue to become career diplomats. I shall never regret this life enhancing experience. I was honored to represent the best of the United States abroad.

*End of interview*