

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Program
Foreign Assistance Series

DAVID ECKERSON

Interviewed by: Carol Peasley
Initial interview date: September 3, 2022
Copyright 2024 ADST

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Childhood, Education, Family, and Early Professional Background	
Upstate New York Childhood	
Hiram College (B.A.) and Christian Theological Seminary (M.A.)	
Peace Corps Volunteer in Upper Volta (Burkina Faso)—Drought Relief and Nutrition Monitoring, 1972 - 1974	
Early Contract Positions as Nutrition Advisor in Cameroon and Zaire—learning host country perspectives and need for institution building, 1977 - 1979, 1981 - 1983)	
USAID/Africa Bureau, Health, and Nutrition Officer, (RSSA Hire) 1984 – 1987	
USAID/Haiti, Health Office	1987 - 1992
1990 Election of Aristide and Shift in USAID Strategy	
Child Survival Program Successes	
PL-480 Local Currency Programming	
Coup—Managing Change in Strategy and Programming after Ordered Departure of Staff	
AID/W, Nicaragua Desk Officer	1992 - 1993
Deputy Director of Office of Caribbean Affairs	1993 - 1996
Haiti Task Force and Return of Aristide	
HIV/AIDS Programming—PROMISE: Successful public-private partnership	
Haiti Earthquake (2009)—Leader of Team Defining Post-Earthquake Program Supplemental Appropriation	
USAID/Ethiopia, Deputy Mission Director (Acting Director)	1996 - 2000
Re-engineering and Strategic Objective Work and Teams	
Greater Horn of Africa Initiative	
ICASS (Interagency Council on Administrative Services and Support)	
Ethiopian Leadership on Development Agenda	
USAID Mission Director Authorities during Ordered Departure	
Role of Foreign Service Nationals (FSNs)	

Senior Seminar	2000 - 2001
AID/W, Coordinator for New Entry Professional Training Program 2001	
AID/W, PPC Bureau, Director, Office of Strategy and Program Planning	2002 - 2004
Aligning Workforce and Budgets - Business Model Review and Staff Template Joint State-USAID Strategic Plan	
AID/W, Director, Office of Human Resources	2004 - 2006
Rationalization of Overseas Staffing Staffing Iraq and Afghanistan—Innovative Actions Workforce Planning Model Diversity Council and Affinity Groups Workforce Challenges within HR Office Global FSN Issues Spousal Employment, Ending the TAACS Program, and the "Beans Rule" Interagency Coordination Standing Up the New State/F Bureau	
AID/W, Asia Near East Bureau, Special Assistant to the Assistant Administrator	2007 - 2008
Joint Security Stabilization Strategy Advisor to USAID/Afghanistan	
USAID/Uganda, Mission Director	2008 - 2012
Innovative Program Assistance in Northern Uganda and USAID Office in Gulu Embassy and Co-location Performance Monitoring, Strategy Development, Geographic Focus PEPFAR and Interagency Challenges LGBTQ Issues in Uganda USAID and DOD Collaboration on Civic Action Programming	
AID/W Counselor to the Administrator	2012 - 2013
Changing the Personnel Appraisal System Creating a New Mission Statement for USAID Roles of Foreign Service Nationals (FSNs)	

INTERVIEW

Q: Today is September 3, 2022, and this is interview number one with Dave Eckerson. Dave, we're delighted that you are participating in the program. I look forward to

learning more about you and your career. Could you please start out with where you were born, where you grew up, and a bit about your family.

Childhood, Education, Family, and Early Professional Background

ECKERSON: Okay. I grew up in upstate New York. We lived in Fayetteville, a predominantly white upper-middle class suburb outside of Syracuse. My dad was a Merchandise Manager for a small department store chain that had stores in Erie, Rochester, Syracuse, and Buffalo. I was the youngest of four children in the family, and the only boy.

My sister Sally was mentally retarded, and she absorbed a lot of my parent's energy and attention. I was born late in their marriage, and they had their hands full with her. As a result, I was somewhat left alone growing up. I was active in sports and theater in high school, and while there was a lot of love in the family, my parents hardly ever attended any of my sports events or plays.

Q: So, you depended on your own self-motivation?

ECKERSON: Yeah, pretty much. I guess that's a good point. I was pretty smart in school, but never studied very hard. It was easy for me to get good grades without too much effort. My high school was a dichotomy of white rich kids whose parents worked as engineers and scientists for big companies in the area, and poor kids from small rural farms outside of town. We only had one Afro-American student in our class. And while I was active in sports and acting, I was more interested in partying and doing crazy things like chugging beer and trying to get my dad's Volkswagen up to 100 MPH driving down the steep hills outside of town. I never got into any of the Ivy League colleges I applied to, or even the safe school where my girlfriend's father was on the Board of Trustees. I received rejection letters from every college I applied to on the same day, and my parents freaked out. They never went to college, and only one of my other sisters got a degree. The guidance counselors at school steered me to look at less competitive colleges in Ohio. I picked Hiram college out of a directory of Ohio colleges since it was the same size as my high school and had an equal mix of men and women. Hiram College was just outside of Cleveland. It's where the Cleveland Browns pro football team used to do their pre-season training. That's all I knew about it. I didn't realize it was in the middle of an Amish community, and if you wanted to get a beer, you had to go outside of the county to buy it.

Q: There are a lot of small liberal arts colleges in Ohio. Is there a network that Hiram was part of?

ECKERSON: Hiram is linked with several small, expensive liberal arts colleges in Ohio that include Kenyon and Oberlin. Hiram had a pretty high academic standing. It was also very expensive, and tuition was equal to many of the prestigious Eastern schools. My dad paid for everything, and I took everything for granted. I spent more time at bars and sleeping than I did going to classes. I would copy notes from friends, take speed, and

study all night before exams. My grades hovered between high Cs and Bs. I majored in social science because you can dabble in many subjects like economics, political science, and history and not have to go deep into any field.

Every summer during college I returned home and went to work at our family restaurant. My dad was always trying to get out of his job at the department store and work for himself. Earlier in his life he and his friend bought a hotel in southern New York that never amounted to anything. When I was in middle school, he was sure he could make money by starting a restaurant featuring broasted chicken. Broasted chicken was a franchise located in Illinois that used a special marinade to prepare the meat, and then it was cooked in a pressure cooker filled with cooking oil. You could cook a pot full of chicken in eight minutes. He and my mother used to eat it all the time at a restaurant near our house. One day my dad started talking to the owner and became convinced he needed to start his own restaurant to sell the chicken. So, he signed a franchise agreement, bought several cooking pots, and leased restaurant space next to a bowling alley in north Syracuse. When I was in eighth grade, I would spend Saturdays at the restaurant cutting potatoes.

Q: He was still doing his retail management job, but doing the restaurant on the side?

ECKERSON: Yeah, he and my mom worked really hard to make it successful. We would all go over on the weekends and get everything ready for the week. Then my uncle and a hired cook ran the daily operations. Unfortunately, my uncle and the cook were both alcoholics. The restaurant only lasted a couple years and had to close. But my dad didn't give up. He closed the restaurant and put all the equipment in our garage. Three years later, during my freshman year at college, my dad got an idea to reboot his restaurant in Eagle Bay, a small town in the Adirondack mountains. This time around he would specialize in carry out food for the summer tourist season. He leased a shuttered building on the main road and renovated the building to house the restaurant equipment he stored in the garage. He called me in the winter of my freshman year as he began hatching his plan. I was on a dorm phone, with my buddies hanging around and he said: "Dave, I'll give you a hundred bucks a week if you come up and run my new restaurant. I want to call it "Dave's Chicken Hut". How could I refuse? When classes ended in 1967, I went back to Syracuse and apprenticed in a restaurant with broaster equipment for 10 days to learn how to cook and maintain the pots. Then I headed up to Eagle Bay and opened Dave's Chicken Hut to the public. It was a steep learning curve and a lot of work. I'd start at 10 AM and work until nine at night when we closed. Then I'd have to go back later to drain the marinade from tubs of chicken to prepare for the next day. Summer nights in Eagle Bay were filled with lots of bars, lots of beer, and lots of parties for all of us who worked during the summer season. My friends would show up when we closed to help me clean up. Then we would all go out and party until the bars shut down. Every night (day, really) at 2 AM everyone, including all the bartenders in the bars we frequented, would go back to the restaurant. I would dump the marinade off the chicken and give everybody free food. I never paid for drinks all summer long, because my bartender friends would eat my food in exchange for drinks at their bars.

During my senior year in college, my dad retired. He didn't really want to, but the department store fell on bad times. It was during the war on poverty in the mid 1960s. The department store was privately owned, and the owner's son went off to university in Colorado. When he graduated, he told his father that the time was right to get a massive loan from the Federal government and rebuild the downtown store. He had a vision of a flagship edifice with glass elevators and luxurious decorations. At the same time, malls were beginning to sprout in the suburbs. My dad wanted to start a store in one of the malls in North Syracuse—they had a location out there—and had they opened a store there, they might have survived. But, they didn't. The owner put all his money in downtown Syracuse to build a new store, and they went belly up. My dad's retirement was based on private shares held by store employees and the owner. All the private shares were liquidated to pay off the department store's debt. After the debts were paid, there was nothing left for the employees. So, after working for 30 years at the store, and after being promised 90% of his last salary, my dad got nothing.

At the same time, snowmobilers came into the Adirondacks in record numbers every winter. The state opened a trail that ran right in front of the chicken hut. So, my dad got a liquor license, added a dining room and gift shop to the building, and turned it into a family restaurant. My parents winterized their summer cottage and moved to Eagle Bay to run the restaurant all year round. They did very well, and after three years sold the business for a considerable profit and moved to Florida.

Q: Well, that's a lot of responsibility, and you obviously did a good job because it evolved into something big.

ECKERSON: Yeah, but in the end, it drove a wedge between me and my mom and dad. I felt they were taking advantage of me. I was locked into running the chicken hut every summer, seven days a week for three and a half months straight. I had no free time. Woodstock happened fifty miles away from Eagle Bay and I couldn't go. At the end of my junior year at Hiram, I made up my mind I would never work at the restaurant again in the summer.

At the beginning of my senior year in college, I went to Europe to study Art History. Our study group traveled with a professor through England, France and Italy for several months. We visited art museums, cathedrals, and classical buildings to learn the history of European art and architecture. I became best friends with the professor's son, who the professor brought with him. His son was a pretty wild guy and the professor wanted to keep tabs on him, and not leave him at home alone with his mother. When our class arrived in Paris all the museums were closed because the French museum workers went on strike. I convinced the professor that his son and I should go to Amsterdam to study Dutch painters, since there was nothing we could see in Paris. We trained up to Amsterdam and did a perfunctory tour of the Rijksmuseum, but spent most of our time smoking dope in the Paradiso nightclub, sleeping, and wandering around the red-light district. I spent all the money the professor had given us to eat and travel back to Paris. The professor's son still had money and took a train back. I hitch-hiked through Germany

to see the Rhine and snuck onto a train in Strasberg bound for Paris. I hid in a bathroom all the way, and never paid the fare.

Q: Was this entirely Hiram students?

ECKERSON: Yes. Most of us were seniors. I still remember most of what we did, and I think it was the best learning experience of my college career. But, I learned a lot more about myself when the class was over, and I told the professor that I was not going home with everyone else. His son and I had hatched a plan to head south to Morocco and experience the drug scene in Marrakesh. I basically gave up my plane ticket, since it was non-refundable if I didn't return on the day I was supposed to travel. Before I left Paris I met a Texan who told me he had some great LSD. I told him I had never tried acid before, and he reached in his pocket and handed me a blotter of orange sunshine—which I took all alone—something you are not supposed to do. I didn't have a bad trip, but I did have a weird 12-hour hallucinogenic walk through Paris before I headed south. I left Paris with twenty bucks in my pocket and hitch-hiked through France and Spain to Algeciras and then took the ferry to Tangiers. The journey took three weeks, and I arrived with seven dollars to my name. I found a 25 cent a night hostel and began checking the American Express Office every day where the professor's son and I had planned to meet.

After a few days I wondered if my buddy was going to show up. I heard from fellow travelers that there was a merchant marine tanker sailing from Tangier to New York, and you could get passage for a hundred bucks. I also heard that the US Embassy would pay to help Americans get home if they were destitute. So, I went to the Embassy, told them I was broke, and asked for 100 hucks to get on the tanker. The Embassy told me I had to send three telegrams to people I knew who might be able to cover my expenses before they could give me any money. I had the Embassy send telegrams to three guys that I owed money to and they, of course, never got back to them.

But, in the interim I smoked a bunch of dope one night and had a horrible acid flashback from my Paris adventure. The Moroccan police picked me up and interrogated me when I came to my senses. They seemed satisfied with my answers and said they would give me a ride back to my hostel. Instead, they took me to a Moroccan prison. I was in prison for two weeks. I was placed in a cell along with a Canadian who had given up hope of ever getting out. He told me he reckoned he would be there the rest of his life. Every morning we would be marched into a huge room with tables and chairs and wait for tea and bread. Off to the side of the room was a small dungeon-like cell that had chains on the wall. Others before us had carved messages of gloom like "I'm going to die here." It was not a pleasant place. We were locked in the huge room with no prison guards to protect us from some really crazy inmates, many who were gay and wanted to have sex with anyone they could dominate and control. Fortunately, my Canadian cell-mate was 6 foot five and would scream and threaten anyone who came close to us.

Every day after tea and bread we were lined up and a guard would place a pill in our mouth to make us sleep. I would put the pill underneath my tongue and spit it out later in

my cell. While other inmates slept the day away, I read books the Canadian had stashed under his bed, and started a diary on a paper tablet he gave me.

One day as we were being led back to our cells, I was at the end of the line and the guards were all in front of me. I passed by a room along the corridor that I had never noticed before. The door was ajar, and a sliver of light streamed out from the crack along the edge. I stopped, knocked on the door and without pausing for a response, slipped inside. A huge desk cluttered with paper filled the tiny office. Behind it, a somewhat startled Moroccan bureaucrat in suit and tie stared at me. I didn't speak any French, so I pointed to his telephone and said, "American Embassy, please telephone the American Embassy for me." He looked at me, said something I didn't understand, and then started dialing the phone. He handed the phone to me and there was an Embassy operator on the line. I told her I wanted to speak to the person who had interviewed me about my request for money to return to the United States. Almost instantly I connected with the person who had sent out my telegrams. He said no one had gotten back to him, and he had tried to contact me at the hostel.

I told him the story of my bad acid trip and how the police had taken me to a prison. He asked where it was, and I said I didn't know, but I thought I must be near an airport since I could hear planes constantly overhead. He told me he would try to find me. I handed the phone back to the bureaucrat behind the desk and thanked him. Then I slipped out the door and caught up with the others unnoticed as they ambled slowly through the corridors back to the cells.

The next day the guards came to me and said, "The American Embassy is here, and they want to talk to you." I was ushered into a small room and met again the young man who I spoke to in the Embassy. He told me the Embassy was issuing me an airline ticket to fly home the next day. I told him about the Canadian, and asked if the Embassy could help him as well. The next day the young man came back and gave me a ride to the airport. He told me he had contacted the Canadian Embassy about my Canadian friend. It seems his father was the Solicitor General for Toronto and was already headed to Tangiers to get his son out of prison.

I returned home to my parents with a passport that had the front cover clipped off at the top edge. Inside there was a statement that said: "This passport is not valid until the bearer pays back \$350 to the U.S. government". My folks were very glad to see me. I never told them about the prison and my drug problems. We had a nice Thanksgiving celebration together. A few days later I bid them goodbye and hitch-hiked back to Ohio to meet up with my girlfriend and resume college.

The night I arrived, I met up with my girlfriend and headed out to party with friends. We ended up in a dorm room with a bunch of other guys that I had known. They were smoking some very strong hash, and after I took a hit, I felt the same hallucinogenic rush I had in Morocco. I lost it again, and this flashback was not pretty. I became pretty crazy and jumped through a few windows before I ended up in the hospital. The next day, I was kicked out of college and told I could no longer attend classes until I recovered from my drug problem. My parents came out to Hiram and took me home. I confessed to all that

had come down in Morocco, we had a prodigal son moment, and my father cut off my ponytail. I had to go to a shrink, and he asked me to write down all that had happened on my bad trips. After he read my account, he told me I shouldn't smoke any more weed, since the acid was still percolating in my head. He gave me some pills to use if I ever had an anxiety attack and told me to come back in a month. I got a job mounting ski bindings and spent a month skiing and working. When I returned to the shrink, he was happy with my condition and wrote a letter to Hiram saying that I was fit to resume my studies.

It took another month before Hiram agreed to let me return for the final semester of my senior year. I began classes in the spring of 1970. Two days after classes started, six students protesting the Vietnam war were shot and killed by the National Guard at Kent State. Hiram was located 20 miles from the Kent State campus, and their deaths triggered Hiram and most colleges in America to go on strike against the war and bombing in Cambodia. We all went to Washington, D.C. and joined the protests. Hiram never resumed classes. All students were given a passing grade in courses they took. I had enough credits for my degree, despite my absence, and graduated with my class.

I had no idea what I would do next. Just before graduation I went up to Chicago with a group of friends to see the Broadway musical "Hair". We met up with the father of one of my friends after the show. His dad was the Dean of Christian Theological Seminary in Indiana. He and several professors had come to Chicago to see the show as well. They were an amazing group of people, very warm, inviting, and intellectually on top of their game. When I told them I had no idea what I was going to do after graduation, they said, "Well if you don't know what you're going to do, why don't you apply to Christian Theological Seminary and do a year there? We can give you a work study job so you can probably cover the costs of your studies. I knew my dad was not going to give me any more money for any studies—I mean, that was over. So, when I got back to Hiram I applied for admission to the seminary and wrote a check for 25 dollars to cover the admission fee. Three weeks later I received two letters from the seminary. One of them said, "Congratulations, you've been accepted into Christian Theological Seminary." The other letter was from the bursar's office, which said, "Your check bounced and could you please give us the twenty-five dollars when you get here?"

I hitchhiked from Hiram to Indianapolis and enrolled in the seminary in the fall of 1970. I was in seminary for a year and a half. I really didn't care whether I got a degree or not. I was there to get a different perspective on life and experience spirituality. The degree program for a Masters in Culture and Values in Religion was interesting. You only needed 30 hours of course credits to graduate. There was no requirement to write a thesis. But, you had to pass a final exam composed of three questions, and you had to at least score a "B" on the exam.

I was ready to get out of seminary by the time I finished my course credits. I didn't prepare at all for the final exam. I just went to bed early and got up the next day and drove to the seminary to take the test. As I pulled into the parking lot, I happened to park next to the smartest guy in our class. He got out of his car as I did, and we walked together across the campus to the test site. I asked him what he thought the three

questions might be on the test. He said he wasn't sure about all of them, but he was sure there would be one on Dietrich Bonhoeffer. So, I asked him a barrage of questions about Bonhoeffer and his contribution to theology as we walked to the test site. Sure enough, when I opened the exam booklet, one of the three questions was about Bonhoeffer. I immediately regurgitated everything he told me. I knew enough to answer the other two questions, earn a B on the exam, and get a Master's degree.

I met several former Peace Corps volunteers while I was living in Indiana. I was quite intrigued by one who served in Ethiopia creating distance learning programs. He urged me to apply to Peace Corps, and a few months before I took my final exam I sent in an application. Just before the exam, I received a Peace Corps invitation to join a program to promote kitchen gardens in Togo. Clearly, Peace Corps thought I was a farmer in Indiana. I called the Office in Washington DC and told a recruiter that I knew nothing about farming, and I wanted to do distance learning in Ethiopia. He told me I should take the Togo offer, otherwise I would not get another chance at a Peace Corps position. I told him I wasn't interested, and to take me off the list.

A day after I took my exam, I said goodbye to my roommates and headed off to Hawaii. My plan was to travel around the world. I had a sister in Hawaii, and I figured I could get a job there for a while, save up some money and head to Australia.

I hitch-hiked from Indiana to LA and tried to air hitch-hike to Hawaii. I climbed a fence around the private airport and asked the first pilot who landed if there was any space on private Lear jets headed to Honolulu. He laughed at me and said: "Kid, none of the planes here can carry enough gas to make it to Hawaii." I spent my last hundred bucks on an airline ticket and crashed at my sister's condo in Honolulu. I got a job washing dishes at the Sheraton Waikiki and met a couple working there who let me sleep in their backyard after my sister's husband told me to leave their condo since he felt my long hair and hippie attitude were not good for their children. I slept in the backyard for several months alongside a guy from the house behind ours who was doing the same thing. We learned that for ten bucks you could fly on the tourist airplanes that did all the Hawaiian islands in one day if there was space available. You could go to any island you desired, stay a few days, and then wait for a plane to come by with space available and return to Honolulu for another ten bucks. I spent time off from dishwashing with my backyard buddy visiting all the Hawaiian islands. I was in a groove dishwashing and saving money to get to Australia when the guys that I lived with in Indiana forwarded another invitation from the Peace Corps to my sister's address I had given them when I left. My sister gave me the letter and when I opened it, I was taken aback. The invitation said: "Do you want to go to Ouagadougou, Upper Volta and be an epidemiologist?" I had no idea where and what they were inviting me to do. I found a Webster's dictionary, and looked up Upper Volta and Ouagadougou, the newly formed capital in the center of the country. It sounded like an intriguing place. Then I looked up epidemiologist—someone who studies epidemics and disease. The invitation also stated that I would spend my time traveling around the country living out of a truck conducting surveys for a special Peace Corps program with the Centers for Disease Control and the US Agency for International Development.

Q: Do you have any idea why they identified you to be a part of an epidemiology program in Peace Corps?

ECKERSON: I have no idea why they chose me. Maybe because I was a bit older at age 24 than most volunteers at the time. Maybe it was because I had a Master's degree in Culture and Values in Religion and they thought I might have a little anthropology in me. The program was a partnership. Peace Corps got money from AID [U.S. Agency for International Development] in one of those deals where AID gave CDC [Center for Disease Control] money to undertake a disease and demographic survey. Peace Corps got USAID funds to have Peace Corps volunteers take part in the program.

Q: What in your background would have caused Peace Corps to write to you?

ECKERSON: Again, I have no idea other than perhaps my initial application was still kicking around, or maybe it was just cosmic good luck. In any case, I decided to join the Peace Corps. I flew to Los Angeles and hitchhiked back to New York. I said goodbye to my parents and flew to the Virgin Islands to start my Peace Corps training for Upper Volta (which is now called Burkina Faso).

Q: This is now 1972, right?

ECKERSON: Right. I began training in July 1972, and after 10 weeks of learning French and More, we flew to Ouagadougou. When I arrived the CDC program was on hold because the government of Upper Volta had still not signed an agreement with USAID to implement the survey.

CDC had a huge presence in West Africa running the smallpox eradication program. In 1972 their work was nearly complete, and the vaccination effort had stopped the incidence of new cases in the region. CDC wanted to maintain a presence in the region to monitor any outbreaks of smallpox. They posted an epidemiologist in Bobo-Dioulasso to monitor smallpox. Then they designed a survey to understand the demographic profile of the region, and the burden of childhood diseases. They had fleets of trucks in every country, and an infrastructure in place to lower the costs of implementation. USAID funded CDC to carry out their survey over a two-year period in Upper Volta and Nigeria, allowing them to maintain a medical presence in the region.

The survey design was like no other at the time and became the model for all of the disease and demographic surveys that USAID and the World Health Organization (WHO) carried out around the world a decade later. In Upper Volta, thirty villages were chosen at random from the most populated area of the country. Then, in each village 25 households were chosen at random to be participants in the survey. Those households were visited every month for two years. We never missed a month visit in any village, despite a road-crippling rainy season and then one of the worst droughts in history. The whole concept was to do a deep dive into the public health of the region to understand the extent and severity of childhood diseases.

The “Achilles Heel” of the survey was the sampling design frame. The CDC smallpox division used a sampling methodology they developed in Africa to cope with the absence of roads, census data and maps. The CDC statisticians in Atlanta trashed the methodology. They were used to sampling frames in large cities based on named streets and numbered houses. Getting a random sample in a village that's not mapped, and where no houses or tent has an address was a real challenge.

The Atlanta statisticians could not accept drawing a population sample based on starting at the center of a village and then choosing a random number between one and four, representing north, east, south or west to determine where to go. For example, if three was chosen, we would walk straight south to the edge of the village from the center, marking each household with a number. At the edge of the village, we would flip a coin. Heads we went right, tails we went left back towards the center of the village, marking all the households in between. You continued the process back and forth from the center of the village to the edge until you attained 30 households. In the end, our sample looked like a piece of pie cut from the whole village circle.

Q: The sample frame hadn't been drawn up, and nothing had happened yet when you got to Upper Volta?

ECKERSON: No. When I arrived, the survey was just a concept on a piece of paper. In fact, the chief of party from CDC still hadn't arrived in country. So, with nothing to do, I took off and first went up to Mali. I spent 10 days marooned in Timbuktu when the river dried up and rode atop the back of a huge lorry on a grueling ride back to Ouagadougou. There was still no survey, so I cashed my Peace Corps subsistence check and headed south to Ghana. The Peace Corps Director found out I skipped town and had been traveling for months. He was not happy. When I got back from exploring the Ghana slave coast, he called me into his office and told me to either go home, or move to Yako, a town in the north designated to be a hub for the CDC survey which still wasn't approved by the government.

So, Peace Corps delivered me to my new home in Yako in an old Peugeot pickup truck. I was introduced to the Prefet and then was taken to the French doctor who ran the hospital in town. Francois Gurrier was a young doctor doing his military service in Yako. He aspired to be the next Albert Schweitzer and was incredibly energetic and full of ideas to improve public health in his medical domain. There were twelve satellite health clinics around Yako, and Francois wanted each one to have a source of clean water. Since I had no real job, and Peace Corps had a wells program, I offered to tap into the program and get the wells dug. I had a bunch of volunteers come up to teach me how to do community wells. Villagers dug the wells. They all wanted them. The secret is to make sure the wells are dug straight down, and not angled to one side or another. You would visit the sites often to ensure everything was going right. It's a bit daunting going down into them. You put a stick between your legs that is attached to a rope, and villagers lower you down. The wells were 75 to 100 feet deep. The rope comes off a pulley hung over the top of the

well. The rope is then wrapped around a post set in the ground off to the side. Villagers sit on the ground holding the rope and slowly release it to lower you down. Fortunately, the first time I went down one, I was being supervised by a Peace Corp well digger. When I stepped off the edge of the well, the villagers did not understand the concept of lowering me slowly. They let the rope slide through their hands, and I went into a free fall. The Peace Corp well digger grabbed the rope and yelled for everyone to hold fast. I was halfway down the well before I felt a hard tug between my groins, and my body came to a bouncing (and testicularly painful) hard stop. Needless to say, I was very careful after that, and learned how to tell people what to do in the local language. All the wells hit water at the same time, and I worked non-stop for three months taking collapsible molds and cement to the sites to get them finished before the rainy season arrived. In the middle of my well work, the government signed off on the CDC/USAID program and my real job began.

Q: Just stop for one second here and go backwards. When you first joined Peace Corps, you went for training. Did that involve any training for the epidemiology work you were going to be doing? What kind of Peace Corps training did you have before embarking?

ECKERSON: As you know, Peace Corps training programs evolved over time. In 1972, most Africa programs trained in the Virgin Islands (VI). We were the last program to train there before the training model shifted to immersive in-country training. There was some technical training for health volunteers in the VI, especially for those who spoke French. Our program consisted of four special placement volunteers, and all we did was learn French and some More, the predominate language in Upper Volta. Our technical training came when the CDC chief of party arrived in country after the program was approved by the government.

Q: Oh okay. Were all the volunteers going to Upper Volta? Were people going to a variety of jobs?

ECKERSON: Yeah, there were volunteers with other jobs, predominantly in primary health care. There were also volunteers assigned to rural development, sports, and well digging who went to other countries in West Africa.

Anyway, when the CDC chief of party arrived, he led a process to launch the survey. The sample of villages to survey was drawn from an old French atlas of villages. We then had to travel around the country to ascertain where they were located. It was not easy, since many of the sample villages were not on census lists of the provincial districts. We triaged names, spelling and locations with provincial officials until we felt we had the right villages. Interviewers were selected from the Ministry of health and a logistics plan was developed to reach every village every month. .

The smallpox eradication program had about 50 Dodge pickup trucks parked at the Ministry of Health in Ouagadougou that they used for the smallpox program. Most were broken and in various states of disrepair. We cannibalized five trucks, and each of us got one to use for the surveys. The Dodge trucks were incredibly powerful and were actually

called “power wagons”. They were also the most inappropriate vehicle to have in Africa. They got seven miles to the gallon and they were huge. You had to carry a fifty-gallon drum of gas in the back of the truck everywhere you went because there were no gas stations in rural Upper Volta. Driving in the rainy season was a nightmare. The truck was a double cabin model, and you had to carry two spare tires on the roof, and a barrel of gas in the back. You also carried four interviewers and their motorcycles on every trip. Driving these heavy trucks off road and on paths through marshes to get to villages in the middle of nowhere was not fun. You hardly ever got to the villages during April, May and June. I would drive until I couldn’t go any further. In most cases that meant that I tried to get through a marsh and got stuck. I would unload the interviewers and their motorcycles, and they would continue on to the village to be surveyed. While they did the interviews, I worked with a crowd of curious villagers to get the truck free. I put my Dodge power wagons in mud up to the headlights more times than I care to remember. To get free you had to jack up each wheel of the truck, put millet stalks underneath it, and get all four wheels above the mud. Then you covered the marsh in front of the truck and had all the villagers push you to high ground. You turned the truck around, and the villagers would throw stones, millet stalks and whatever they could find to build a path back to high ground on the other side of the marsh where you had come from. Everyone pushed again to get the truck back and positioned to head to the next village. It was a real endeavor, and I learned a whole lot of Mooré working with folks to free my truck.

Sorry, I’m digressing. Once we had every aspect of the survey and logistics worked out, experts from CDC came out to test the survey questionnaire and oversee the launch of the program. The folks that came out were legends in the CDC smallpox program. Did you ever know Bill Fage or Bob Hogan?

Q: Yes. Some wonderful people there.

ECKERSON: They were amazing, and full of incredible stories about the smallpox program. They also knew everything about developing survey questionnaires, and it turned out that our questionnaire took quite a bit of fine tuning before it was ready for prime time. Working with our newly hired interviewers (who were all male), we learned that they translated the question: “Since my last visit, are you pregnant” to be “Since my last visit, are you knocked up”? We had to go over every translation of every question to ensure they were standardized and culturally correct in Mooré. We also fine-tuned other questions in English to ensure answers would accurately assess the health status of the population we were surveying. In the end, the questions we crafted and then field tested and refined even further are the same questions contained in every disease and demographic survey carried out today.

CDC did the same survey in Upper Volta and Nigeria using the same questions and the same protocol. After a year of implementation, we went to Nigeria and shared our experiences and lessons learned. It was clear that both surveys were on track and complementary.

When the drought of 1972-75 rolled across the Sahel, our survey life changed. The drought was horrible. Ouagadougou became a haven for every journalist in the world. The cover of Newsweek showed parched earth, dead cows, and babies that looked like skeletons. The donor establishment wanted data to demonstrate the extent and severity of the situation. CDC got involved and in addition to our village survey work, we were asked to carry out a nutritional assessment in the hardest hit area of the country. I spent a month leading a team of interviewers on a nutrition survey across the entire northern part of the country. We slept on mats in village huts and drank beer every night that was as hot as coffee. Our data demonstrated there was a huge problem in the north, and we detailed priority areas where food was immediately needed.

Q: Did the normal work that you were doing in the thirty villages include nutrition monitoring?

ECKERSON: Yes. That was probably the most important aspect of the village surveys. We had Salter scales and length boards that we used to measure the nutritional status of every child every month for two years. The villagers would laugh as we hung their children off trees to get their weight every month. But, they really liked it when we put naked little male babies on the length boards and they peed in our faces.

In the second year of the program Neal Ewen, the CDC Chief of Party, began suffering serious asthma attacks. He didn't want to tell CDC about his condition, since he felt they would send him home. His attacks started to come more often and more troubling as the dry season settled in. He became very dependent on asthma shots, and I would give them to him when he was away from his wife. I felt I needed to tell someone in CDC about the situation. I called Joel Breman, the CDC epidemiologist in Bobo and said: "Joel, I probably shouldn't be telling you this, but Neal is not in very good health. He is really suffering from asthma." Joel talked to Neal and then told CDC about the asthma attacks. This led Bob Hogan to come out and send Neal back to the states. At the time, I was three months away from finishing my Peace Corps experience. Hogan then called me in and said: " Dave, you've been Neal's go to guy since day one. Neal's not coming back. How about we put you on salary for a year once you get done with Peace Corps. We have to close the program down, and I know you can do it ".

So, I took over Neil's job. I moved to Ouagadougou to manage the last few months of the survey and close out the program. Several trucks, and all survey materials, data back-up, and supplies were stored in the garage at Neil's large Embassy house. CDC requested the Embassy to let me live in his house until the program was completely closed out. They agreed, and I left my stick bed and straw mattress in a one room house to sleep on a real bed in a luxurious air-conditioned mansion that had a swimming pool out back.

Q: Oh, wow.

ECKERSON: Yeah. It was amazing. I turned the place into a Peace Corps hostel, and it became party central. At the same time, I started dealing with the Embassy to close out the program. USAID did not have a presence in Upper Volta in 1974. Before the drought,

in a cost cutting measure, they closed the bi-lateral program in Upper Volta and moved all staff to a regional Office in Niger. When the drought hit in 1972, it became clear USAID needed an in-country presence again. Two years later it finally happened. The AID administrator at the time was John Parker, of “Parker T-Ball Jotter” pen fame. He flew into Ouagadougou, got out of his plane on the tarmac, and announced that USAID was opening an AID mission in Upper Volta. Then he got back in his plane and flew away.

I spent a year closing out the program. I spent considerable time communicating with CDC in Atlanta over the final details. CDC was upgrading their data systems, especially the huge main frames they used that required punch cards and manual entry of data. Several years later, I went down to Atlanta to see my old boss Neil Ewen. He was retired by then and told me that when CDC was upgrading their computer systems, they boxed up all our survey data from Upper Volta and Nigeria and moved it to a warehouse. The CDC/Atlanta statisticians had their way in the end. The complete set of our survey data was never punched into the mainframe, and our data was never fully analyzed.

As I was closing down the survey, I watched as the USAID Mission began to root in Ouagadougou. A few months before I was due to leave, the Embassy came by my house and showed it to Dick Meyer, who had just come out of Viet Nam after serving in the Marine Corps and then joining USAID. Dick clearly wanted the house, and it looked like I was going to have to spend my last few months somewhere else. He was single, and we hit it off quite well together. He took the house and said I could stay with him until I left ... but all my Peace Corps friends had to go.

Q: Had he been designated to be the new AID director?

ECKERSON: No. Dick was only in his second tour with AID. He was a rural development officer. Staffing up the new Mission turned into a soap opera. A program officer came first. He thought he would be running the Mission. But six months later, AID/W assigned another person to be the Mission Director. The program officer was a hands-on development type. The Mission Director was a PhD, theory and process person. There was real tension and strife between them, and throughout the new Mission. There were also a few adulterous romances going on that ended when dependents were finally allowed at post. It was a crazy environment. I was good friends with the Peace Corps nurse who was going through a divorce from her husband she left in Senegal, where they had been a tandem couple. I can't remember Mary's maiden name. She was a wonderful lady, and on the night before I left Upper Volta, I encouraged Dick to take Mary to the Marine Corps movie night. He actually did take her to the movies, and to other spots around town. The next day as I was preparing to leave, Dick and Mary came out of his bedroom, gave me big hugs, and said good-bye. Dick and Mary eventually got married, and they've been married for fifty years.

Q: That's wonderful! You are a cupid among other distinctions.

ECKERSON: Sorta, but apparently they had been seeing each other before, and I wasn't aware of it.

Anyway, I left Upper Volta in the back of a “mille-kilo” van that resembled a bread truck jammed with 25 people. My goal was to go to Cameroon, and then get a steamer out of Cameroon to Ghana. It didn’t work out after I got a severe bout of malaria in a border town between Nigeria and Cameroon. While I was riding out the fever in a rat-infested hotel room, Nigeria had a coup. I got into Cameroon just before they closed the border and headed to Douala where I took a cheap Ghana Air flight to Accra.

I made my way up the coast. I ended up in Liberia visiting one of my old roommates from Seminary. He helped me get a black-market plane ticket from Monrovia to Casablanca. I stuck out my thumb outside the airport in Morocco and instantly got a ride all the way to England where I hung out for a month with a British friend I met in the Peace Corps. Then I flew back to America and went up to Eagle Bay to visit my parents. The restaurant was thriving, and my dad wanted me to take it over. I couldn’t fathom living in the Adirondack mountains in sub-zero weather in the winter and working 24/7 running a restaurant. I bought a used VW bug, wished my parents well, and headed out to cross the country and figure out what to do with my life.

Q: Because a lot of ex Peace Corps volunteers after their experience then decided to do graduate study in international development or a related subject, was that something you were thinking about?

ECKERSON: I met a professor in Peace Corps from Australia who heard about our survey and came to visit the program. He was a very respected demographer, and really encouraged me to get a PhD at his university. He wanted me to do a thesis around an analysis of our survey data. I was sick of the survey and didn’t want to do anything more than end it. I was interested in studying the movement of prostitutes in West Africa. They are constantly moving in a circle from the Ivory Coast to Ghana, then over to Togo, and up to Niger. They continue to Mali, and then return to the Ivory Coast. I wanted to trace their circuit and the factors that influenced them to move. We left it at that, and I never pursued it. But, the idea was in the back of my head as I crossed the country visiting old friends, trying to figure out what was next in my life.

The last person on my list to connect with on my trans-America journey lived in Seattle. Connie had been a Peace Corps public health trainer in the Virgin Islands while I was there. We had a short, but wonderful affair before we each went our separate ways. I saw her in Niger after I got to Upper Volta, and she visited me on her way to the states a few months later. We kept in touch a few times every year with long letters, often sent at the same time that crossed in the mail. We never saw each other for three years, until I arrived in Seattle. We rekindled our relationship and ended up getting married in 1977.

Q: You're still married?

ECKERSON: Oh yeah. We’ve been together for 45 years so far.

Q: This is how you ended up in Seattle?

ECKERSON: Yes. I went there to see if Connie was the woman for me. I also went there because Seattle was a very hip place to be in 1976. It was also a place where it was very hard to find a job. I ran out of savings a few weeks after I got there. I moved in with a friend and his family while I courted Connie. I got a job as a janitor after several rejections, and cleaned banks. Then I moved up to a temporary city job working with young kids cleaning neighborhood parks. Finally, I found a very interesting job working with schizophrenics in a program where patients had the power to determine how they lived their lives. They all stayed in a group home, and my job was to take them to movies, parks, shopping, and various events. The whole idea was to allow them to live as normal a life as possible, despite their handicap. I was quite interested in the program, and thought about pursuing a Master's Degree in psychology.

I came home one day and found a letter addressed to John Reddy, the friend who I lived with when I first got to Seattle. I moved into his house after he left to take a job in Togo. John had been the Peace Corps director in Upper Volta. The letter was from Peace Corps, and I opened it. The letter asked if John wanted to be considered for a Peace Corps Director position in Africa. I called the Peace Corps contact phone number in the letter and told a recruiter that I was qualified and interested in the position. They asked me to send them a resume, which I sent immediately. A few weeks later I got a call from TransCentury. They were fishing around for candidates for a nutrition planning project with USAID, and got my resume from Peace Corps. Marty Forman was running the AID/W Nutrition Bureau and got Congress to put a huge earmark on the USAID budget to spend on nutrition. He was a very powerful operator at the time and created a project to strengthen nutrition planning around the world. TransCentury won the award and were expected to place six experts in strategic countries to advance the idea of integrating nutrition into the development planning process. TransCentury called me for two reasons. First, I had nutrition survey experience. Second, I was a male. Apparently, most of the people who qualified to be in the program were women, and they needed gender balance. TransCentury really wanted me on their roster, but I wasn't sure it was the right move. I liked my job working with schizophrenics. TransCentury invited me to their training program in Washington DC and said I would not be committed to anything after that. They just wanted me to see what they were doing.

Q: When is this, by the way, just in terms of timing?

ECKERSON: I went back to America in 1975. I got to Seattle in February 1976. The training program started in the fall of 1976.

Q: Just to add some context to this, you talked about the drought in 1973-74 in Africa. As I recall the Live Aid concert occurred at this time, so there was massive public attention on food security and nutritional status globally. That was probably a factor in driving this focus on nutrition and development.

ECKERSON: Exactly. Nutrition became the development "flavor of the month" after the drought and Live Aid.

Anyway, about a week after my phone call with TransCentury, a guy came to the schizophrenic group home and asked to see one of the patients. He was directed upstairs to the counselor's office. He knocked on the door, and when she opened it, he shot her in the face. She didn't die, the bullet went right through her cheeks. If I had been on duty, it would have been my face.

After that, it was an easy decision to check out the TransCentury training program. I flew to Washington DC, met Jim Pines and others in the program, and immediately realized the job and project they were running was amazing.

Q: And TransCentury did the training program as well?

ECKERSON: Yes. The whole program was built around Jim Pines. He was one of the foremost experts in nutrition planning at the time, along with Alan Berg at the World Bank. Warren Wiggins was the head of TransCentury, and recruited Jim to hatch and run the program.

Warren helped create the Peace Corps and served as the first Deputy Director. He was very involved in the highest ranks of Democratic politics, and at one point lobbied heavily to be Secretary of State. He didn't get the job, so he started TransCentury. Warren's vision was to hire former Peace Corps volunteers, give them higher levels of development experience, and grow a new generation of development experts.

I took the job, and we went to Cameroon in the spring of 1977. I was stationed in the Ministry of Planning. I could look out the window of my tiny little office and see all the visiting dignitaries that came to present their credentials to President Ahidjo. I was the only American in the Ministry, and everyone there thought I was a CIA spy. After a while, when they got to know me, most accepted me as a friend and colleague.

My job was to get nutrition planning into the Cameroonian Five Year Development Plan. Success would be a chapter on nutrition planning in the 1980-1985 Plan. We succeeded in doing that, and more. While I was working in the Ministry, USAID/Cameroon contracted with UCLA to undertake a National Nutrition survey. Fred Zerfus was the Chief of Party from UCLA. The survey consumed a large part of my two years in Cameroon. I traveled throughout the country with the survey teams. Then we analyzed the survey data and held a national seminar to discuss the results. The data and results were used to set targets in the Five Year Plan,

Q: Were you in, what would have been referred to as "an advisory position," or in an actual ministry position as a ministry employee? I believe they referred to these as OPEX positions.

ECKERSON: I wasn't a formal OPEX employee. I was a USAID consultant working in the Ministry. But, everyone considered me a Ministry employee. My apartment was given

to me by the Ministry of Health. It was right across the street from the public market, and emitted some very funky odors during the day.

I reported to Dr. Al Henn and Richard Thornton in the USAID Mission. I briefed them periodically, but I had very little USAID supervision. My main supervisor was Dr. Patrice Mandeng. He was the head of technical resources in the Ministry. I would sit with him and take notes while he met with officials from donor countries, the United Nations, and the World Bank. Every day I watched a parade of people come through flogging family planning, flogging immunization, flogging stuff that was wacko. Mandeng and my Ministry colleagues would politely hear these people out, day after day, hour after hour, until five o'clock. Then the expatriate experts would thank us, take their leave, and head to hotel bars for drinks and dinner. The Ministry staff headed back to their offices and started on their real work for the day. It was very illuminating.

Q: Absolutely an important observation that I fear too many Foreign Service Officers don't understand.

ECKERSON: Time is precious for host governments, and the donor community doesn't realize the burden they pose with all their initiatives. I became pretty fed up with the development world in Cameroon. All the USAID and Embassy Foreign Service Officers lived in really nice houses up by the Mont Fébé Hotel. They didn't know what was going on in the Ministries or in town. Don't get me wrong. The USAID folks were great people. Many of them are still close friends. They felt they were doing the right things to better the lives of the Cameroonian people. But they didn't understand what was really going on in the country, or how their projects could be sustained after the bucks ran out.

I really became discouraged, but continued on until my contract was finished. I was highly praised for my work by USAID and the government when I left. But in the end, things fell apart. Connie got Loa-loa just before we were to leave and head to China on a grand adventure. Loa-loa is a nasty disease spread by the same black flies that carry river blindness. David Heyman, a young epidemiologist for CDC, was a close friend in Cameroon, and when I told him what was going on with Connie, he came over to the apartment to check her out. He really knew his stuff and went on to become one of the most notable tropical disease experts in WHO. He spotted little critters moving across Connie's eyes, diagnosed her with Loa-loa, and had her evacuated to the U.S to take a nasty cure that had to be administered and strictly observed for side effects. I ended up packing us out, and we still laugh about how I took everything, even wastebaskets with trash in them.

We returned to Washington DC in the summer of 1979. A week later we went up to Maine for the baptism of a friend's daughter. I had checked in with TransCentury before we left, and while I was in Maine I got a phone call from them asking me if I was free to take a consulting assignment. AID/W had asked them if I could go to Haiti and develop a nutrition component for their massive public health program. The nutrition money was still flowing, thanks again to Marty Forman.

I went to Port au Prince with Connie and endured an arduous six-week experience traveling throughout the country, learning how to be a consultant to USAID. Linda Morse was a junior officer in the USAID Health Office, and she was an excellent teacher. She told me the most important thing I had to do was write a concise, yet all-encompassing executive summary of my voluminous report, since that was the only thing folks would read. My assignment ended with a hurricane blasting towards Haiti that veered off and hit the Dominican Republic instead.

We returned to Washington, and I de-briefed Marty Forman and senior staff in the Nutrition Bureau. They all loved my work, and I passed the test to become a bona fide USAID consultant.

But, Haiti left me even more discouraged about development. The huge USAID houses with swimming pools, the Embassy life-style, and the fine dining experiences were in sharp contrast to the poverty and suffering I witnessed traveling around the country with Ministry of Health staff.

I decided I was done with development. Connie and I drove across the country to return to Seattle. We thought we were rich with \$14,000 saved from Cameroon that we never spent to go to China. We found a house to buy, but we couldn't get a mortgage because we didn't have a credit card or any credit history. We negotiated with the owner to sell us the house without a mortgage. It was a risk we had to take. But, if he defaulted on his loan, the bank would get the house, not us.

I began to get phone calls from TransCentruy and USAID/W asking if I was available for consulting jobs. I refused them all, and after a few months they stopped calling me. I started to write the great American novel and Connie got a job that paid the mortgage and little else. We had some savings, but I realized that I didn't have any real skills other than working in a bureaucracy.

A good friend called me to bemoan Ronald Reagan's election and I learned he was about to build a house in Iowa. I asked him if I could help him out. I didn't want to be paid, I just wanted to learn how to build. He was happy to have me, so in July of 1981, I drove my van out to Iowa and spent the summer building a 2500 square foot, super insulated, passive solar house. When I got back to Seattle, I got a job shingling two houses for a friend. I started working on our house as well, salvaging wood and materials to improve our space. I repaired screen doors and other things for elderly neighbors, and while I was very busy, we were not making a lot of money. During a visit from my parents, our refrigerator broke. My dad gave me \$100 to fix it and after they left, I realized we didn't have enough money that month to pay the mortgage. I used the 100 bucks to make the payment, and realized I needed to get a job.

The next day, I got a call from USAID. They wanted to know if I was free to do a consulting assignment in Zaire. USAID was evaluating a Nutrition Planning Center they were supporting and wanted me to be a member of the team based on my experience in Cameroon. They had a distinguished doctor from Columbia as team leader, along with

Heather Goldman, a PhD nutritionist from AID, and a social marketing expert from New York City.

The timing of the call was pretty cosmic. We needed the money. I laid aside all my qualms about development, packed my bag, and headed to Zaire.

When the team assembled in Zaire, we met with Norm Sweet. It was quite apparent that Heather was pregnant, and Norm told her that because she was pregnant, she could not leave Kinshasa. Heather being Heather told him if that was the case, she could not do her job. So, she left. Then the Columbian team leader got a phone call in the middle of the night, and announced the next day that there was a political crisis in Columbia. His superiors told him he had to return to his country. So, the team became me and a woman from a marketing firm in New York who had never been to Africa. The next day the Mission Program Officer announced that I was in charge, and they needed an evaluation. I had never evaluated a USAID program, and this one was contracted to Tulane University. Tulane was a major partner with USAID in public health, and Dr. Bill Bertrand was the Chief of Party for the Tulane team. Bertrand was also the Dean of the School of Public Health at Tulane. Their Masters of Public Health degree was one of the best at the time, due to all the field experience they gave their students. I immersed myself into all facets of the Planning Center. I drank lots of beer and bonded with the Tulane in-country team. I talked to every one of the Nutrition Planning Center local staff and came to the conclusion that Tulane was doing very little to strengthen the capacity of the Nutrition Planning Center. Rather, they were spending far too much time and effort nurturing their graduate students' education and experience. I wrote an extensive report and capped it with an executive summary. Hardly anyone in the Mission talked to me or gave me direction during the six weeks I was there. They just wanted an evaluation. I never pre-briefed the program or health office. They were all too busy. A few days before I was to depart, I had a meeting with the health and program offices and the Mission Director to discuss my findings.

Q: And what position was Norm in?

ECKERSON: He was the Mission Director. He was busy, too. He never even read my executive summary. It seemed no one in the Mission really cared about the nutrition program. Nutrition was not a high priority in the field like it was in Washington and Congress. My brief was short and sweet. Tulane was not doing their job, and things needed to change. I laid out specific areas where changes were necessary and explained that Tulane actually agreed with me on everything I wrote.

The Mission liked what I observed, and how I was able to get Tulane to agree to make major changes in their operations. They sent a cable the next day to TransCentury and USAID/Washington complimenting my work. Just as I was about to leave Zaire, a cable came back from Washington asking if I could go to Senegal immediately to assist in running a two-week seminar on nutrition planning. I had been away from my bride for almost two months and spent almost another month in Senegal before I finally returned home.

Q: Just before we leave Zaire. The mission loved the evaluation. Does that mean they then tried to restructure the program to do a little more institutional strengthening?

ECKERSON: Oh yeah. They also asked me to come back and design a new program. I went to Senegal and returned home completely exhausted. We were trying to have a baby and when you're not there, it's tough to make happen. But, I went back to Zaire a couple months later. I did the new design. The Mission loved it. They offered me a lucrative Personal Service Contract and asked me to manage the new program.

It would have been a dream job. But, I had to say no. Ripping up our roots and moving to Zaire was not the right thing to do during our quest to have a child. I also got several other offers for work in Zaire from contractors and voluntary organizations. I turned them all down.

At home in Seattle, I started applying for jobs. I applied everywhere. I applied to run orphanages. I applied to state jobs. I applied to work on the ferries. I applied for everything under the sun, and I never got an offer. I received over a hundred rejection letters. I was told constantly that either I didn't have enough domestic experience, or that I was too qualified for their job and could not be counted on to stay with them very long.

Finally, I bit the bullet and applied to the USAID International Development Intern program. I figured I had a reasonable chance to get into the USAID intern program. I was driven to get a permanent job, even one that took me back into development again at the rookie level.

To make ends meet, I continued to do USAID nutrition consulting for TransCentury from Seattle. I got to know Hope Sukin and Mellen Duffy and other folks in the Africa Bureau and Nutrition Bureau. One day, Mellen called me and said her father was very sick and she was going to take a leave of absence to care for him. She told me she talked to her supervisor, Charles Gurney, and told him I would be an ideal candidate to replace her. There was an open position that could be filled by a mid-level entry candidate in the Africa Bureau, and Gurney agreed to interview me for the position. The next day, the IDI program called and invited me to interview for an intern position as well.

I flew to Washington and interviewed for both jobs on the same day. Linda Morse was the chair of the IDI interview panel. When I finished the interview, the panel told me they wanted me to join the IDI program. That afternoon, after I interviewed with Charles Gurney, he told me he wanted me to replace Mellen. He had to request the mid-level entry board to offer me the position, and it would take at least a month to get their approval. He wanted me to start work immediately, so he offered to bring me on board through a Cooperating Agency Agreement with the Office of International Health.

I accepted his offer and flew back to Seattle to tell my bride (who was pregnant) that we were moving to Washington DC.

USAID/Africa Bureau, Health and Nutrition Officer, (RSSA Hire), 1984 – 1987

Q: And this was a nutrition job? It was in the Office of Nutrition?

ECKERSON: No, I was in the Technical Resources Office of the Africa Bureau. Keith Sherper was the Office Director. My job title, Health and Nutrition Advisor, expanded my technical expertise beyond just nutrition to health as well. I began working in the Africa Bureau in May 1984 as a RSSA.

In September we bought a house in Crystal City. My wife and newborn daughter flew to DC, and I drove all our belongings in the biggest truck Ryder rented across the country with my trusty VW van in tow. I arrived on a Friday night. The following Monday, I picked up the newspaper before heading to work and saw the headline: "President Reagan Announces Federal Hiring Freeze".

I was no longer a candidate for mid-level entry after that. The Bureau funded my RSSA appointment for two years until I became a direct hire when the Agency began hiring again.

Q: Okay, but you're on this, this RASA job in the Africa bureau doing health as well as nutrition?

ECKERSON: Yes. I traveled throughout Africa for two years doing evaluations, project designs, conducting workshops, and assessing emergency feeding programs. The beauty of being a RSSA was the fact that I was program funded, and had lots of money available to travel. I was in constant demand from the Missions.

After two years, USAID began hiring again. I had to compete against a formidable group of candidates who all had Master degrees in Public Health. I had experience, but absolutely no formal public health education. I even failed chemistry in college. The qualifications for the position stated clearly one had to have a Master degree in Public Health, along with several years of experience. When I filled out my SF-186, I stated that I had a Bachelor of Arts in Social Science, and a Masters of Arts in Culture and Values. I left out religion. Then I got creative. I stated I also had a Masters of Arts equivalent in Public Health from the Centers for Disease Control. I listed key areas of public health like epidemiology, survey design, and survey evaluation that I had experience with in Peace Corps. Then I created a column next to the subject areas, and added class hours of study under each one. I pegged my total hours at 40, which I thought would be respectable for a Master's degree. At the same time, I got the Human Resources Office to allow me to send a cable to Missions where I had worked to solicit feedback on my performance as a RSSA. I still can't believe the GS 9 analyst who reviewed my application credited me with a Masters degree in Public Health. Thanks to that, and a slew of cables that came back extolling my performance, I became a direct hire Foreign Service Officer. Given my experience and salary, I came on board as an FS-03 mid-level entry

May 1986 -- Becoming a Direct Hire USAID Employee/International Development Intern

Q: When you came in then as a mid-level IDI was there a class of IDIs that came in at the same time in a training program?

ECKERSON: Yes. We had a three-month training program and then rotated through different Bureaus to get experience in Agency operations.

Q: Were there other mid-levels or was it a mix of younger people and mid-levels?

ECKERSON: There were a few mid-level entries, but the class was predominately people new to USAID. However, I realized early on that you didn't tell anybody your status. We were all IDIs, but mid-levels made far more money than a normal IDI. The bonding chemistry suffered when everyone was doing the same job at the same level of responsibility, and some made more salary than others. I didn't have to do all of the rotations in Washington given my experience. Linda Morse and Mike White knew I was in training, and they worked the system to get me assigned to Haiti before the IDI training program ended.

Q: The paper you gave me says you started work in Haiti in May 1987.

ECKERSON: That may be wrong. I arrived in Port au Prince just before the failed elections. I think I began my tour in September 1987.

Q: Okay, so you were assigned to Haiti as your first post. When you became an IDI, did you know you would be assigned to Haiti?

ECKERSON: Mike White was the head of the Health Office in Haiti when I became an IDI. We were good friends, and he asked me if I wanted to work for him in Haiti. I told him that would be my dream job. Linda Morse was the Deputy Mission Director, and I knew her well from the design work I did for her in Haiti when she was there as an IDI. They worked the system, and I was assigned to run the Nutrition Unit in the Health Office.

Q: And you knew Mike from West Africa?

ECKERSON: Mike was the Peace Corps regional doctor when I was in Upper Volta. He was the only member of the Peace Corps senior staff that visited me in my village. Mike was based in Abidjan, but came to Upper Volta on a routine visit. Somehow, he heard that we were about to launch a polio campaign in the Yako region. He showed up at my hut in the late afternoon the day before the campaign. No one told me he was coming. I was surprised, but happy to know someone cared about what I was doing. We headed off to the only bar in Yako, and began throwing back beers and telling each other our life stories. At midnight we finished the last two beers in the bar and rolled back to my hut. We got up the next morning at 5 AM, and spent the day using eye droppers to drop dots

of polio vaccine into the mouths of screaming little kids. We reconnected when I was a RSSA in the Africa Bureau, and he ran the Health Office in Senegal. I did several TDYs to Dakar for the Mission, and I would always spend a lot of time with him and his family when I was there.

USAID/Haiti, Health Office Unit Chief and Office Director, 1987 - 1992

I went to Haiti without my family in September 1987. The plan was for me to start my job during the leadup to the November elections. At the same time, I would try to find a suitable house for our family to live in. We had two kids at the time, and the housing board did not have a house in their inventory for us all. Soon after I arrived, I noticed something weird was going on in my eye. I was born with only one eye, and it was very disconcerting to notice my vision clouding up, especially at night. Then I started seeing little floating bubbles float across my field of vision. My eyesight started getting worse every day. During a meeting about a month before the elections, I lost my vision. It was as if someone pulled a curtain over my eye. All I could see were foggy shapes, lost in a cloud.

Bonnie Kittle was with me, and she helped me get back to the Mission. Mike sent me immediately to an ophthalmologist, who quickly diagnosed that I had a detached retina. I had to get to the Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami immediately or lose my sight for life. Commercial flights were not available until late afternoon the next day. It would also take quite a while to get authorization for a medivac, and have an airplane come down to pick me up. So, Mike contacted a guy he knew who had a small plane that he used to fly cargo around the Caribbean. It was not clear how legit the guy was, and if some of his cargo was drugs. But, he was available and able to fly immediately. We went to the airport, got into his plane and took off. As we tried to gain altitude, the engine started to sputter, conk out, and then start again. The pilot looked concerned, but said he just needed to get the oxygen right in the fuel mix. It continued to get worse as the plane lurched even more and the motor began hiccupping. Mike screamed at the pilot to take us back to the airport. The pilot kept saying don't worry, we will be alright. Mike finally convinced him to turn around and we returned to the airport. We got back to the Mission at midnight. We sat in the Director's Office all night while Mike called Washington and the Medivac company, waking up countless people to get authorization for a plane to pick me up. He was able to get a Lear jet sent down, and we left together early the next morning for Miami. When I got to Miami, I called my ophthalmologist in Seattle. He told me the two best places for retinal surgery in America were the Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami, or the Wilmer Eye Institute in Baltimore. He also told me one of the best eye surgeons in the country was the one who would do my operation in Miami. I went under the knife, and the band that the surgeon attached to hold my retina back in place is still holding after 37 years.

Q: And this happened shortly after your arrival in Haiti?

ECKERSON: Yes. I was in Haiti maybe six weeks before my retina detached. It was not the best way to start off my tour. I had not earned any sick leave, so I had to go on leave

without pay and recover in the States. Fortunately, Chuck Drilling and Pam White were newly minted EXOs at the Mission. They helped me get an advance on my salary to allow us to pay our mortgage and live until I could return to Haiti.

Q: In Haiti, and you were in the health office?

ECKERSON: Yes. I was assigned to be a Unit Chief in the Health Office. There is no such thing as a Unit Chief anymore, given our shrinking staffing levels.

Q: Was it the nutrition unit?

ECKERSON: Yes, it was the Nutrition Unit. I managed the nutrition program and the feeding program.

Q: And Mike White was the head of the Health Office.

ECKERSON: Oh, yeah.

Q: And who else was in the health office? It sounds like there might have been a pretty big health office.

ECKERSON: It was big. We probably had at least seven senior level Foreign Service Nationals who were medical doctors or had Masters degrees from universities in the United States. Dr. Michaele Gedeon was an amazing young doctor who worked for me. She became the Secretary General of Health under Aristide, and later ran the School of Public Health at the University. She died in a tragic car accident in Haiti about two years ago. She was the most committed public health professional I have ever known.

Q: Okay; let's stop for now and reconvene.

Q: Today is Friday, October 7, 2022 and this is interview number two with Dave Eckerson. We're delighted to continue our discussion. When we left off, you had just become a direct hire AID employee, as an international development intern, and had been assigned to Haiti. And shortly after arrival, you made a quick trip to Miami and had miraculous care for a detached retina and had great help from Mike White. Why don't we pick up from there? How long were you in Miami? And how long did it take you to get back to Haiti?

ECKERSON: I was out of the country from around Halloween of 1987 to February of 1988. It took a while for my retina to heal and the pressure inside my eye to return to normal. But, my recovery was excellent, and my sight got back to normal.

I returned to Haiti at about the same time that the new Ambassador, Al Adams, arrived in country. Al Adams took the country by storm with the first words he spoke as

Ambassador. As he descended the steps of the plane, a reporter on the tarmac asked him what he thought about the upcoming elections. The previous elections that I was supposed to be a part of never happened, thanks to a coup by the military. There was a concern in the country that the next try at elections wouldn't happen either. Al Adams stopped at the bottom of the stairs, turned to the reporter and responded in Creole with a classic Haitian proverb; "Un buriq charge pas ka campe". A loaded donkey going down a hill can't stop. All the papers and radio broadcasts the next day labeled Ambassador Adams "Buriq Charge", a moniker he kept throughout his time in Haiti.

The press loved Al Adams. He spoke fluent Creole. He was constantly in the news. He was a no-nonsense diplomat who spoke bluntly and to the point. Soon after he arrived, Ambassador Adams requested a one-on-one meeting with General Prosper Avril, the leader of the military coup. In the meeting Ambassador Adams issued Avril an ultimatum. The military needed to step down and let Haitians decide their future with free and fair elections. He basically told the General: "You need to get out of here. We will give you safe passage to Miami, Be a hero for your country. Step down. Send the coup leaders, your other general friends, out".

Later that night, Ambassador Adams got a call from Avril. The General asked Ambassador Adams to come over to his house to discuss some issues. So, at midnight, Ambassador Adams goes over to Avril's house, and they're sitting in Avril's kitchen with the General and his wife. Avril asks: "If I go to Miami, can I take my dog on the plane?" Ambassador Adams told him that would not be a problem. With that assurance, General Avril said he would go to Miami. The next morning, the U.S. military sent in a plane that picked up General Avril, his family and his dog, and flew them to Miami. The two other Generals who were part of the coup fled to the Dominican Republic the same day. With the ouster of the coup leaders, the stage was set for the elections. It was a classic matchup between Marc Bazin, a former legislator and member of the rich Haitian elite, and a barefoot priest named Father Aristide who stood for all the poor and downtrodden Haitians.

The campaign unfolded, and Aristide drew throngs of people to his rallies. On election day just about every direct hire in the Embassy and USAID went out as observers to witness the electoral process. I went to a small village north of Port au Prince. Everything transpired calmly and without incident. The polls closed at 9 PM. It was very dark when they opened the ballot boxes. Under the light of kerosine lamps, the electoral officials began counting the paper ballots one by one. They would open the ballot, say who it was for, and then place it on a table either in a stack of ballots for Aristide, or a stack for Bazin. The pile of votes for Aristide began to accumulate far more ballots than Bazin. It was a magical moment. The observers felt it. The Haitians felt it. We were watching history unfold.

Just to go back a bit. I returned to Haiti in February 1988. The elections finally happened in December 1990. Aristide was sworn in as President in February 1991.

The USAID program in Haiti previous to the election strictly prohibited any support to the Haitian government. Mike White designed a health program centered on child survival called the Voluntary Agencies for Child Survival (VACS) that was implemented by local NGOs. Funding was provided to the NGO through an umbrella grants program

managed by an American contractor. This was the child survival era in the donor world, when all health programs focused on vaccinations, diarrhea control, and nutrition in children under five years of age. Family planning was coupled to the child survival movement as well, to address maternal needs and population pressure. There was a Congressional earmark and separate account for child survival funding worldwide at the time. Haiti had one of the largest child survival budgets in the Agency.

Q: And Aristide won. People were probably feeling optimistic at that point. These were all or mostly international NGOs?

ECKERSON: Aristide won, and that meant we needed to shift the focus of our program to support the government again. It became a huge issue, since the Ministry of Health was totally dysfunctional. The VACS program was huge and covered the entire country. All services were delivered by local NGOs. A U.S. contractor provided grants to local organizations and provided financial management and institutional strengthening to help them attain sustainability. But, there was a problem. Because the Ministry of Health was so dysfunctional, our contractor and the local NGOs sucked all the best health care staff in the Ministry into the VACS program.

But, it was an amazing program. The Child Survival Office in Washington sent a high-power evaluation team to Haiti in early 1990 to evaluate the VACS program just before Aristide was elected, Robert Clay led the team in a rigorous data centric exercise that showed the VACS program was directly linked to significantly lowering the infant mortality rate in children under five throughout the country. Haiti became the poster child for child survival around the world.

Once Aristide was elected, we had to flip the switch and begin working with the government. But all the key Ministry of Health staff were working in NGO programs. The government could not compete with the salaries of the NGOs. To bridge the gap, we basically got the Minister to agree to create public private partnerships between the Ministry and NGOs in the VACS program. So, if there was a dysfunctional Ministry clinic in an area served by a USAID-supported local organization, then support from the VACS program would be given to the clinic to become operational again. If that was not possible, then local ministry staff were merged into the local NGO health clinic.

Q: Right. I think this is one of the dilemmas of Haiti that the U.S for a long time didn't work with the government directly for a variety of reasons. Certainly, some have said that the poor performance of Haiti after the earthquake was due in part to the weak government institutions. Do you know if the network of local NGOs providing health services remained? Or did that system of local NGOs providing health services erode over time?

ECKERSON: That's a good question. I can say that in the pre-Aristide timeframe, local NGOs were very capable and strong. At the time of the earthquake 20 years later, several NGOs we supported back in the day were still managing large service delivery programs. Eye Care Mirebalais operated on the central plateau and received significant support

under the VACS program in health care financing. Dr. Tony Augustin created the Eye Care hospital in Mirebalais. He was a remarkable Haitian doctor, and under his vision and management, Eye Care became a model for sustainable health care in the country.

When the earthquake hit, the Eye Care hospital in Mirebalais was one of several VACS-supported NGOs still operating. After the earthquake, a large and well-financed program managed by Paul Farmer set up a clinic near Eye Care and began dispensing free medicine and services. Paul Farmer's international reputation was outstanding. But, his free drugs and services drew everyone to his clinic, and shuttered the Eye Care hospital.

Haiti has a history of well-meaning volunteers from church groups across America who want to improve the lives of Haitians living in poverty. You notice them at the airports in Miami and Port au Prince. They travel in groups ranging from ten to thirty people of all ages, wearing brightly colored tee shirts that message where they are from, and what church they represent. They are met by local church leaders when they get off the plane, and are shuttled to villages throughout Haiti. They help build schools and put books in the classrooms. They repair health clinics, and stock them with medicines. Everything is so heart-warming, and so unsustainable.

But, Haiti is only an hour and a half away from Miami by plane. It is easily accessible to well-meaning folks. When I got my first taste of Haiti in 1979, I was shocked when I stepped off the plane. Haiti seemed to be as poor as many places I had seen in Africa. But, Haiti is on the doorstep to America. And it has cable TV from Miami, and a small group of very rich people who control everything.

Q: To clarify, these well-intentioned church groups are also providing free services. If so, it must be difficult to build any kind of self-sustaining system that requires some kind of payment.

ECKERSON: Bingo. But, that is not the only reason sustainability is challenging. There's a lot of complexity in terms of how health services are delivered through the public sector in Haiti. Physicians that go to work in the morning at public clinics and hospitals see patients that can pay for public services while on duty in the morning. In the afternoon, when they are off duty, doctors funnel those patients who can pay to their private practices. So diagnostic scans are done at the public hospital or clinic, but treatment, surgery or other services are provided by, and paid to the private practices. So, you've got this weird way services are delivered.

It really comes down to if you're rich, you're going to have really good health services. If you are poor, then you get what you can at the public health center, and then try to find a free or private clinic somewhere to get the medicine you need. The disparity between the rich and the poor in Haiti is staggering. A few rich families control the entire country.

Let me tell you a quick earthquake story before I get back into my history. Immediately after the earthquake, many people felt the disaster offered a chance to bring all Haitians together to rebuild their country. Poor folks got hurt, but the rich folks did too. It was

horrible for everyone. There was a feeling among many people that this could be the moment in Haitian history where people came together, rich and poor, to build an egalitarian society rather than continue with the rich controlling everything. Well, that moment passed when the U.S. military arrived on the scene. They began issuing huge contracts to clear the port and collect debris throughout urban centers. The rich families got all the contracts. So, the rich got richer, and the poor got nothing. The history of Haiti continues on.

So going back to pre-Aristide. We were running a country-wide health program through NGOs that replaced the Ministry of Health. We were not allowed to provide any funds to the government. When Aristide got elected, we had to change our strategy and program.

Further, all the senior public health personnel who left the government to work in NGOs wanted to go back and serve in the Ministry under Aristide. They wanted to make the system work under his visionary leadership. The Director of our VACs program left his job to become Secretary General of the Ministry of Health. The head of the largest NGO involved in family planning left his job to become Minister of Health. And, the most senior FSN in the USAID health office, Michael Amade Gedeon, left us to go to work for the Ministry.

Key people in the Ministry were now trusted former colleagues. We brought in several technical design teams to support the government. We keyed first on strengthening public private sector partnerships that would strengthen the credibility of the Ministry of Health and allow them to integrate their service delivery into the on-going NGO health system we supported. We coupled that approach with support for healthcare financing, trying to figure out how several of the public private partnerships we created could become sustainable.

While we were finally able to work with the government, we needed time before financial management systems could be in place, and programs designed to directly support the government.

It was a real challenge to find ways to directly support the government quickly. They needed help immediately after the election as Aristide's charismatic personality and speeches spurred the country to dream of progress for the people and by the people for the first time in the country's history.

Early on, we realized we had an ace in the hole. Haiti used to have a Title III Monetization program. But, after the coup in 1987, the United States stopped all shipments of wheat that funded the program. There are not many Title III programs in the world, and Congress was very leery of them, especially in Haiti.

While wheat sales stopped in 1987, the program had several million dollars in the pipeline. The Title III office was able to give out grants, and it was totally run by Haitians. The Haitian Monetization Office had been set up with USAID support. It had an excellent financial management system, and sound fiscal controls.

When Aristide took power, the streets of Port au Prince were literally clogged with garbage. The government didn't have the trucks or capacity to clean up the city.

Soon after the election, NGOs began streaming into Haiti looking for funding to support the new government. The Community Housing Foundation (CHF) came to us and proposed a plan to clean up the garbage. They had partnered with the U.S.G. Title III program in Egypt and proposed to create a public-private partnership with the Haitian Ministry of Public Works to assist them in strengthening their garbage collection services. CHF wanted to fund the program with Haiti's Title III funds. It was a fascinating idea and an amazing challenge. We consulted a host of lawyers in USDA, State, and USAID. We talked with the Haitian government at all levels, and then we had to convince our oversight committees in Congress that it was a good idea and fiscally responsible.

We got the green light, and in the space of a few months, CHF began employing hundreds of people to clean up the garbage in Port au Prince. Needless to say, it was a remarkable success story for USAID in the quest to help stand up the new government, and prove that things could get better under the leadership of Aristide.

Q: Quick question, who was the mission director during this period?

ECKERSON: Let's see, that would have been 1990-91. I think it was David Cohen. Gerry Zarr was my first Mission Director. Franz Herder was there, but I think he was just the Deputy.

Q: One reason I ask is the degree to which this challenge of going from an NGO strategy to support for the government was felt mission-wide? Was the issue discussed mission wide, or did each program take its own approach?

ECKERSON: David Cohen was really instrumental in shaping the strategic focus with all Mission staff. We had several all-Mission retreats to develop a new strategy and align our programs and resources to support the new government.

In the end, it was all for naught. Aristide took office in February 1991. Eight months later, on the last day of the fiscal year, he was overthrown by a military coup. It was the penultimate bureaucratic nightmare. All funding and programs we designed to support the new government were stopped because of the coup. I remember that month of October right after the coup. It was like, what the hell do we do?

Q: You just made the program all governmental, so it was cut off. What did you do?

ECKERSON: It was a real challenge, because we had several programs that were at critical points of implementation. We asked the regional lawyer to come to Haiti to help us sort things out. Ed Dragon showed up right after the coup. In my career with USAID, I never met a lawyer as good as Ed. He was a lawyer who asked what you wanted to do, and then found a way to do it. He had seen it all, and knew how to work wonders with

our regulations, legal restrictions, and handbooks. He did a lot of research and networking with USAID/Washington and the Hill to get agreement on a principle to follow when deciding what we could do, or not do with our funding. Ed gave us a hypothetical example of funding a governmental program to provide clean water. If the program was designed to dig wells and all the wells hit water, you have to shore them up with cement before the rainy season. If not, the walls will crumble, and the wells will be ruined. So, if a coup stops funding after you hit water, but before you can cement the sides of the wells, you can fund the completion of the wells. If not, the U.S.G. will lose a return on the investment.

Ed's legal advice allowed us to continue funding many of our critical activities in the health sector. It really made a difference in our ability to keep many of our programs operating as chaos ensued after the coup.

Soon after Aristide was overthrown, the U.S. Coast Guard put a ring of ships around the island to block delivery of gasoline to the country. Haiti is totally dependent on imports of gasoline. Everything stops when there is no gas. No cars, no trucks, no electrical generators can run. The United States wanted to make the coup leaders and rich families understand that they could not get away with ousting their elected president. They would not be able to run the country without gas.

When the blockade began, the Embassy went on ordered departure, and all our families had to leave. A few of us were on the ordered departure list, but the Ambassador allowed us to stay for a while longer as the drama played out. After about ten days, there were hardly any cars on the road. There was no electricity. Port au Prince was a ghost town, and at that point the Ambassador told us we all had to leave. The only USAID Officer allowed to stay was our EXO, Chuck Drilling. He stayed to make sure that our building was maintained since we were not co-located with the Embassy.

The only USAID folks left were Robbin Burkhart, the Controller; Dave Cohen the Director, Shelah O'Rourke from the Health Office, and me. Robbin was really concerned about how all the NGOs were going to be able to voucher and get funds to run their program if we had to move all financial management to USAID/W. He contacted the USAID Mission in the Dominican Republic and worked out an agreement with the Mission, Embassy, and Washington to literally move our Controller's Office (and all our files) to the Dominican Republic. Robbin was a former Marine with a can-do attitude. He worked with his FSN staff to cull the necessary files and load them into the back of an Embassy pick-up truck. On the day before I was scheduled to leave, Cohen, Robbin and Shelagh got in the truck and headed overland to Santo Domingo. They were able to set up a temporary office in the DR Mission. Robbin stayed in the DR, and Cohen and Shelagh flew to Washington. Robbin immediately set up a system to allow NGOs operating in Haiti to process their vouchers in the DR on a regular basis and keep their programs delivering services.

Q: Did some of the Haitian staff go as well?

ECKERSON: The Haitian staff never left. They continued to go into the building and work. After the coup, our program morphed into only providing food and essential health services. The fact that we set up the Controller's Office in the DR, and not in Washington, was incredibly important. It allowed us to provide uninterrupted humanitarian assistance throughout the entire country.

I asked the Ambassador to let me stay and run the program after Cohen left. But the streets were empty, there was no electricity in the city, and our generators were shut down for several hours during the day to conserve fuel. The Ambassador finally told me I had to leave, and I flew back to my family in Washington.

After I left, the blockade crumbled. Small ships from the Dominican Republic carrying drums of gasoline slipped into Haiti by sailing along the rugged coastline at night, hugging the shore. The US Coast Guard was out at sea in large vessels. More and more small ships began arriving in Haiti from all parts of the DR, and the Coast Guard couldn't stop them. Three weeks after we left, cars returned to the streets of Port au Prince and shops began to re-open.

Just before Christmas, the Organization of American States (OAS) sent a delegation to Haiti to assess the situation and need for humanitarian assistance. Ambassador Adams agreed to let Cohen and I return to Haiti and be members of the team. Most international organizations never left Haiti. They moved out of their offices during the turmoil, and relocated into hotels in town where they could benefit from a safe environment, electricity, and food. We met with all major international agencies and local NGOs and documented that gas was not an issue anymore, and life in the country had pretty much returned to normal. However, there were serious humanitarian concerns centered around hunger and health.

We briefed Ambassador Adams and delivered a report to the OAS when we returned to Washington. Ambassador Adams agreed to let four people from USAID come back to Haiti to manage our humanitarian assistance program. Dave Cohen, the Mission Director, led the group. I went back as head of the Health Office, along with two Personal Services Contractors, Peter Goossens and Shelagh O'Rourke.

It was a very surreal experience when we returned and entered the USAID Office for the first time. FSNs were not coming to work. The building was deserted. It was weird. We were alone in the building, talking on the telephone with our partners and FSNs. There was a curfew for Haitians, and one had to be careful driving after dark if you wanted to go to a restaurant or visit someone. It was a very scary and threatening environment. The streets were empty. There was no electricity except at a few hotels and restaurants that catered to the international community.

Q: Where were you staying? at your home or at a hotel?

ECKERSON: I stayed at our residence. While I was in Haiti during the initial blockade, I let all our staff and their families move into our residence. It was not safe for them to be

in their homes, especially after all the shops closed and there was no electricity in town. We had a gardener, a cook, and a nanny. They all had families. It was quite a lively crowd, and most of them did not speak English. When I came home after work, I became immersed in a house where everyone was speaking Creole. By the time my family returned in April, I was fluent in Haitian Creole.

I was a good friend of Bill Key, who managed the Embassy guard force contract. Bill was an ex-Green Beret who packed a 357 magnum and had no fear of anything. We would often go out to dinner in Petion-Ville at night during the curfew. He would pick me up at my residence, and we would drive through the empty streets to eat at a couple of restaurants opened for the expat community. The elites could always get around town. Haiti reverted back to the days of the Duvaliers. The rich people were running the show. The military ensured their security.

By May 1992, there was no shortage of gas anymore. Electricity returned, and life in Port au Prince returned to normal. The Embassy lifted ordered departure in April, and families began returning to post.

Q: David, quick question. I remember hearing David Cohen speak about some interesting work you all did during this period. As I recall, he said you all were trying to monitor what was happening with the general population, and you went back to your nutrition survey roots and began to do similar surveys in Haiti to get a better picture of what was happening in the poorer regions.

ECKERSON: Actually, we didn't do a lot of surveys. Our health and nutrition programs were delivering services throughout the country. We got UNICEF to provide growth monitoring charts for all children under the age of five that visited our NGO health clinics. We also purchased salter scales and gave them to clinics to weigh children. We provided training to NGO staff on how to use the scales and record the weight and age of each child on the growth charts. Then we required all our programs to report on the nutritional status of children seen at their clinics every month.

The data wasn't perfect, or always timely. But it was a good flow of information that allowed us to monitor what was going on and justify a need for significant amounts of food aid. We also had CARE, Catholic Relief, and the Seven Day Adventists operating large relief programs in historically vulnerable areas of the country. The monitoring system and targeted food aid were extremely effective, and allowed the Mission to claim that our actions averted a catastrophic nutritional crisis.

I remained in Haiti until the summer of 1993. I felt pretty good about all the experience I gained in Haiti. I was promoted to an FS-02 and decided I wanted to be a Mission Director. When I asked Mission Directors and Deputy Directors how to do it, they all said the same thing: "If you want to be a Mission Director, you have to go to Washington and get on a hot desk".

So, I bid out of my health officer backstop and became a program officer in Washington. I was assigned to be the Nicaragua Desk Officer. I knew nothing about Central America. I didn't speak Spanish. It was a daunting job, right after the Contra crisis, on the hottest desk in the Agency.

AID/Washington, Nicaragua Desk Officer, 1992 – 1993, Deputy Director, Office of Caribbean Affairs, 1993 - 1996

Janet Ballantyne was the Mission Director when I began my tour as Nicaragua desk officer. The Mission's Operating Year budget was just shy of a billion dollars. Liliana Ayalde was the Deputy Director of the Central America Office, and she reported to the Director, whose name I have forgotten. He was not a good manager, and he never shared any information with us. Liliana was terrific, and we coped together with our dysfunctional boss.

I would go into the Office very early in the morning and go through the Director's in-box to find out what actions were in play, and what we needed to know to cope with them. Janet and Liliana taught me a lot about how to work in USAID/Washington and deal with the politics of the Latin America Bureau. Janet hated Mark Schneider, the Assistant Administrator of the Bureau. He was far left in his world view, and Janet was a straight shooter who detested political spin and optics. My job was to broker agreements between them and try to find ways to transcend their bitter differences.

I worked on the Nicaragua desk for about six months before I was asked to move to a job in the Office of Caribbean Affairs to deal with Haiti again. I reported to the Deputy Director. Damn, I can't remember her name. Mike Morfit was the Director.

Q: Was it Marcy Bernbaum?

ECKERSON: Yes, of course. When I started work in the Office of Caribbean Affairs, Marcy was the acting Director. She did not get along with Mark Schneider, who was the Assistant Administrator of the Latin America Bureau. Marcy never held back her opinions, and often challenged decisions made by Schneider. Mark Schneider came to USAID after serving on Senator Ted Kennedy's staff. He had been a Peace Corps volunteer. He had a super ego. Mark Schneider did not like Marcy, and Marcy did not like him. Mark won, and Marcy transferred out of the Bureau.

Tish Butler was Marcy's deputy at the time, and she became Acting Director. I reported to Tish in my new job as the Office representative to the Haiti Task Force.

Mark Schneider asked me to leave the Nicaragua desk when the U.S. Military began development of a Pol-Mil plan to invade Haiti. Mark learned that I had spent almost 6 years in Haiti, and I was fluent in Creole. The situation in Haiti continued to deteriorate after I left in 1992.

My job in the Office of Caribbean Affairs was focused on Haiti again. I served as the Office representative to the inter-agency Haiti task force. The task force was led by Jim Dobbins, a senior State Department officer. Dobbins was one of the smartest, and the most cynical diplomats I ever met. Every day for seven months I sat in a skiff with him for an hour, surrounded by television monitors that beamed in generals from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, spooks from the CIA, and various other agencies involved in planning an invasion of Haiti to restore Aristide to power. Haiti had deteriorated to a point where the United Nations got involved and actually agreed to send a peace-keeping force to restore order once the troika of Haitian generals agreed to leave and allow Aristide to return to power. The problem was, the generals could never agree on the particulars of how that would happen.

So, the United States decided to invade Haiti and kick them out. The task force developed a plan to take down the generals and stand up the country after Aristide's return. I was the rookie in the skiff every morning, listening to inter-agency decision makers debate what to do, and how to do it. Dobbins hated the CIA. He felt they were the most incompetent organization in the U.S. government. He constantly muted our sound when the CIA spoke and castigated them. He would say the CIA didn't know anything about what they're talking about, and we shouldn't trust anything they were saying. There was not a lot of love in most of the inter-agency discourse I witnessed. Each agency constantly protected their own space. After seven months, the final product of the discussions was a Pol Mil plan that basically cobbled together individual agency plans with very little connectivity between them.

I would return to the Caribbean Office after every meeting and debrief Morfitt and Tish. Then I would work with the LAC Bureau's technical offices and Central Bureau offices to line up resources and programs to support Aristide's government upon his return to Haiti.

About three months after I joined the Caribbean Office, Tish announced she was going on leave without pay for six months to adopt twins from an orphanage in Nicaragua. All of a sudden, and without having to bid on a senior management group position, I became the Deputy Director of the Office of Caribbean Affairs.

Mike Morfit gave me a lot of responsibility on the Haiti front. I spent considerable time on the Hill, briefing congressional staff on Haiti and what we were planning to do to support Aristide. Jesse Helms' staff were incredibly cynical about everything USAID did in Haiti. Helms did not like USAID and felt the Agency should be folded into the State department.

I made a disparaging comment in a meeting one day about Congress not understanding the situation in Haiti. Little did I know there was a "Jesse-lover" in attendance who leaked what I said to Helms' staff. They in turn leaked my comment to the Washington Post. It was not pretty, and I got pretty scared when we saw it in the paper, and the Administrator told Morfit he wanted to see me.

Mike would not let me go. He went instead. It was a class act. Administrator Atwood admonished him for letting me be so stupid and not realizing you never say anything you don't want to see on the front page of the Washington Post.

I learned my lesson. It never happened again.

Q: So, what was the result of all the work you did on the Haiti task force?

ECKERSON: Well, we were prepared for the day the military launched the invasion. We had a plan. The Mission Director in Haiti was Larry Crandall, a seasoned Senior Foreign Service Officer who had been the first Mission Director in Afghanistan. His Deputy, Sarah Clark was on ordered departure in Washington, but went to Miami just before the invasion. Her dad was a retired Naval Commander, and she worked his network to get herself on a ship that was part of the invasion force.

The only problem we had was the relationship between Larry Crandall and Sarah Clark. Crandall was a pompous, know-it-all, "I'm always right" kind of manager. Sarah was a no nonsense, straight shooting, "I know my stuff" kind of manager. There was a lot of turbulence between them.

Anyway, planes took off, ships sailed, and the invasion began even though Colin Powell, Jimmy Carter and Sam Nunn were in Haiti trying to negotiate with General Cedras and his partners to step down and leave the country. They actually succeeded before the invasion force landed. The generals accepted safe passage to the Dominican Republic, and the invasion force morphed into peace-keepers.

By the way, Sarah Clark arrived by sea on a navy ship, and made an amphibious landing at the port. She walked over to the USAID Mission and joined Larry to begin her job.

Q: Oh, there was only a small staff at the mission then. Sarah was based in Washington?

ECKERSON: Right. She had been assigned to Haiti but never went because there was an ordered departure.

Q: Where was Larry Crandall out of curiosity?

ECKERSON: I'm sure he was at the mission.

But, it was an interesting situation for me. My nephew Mark was in the military and was part of the invasion. I heard a lot from him about his perspective on what was going on, and what the military was doing in their tent base to prepare for Aristide's return.

Q: And they brought back Aristide?

ECKERSON: The invasion was in September 1994 and Aristide returned in October 1994. Mission staff returned to Haiti after that.

Q: Did we try to reinstitute the plans that we had before with the public private partnerships and working with the government? Did we go back to that strategy?

ECKERSON: Yes. But it wasn't easy. The Mission went head over heels trying to reboot partnerships with the government. And at the same time, again, a lot of our FSN staff went back into the government. But, it became more and more difficult to establish public private partnerships with Aristide's government. They wanted to do it all themselves and did not have the capacity. While we attempted to create programs to build their capacity, the political situation in Haiti kept deteriorating. This eventually led to a lack of trust and support for the government under Aristide.

Q: Because you went back to Haiti at the time of the earthquake while you were the Mission Director in Uganda, we agreed we would talk about that experience in Haiti now. But before we leave Haiti during this 1990's period, I wonder if you were involved at all in HIV/AIDS programming in Haiti?

ECKERSON: Oh yeah, we had a significant amount of money for AIDS. We were able to find ways to work around the parameters of the Congressional earmark to integrate many of the funds into our child survival program. Haiti also had a world class laboratory created by Dr. John Pape that we also supported.

I'd say the best use of our HIV/AIDS dollars supported a public/private drug supply, warehousing, and distribution system called PROMISE. One of the major constraints to public health in Haiti was the lack of an efficient drug supply and distribution system.

We gave funds to the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) to avoid Congressional constraints on how we could use funds to purchase medicines. Given its international status, PAHO had more flexibility using our dollars than we could. We told our NGO grantees that we wanted them to use PROMISE. We were able to use a significant amount of HIV/AIDS funding for condoms and for rapid test kits purchased by PROMISE. We also set up a system to distribute the condoms and rapid test kits to health clinics and testing centers throughout the country to screen for HIV.

Additionally, we gave funds to the United Nations Family Planning Association (UNFPA). Given their status as International Organizations, both PAHO and UNFPA could use our restricted funds to work with Aristide's government to strengthen the public health system. USAID regulations allowed them to do what we couldn't, as long as they had an annual audit approved by their internal control systems.

It's interesting. I just came back from Belgium where I reconnected with the PAHO Director I worked with in Haiti. We have remained close friends for the past 30 years. He told me PROMISE still exists. I'm not sure how effective it is, but at least we built an institution from scratch that remains sustainable.

Q: Okay. That's great.

ECKERSON: Anyway, can we fast forward to the earthquake. The earthquake happened in early January of 2010. Carleene Dei was the mission director.

Raj Shah had only been the Administrator of USAID for 12 days. It was his first humanitarian crisis. He was told Lew Lucke was the best person to send down to Haiti and deal with the crisis, given his experience in Iraq and elsewhere. So, Shah sent Lou to Haiti and gave him total control of the recovery program. Carleene was an incredibly capable senior leader, and yet she was cast aside by Lou Lucke and his massive ego. Humble and gentle Carleene actually gave him her house to live in, while she slept at the Mission on a cot.

Q: Took over her house?

ECKERSON: Yes. Totally. There were other houses he could have stayed in. Most all of the Direct Hires were on ordered departure, and their houses vacant. There were also Office Directors living in their residences without their families where Lou could have stayed .

Q: Right. They had people staying with them in their homes?

ECKERSON: Yes. There were no hotel rooms available. You couldn't move around town. And most residences were located in an area adjacent to the Embassy. The Embassy grounds were filled with tents that the military used to "hot bunk" personnel.

Shah set up yet another Haiti task force in Washington. Paul Weisenfeld managed the operation and Susan Reichle was his Deputy Director.

I was in Uganda. They both called me right after the earthquake in January asked me to leave Uganda and help out on the recovery. I told them we were in the middle of some really important things, one of which was developing our first ever country strategy. They called me back again in February. They said they really needed me to go to Haiti. Lou Lucke had left, and he had not done what was needed. Shah wanted me to go down and make things happen. Again, I told them I was over my head running one of the largest programs in Africa. They understood, and convinced Raj to let me stay.

When they called me again in March, they told me I couldn't get out of it this time. I had to go. Cheryl Mills, Hillary Clinton's chief of staff in the State Department had stopped all USAID funding in Haiti. The Secretary of State and her husband Bill wanted to rebuild Haiti the right way this time around. They wanted to terminate all existing USAID programs and start afresh with programs they felt were more effective. Congress was about to pass a billion dollar supplemental funding bill for Haiti and they wanted to use the funds to build a new port in Cap Haitian, and rebuild the country's electrical grid. They were in the process of contracting with McKinsey to help them define their program.

At the same time, the National Security Council was blasting USAID for incompetence, and the military (SOUTHCOM) was saying that they would be leaving soon, and when they left, USAID was going to screw everything up.

Paul and Susan told me I had to go, and I had to get our funds restored. They told me I would lead a team to assess the situation and resolve all the issues. They told me I could take whoever I wanted on the team. They suggested that I take Todd Amani, since he had done an amazing job handling the Nicaragua hurricane a few years earlier. Todd was the Mission Director in Mozambique.

Q: Yeah, yeah. He did excellent work following the big hurricane that hit Central America.

ECKERSON: I told them I wanted Sheila O'Rourke on the team. She was a PSC in the health office when I was in Haiti. She had lived in Haiti for years, was fluent in Creole, and knew everyone in the health sector. The task force added a housing expert from RHUDO (Regional Housing and Urban Development) to the team. They also added a woman from the Democracy and Governance Office. They added the most valuable person as we were about to get on the plane. Paul and Susan told me we needed a powerpoint expert to develop a "powerpoint deck". I asked what a "powerpoint deck" was, and why we needed someone to do it. They explained to me that the team was not going to deliver a report. Shah wanted a powerpoint presentation as the main deliverable that he could use to brief the National Security Council.

So, we all headed off to Haiti. We were a team of five seasoned development professionals, along with a young woman carrying a laptop computer who looked about the same age as my daughter.

It was not at all clear how long we would be there. Upon our arrival, we went straight to the Embassy to meet the Ambassador. The meeting was cordial, and he told us we could have access to anyone and anything we needed. He wished us good luck and set us free to do our thing.

Q: Your task was to plan what AID was going to do with this big supplemental? So, your work was focused on recovery, not relief?

ECKERSON: The job description was: we cannot fail. (laughter) And by the way, the second part of the job description was to get Cheryl Mills to let us have our money. Because the Mission had no funding, all the programs were about to run out of money and stop.

It was not easy to travel in Port au Prince. Rubble was everywhere. Many of the main roads were closed. Traffic on the few roads that were open moved at a snail's pace. We spent a lot of time creeping through clogged streets in Embassy jeeps to meet with people. The worst travel was going to and from the Embassy that had relocated to La

Plaine and our TDY house above Petionville on Montagne Noire. The journey took an hour and a half each way. Before the earthquake, travel time was about 15 minutes.

Q: Who were you talking to? The Haitians, but also probably the host of Americans that were working there?

ECKERSON: We talked with dozens and dozens of people. Military officers from SOUTHCOM, government officials, representatives from all the UN agencies, NGOs, the donor community, many folks from the private sector, and random people in gas stations, shops and restaurants.

Q: Okay. So, everybody. What I was really driving at was how much of your time had to be spent talking to the multiple U.S. government entities that were involved versus Haitians and other donors.

ECKERSON: We spent a fair amount of time talking with inter-agency folks in the Embassy. We talked to almost all of the USDH and FSN staff in the Mission. Shelagh and I had a huge network of Haitian and ex-patriate colleagues that we tapped for discussions. I also met with several of the rich Haitian elite that were friends of my wife when she served on the international school board.

Right after the earthquake, many felt that the disaster might have a silver lining. Everyone, rich or poor, was touched by tragedy. There was a feeling that perhaps for the first time ever, the rich and the poor in Haiti could work together to rebuild Haiti for the benefit of everyone. That feeling didn't last very long. When SOUTHCOM arrived in country, they gave millions of dollars in contracts to businesses run by the elite families to clear the port, remove rubble, and rebuild Haiti for their own profit.

Thousands of displaced people were living in camps scattered around town that were set up by the military and NGOs. We visited them all. It became clear the first priority was to get people out of the camps.

I remember talking to some nurses Shelagh and I knew in the Cite Soleil slum. Since the slum was on a landfill on a marsh along the coast, it was untouched by the earthquake. But, all the families in Cite Soleil moved into camps

Basically, if you were a Haitian family living in Cite Soleil, or any other slum in the city, the husband would take the older kids in the family and move to a camp. The wife would take the younger ones and move to another camp. Life in the camps was like living in a hotel compared to living in the mud under a leaking roof. The camps had free food. They had electricity. They had porta-potties.

It was a great survival strategy for poor Haitians. They put their family members in the camps in hopes that they could come out with something.

Chelsey Clinton went to Haiti on her own to see the damage. When she went back she told her mom that she felt that many women in the camps were at risk of rape. The Secretary of State passed that on to SOUTHCOM, and lights were installed everywhere. I understand that. I totally accept the need.

But, you have a problem when you put electricity in a camp, and you have food distribution in the camp, and you have showers and sanitary facilities in the camp. Poor people are not going to leave the camps to go home and clear rubble and rebuild their damaged houses if the camps are better than what they had before.

So, the first thing to do became very clear to us early on. We needed a strategy to move folks out of the camps. But, perhaps more important, we needed to find a way to get Cheryl Mills and the State Department to resume funding for our programs. Our NGO partners and contractors were rapidly running out of money for their activities supporting primary education, delivery of health services, agriculture development, and efforts to improve democracy and governance.

After nearly a month of discussions, we still didn't know what we could say to convince them to release the hold on our funds. I remember sitting with Todd Amani in the closet we were given as an office to work in. We sat face to face, looking across the table at each other wondering what the hell to say or do. Then the idea came to us, almost simultaneously. Why don't we describe what happens when you shut off a program? If you shut off a program, and you're going to design a new program, you're not going to see a new program on the ground for a year and a half, or two years. The minute that they gave you the billion dollar supplemental, what are you going to show the Congress that you're doing?

We ran the idea by our team, and everyone felt it was the best way to go. We created timelines for every program in the Mission. We developed graphics to show that nothing was going to be happening for a very long time. We demonstrated that you needed to have a transition period to move from existing programs to the new programs.

I have to say the young woman that Paul and Susan sent down with us was the real hero on our team. We developed the data and she took it to another level with her amazing powerpoint slides. She made military colonels who are powerpoint rangers look like rookies. I still remember one slide she made from a photo of the former USAID Administrator, Andrew Natsios, and the President of Haiti sitting in a pickup truck together. Underneath the photo she put a caption that said "Who is in charge?". The point being that our assistance should support the Haitians to help themselves. They needed to do things their way, not ours. We needed to support their government, and their organizations.

She took all our data, comments and notations and created a slide deck composed of stock photos, graphics and data that was simple, sweet and incredibly powerful. We worked with Mission project staff to show where they were in their programs, the results that they had so far, and the results they intended to have. We created slides for each program.

The slide deck clearly demonstrated that if you shut everything down and get a billion dollar supplemental to do the things you think you need to do, it will be a long time before you can report anything of substance to Congress.

We went back to Washington and presented the slide deck to Cheryl Mills and her entourage in one of those hallowed meeting rooms outside the Secretary of State's Office on the sixth floor. We presented the slide deck to them, and when we finished Cheryl Mills laughed and said: "Well, I guess we better turn on the spigot and keep your programs running."

We headed back to USAID, and briefed Raj and the senior staff on our meeting with Mills and presented the slide deck. Raj loved it. He briefed the National Security Council with the slide deck, and they loved it as well.

We were all exhausted. It was a great team, and a successful mission. I went back to Uganda and immediately came down with walking pneumonia.

One final point. When we were in Haiti we would often eat dinner in Petion-Ville in the few restaurants that were open. We would often see the McKinsey consulting team eating together and discussing their analysis of the programs proposed by the State Department. I swear to God, there were probably ten to fifteen of them, and they all seemed to be between the age of twenty-three and twenty-eight.

Q: First jobs out of college.

ECKERSON: There was one person in his early thirties leading the pack. We read their report after they left to brief Washington with their analysis. It was amazing. They had no concept of what was going on in Haiti. It's hard to describe what they proposed. It didn't fit with reality. But, they got a lot of money for their advice.

Q: That's interesting. Often when there's an emergency of that magnitude, people initially look at the existing portfolio, make adjustments, and then add money in order to expedite programming. They obviously took a very different tact for at least a while.

ECKERSON: The vibe we kept hearing was "we screwed up the first time with Aristide. Now we have to get it right." There was a lot of money flowing to Haiti from Congress and from donations to NGOs from people throughout America. There was also a relief fund of private sector money set up between the Haitian government and the U.S government that was administered jointly by Bush and Clinton.

Q: Private money. Yes; it was George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton.

ECKERSON: The Salvation Army got a pile of money as well, but they never spent it. Needless to say, a whole lot of money flowed to Haiti in the aftermath of the earthquake.

It's debatable how much the massive influx of money actually led to improving the lives of the Haitian people.

Q: You were doing that on behalf of the mission. Washington asked you to go in, but you were working with the AID mission?

ECKERSON: We were tasked to keep the Mission programs running. Raj Shah wanted to win the fight in the National Security Council. Our focus was on the Mission and staff. We worked with them to show Washington how effective and important their programs were to address the dire situation in Haiti.

Q: Can I ask a question just about how AID manages this kind of emergency. I've done a number of oral history interviews, and read some others about people who worked on the Haiti earthquake. I've read Lew Lucke's interview. I've interviewed Paul Weisenfeld and Susan Reichle, both of whom were part of the task force. I've interviewed Chris Milligan, who was sent in to do something. I've interviewed Phil Gary, who was also asked to go in to do something, as well. I'm wondering about this propensity to bring in external people as opposed to making maximum use of what skills are already on the ground. There were so many different people brought in at different points of time. Did that add to the confusion or did it help? Or, am I being unfair?

ECKERSON: That's an interesting question. It's complicated. Invariably, when a crisis occurs, USAID sets up a task force to coordinate all facets of how to respond to it. You have to deal with the inter-agency, especially State and the military. You have to develop a first response and assess the situation, usually by sending in a Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) from USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance.

Every task force plays a major role in securing and aligning resources to address critical areas of need. Those resources include money and people. They also serve as the focal point of communication between Washington and the Mission.

Issues arise when political forces drive responses to crises. There is also the problem of Washington second-guessing the Mission's judgment and capacity to understand the full range of issues. So, there is a propensity to send in outside expertise who have been through disasters before and have experience not resident in the Mission. There-in lies the problem: finding the right people at the right time that are right for the Washington perspective and right for the Mission's needs. Lou Lucke was not the right person to send to Haiti to manage the Mission, even though Carleene had just arrived.

Q: I guess the question is if it would be better to give clearer authority to the mission and then have people come in to help the mission? I think that's in essence, what you were doing? Although, I believe that Chris Milligan was actually assigned to SOUTHCOM. So, a big part of his job was to coordinate with the military, which is a different task.

ECKERSON: Exactly. Chris was USAID's military liaison with SOUTHCOM, and he did an incredible job aligning the military's immediate response with the Mission's short and long term development needs. He was amazing, and very effective.

Q: Right. And that was a different task. It's more on the overall leadership of it in the field, and the management capacity of the Mission.

ECKERSON: I think it's important to note how much autonomy missions had in the early 1980s. They operated with minimal oversight and control from Washington. Overseas phone service was poor, and in franco-phone Africa you had to book calls in advance to Washington through operators in Paris. Most communication was through cables. By the time a cable reached Washington describing a crisis, missions would have to respond to it before they received a cable response from Washington.

The USAID e-mail system was rolled out in the early 1990s, but was not very effective. However, as electronic communication grew, and the internet came into force, missions began to lose their power to control their programs. Washington oversight and influence on mission programming has grown exponentially over the past decade.

The span of management control becomes very complicated in emergency situations. For example, when OFDA sends a DART team to a country, the DART team reports to the Ambassador. It works hand in hand with the Mission Director, but the legislation that set up the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance specifically requires the DART be managed by the Ambassador.

There was a confluence of issues when it came to the USAID Mission managing the Haiti earthquake response. You had incredible oversight from Washington. The State Department assumed a larger role than normal, given the Ambassador's legislated management of disaster assistance. Then you had SOUTHCOM based in Florida all over the place. Since Haiti is only an hour and a half flight by plane from Florida, Congress sent several delegations to ensure their political concerns.

It was a nightmare for USAID. It was difficult to assess how much help the Mission needed in the face of so many actors doing so much in our development space.

Q: I accept that. And this was a unique case because Carleene had arrived the day before the earthquake. I've just always wondered about this propensity to send external sources in because the administration has confidence in their individual skills.

ECKERSON: Right. It all has to start with an assessment of the Mission Director and their staff. Some of our directors are excellent managers. Carleene was one of them. But we also have some directors who leave a lot to be desired. I would say again that Haiti is unique. It's close to America and you can go down there and be back tomorrow. You can't do that in a country like Rwanda or Nepal. USAID was overwhelmed and micro-managed in Haiti after the earthquake.

I'm curious, Carol. What have you learned from other oral history interviews about USAID success in managing the response to a disaster?

Q: I do think that Hurricane Mitch in Central America was handled a bit more by people on the ground. At least I have that impression. But again, that was different. Haiti was unique, and I'm probably pushing a point too hard.

ECKERSON: Yeah, I know. But, I guess the issue is, and you said it. Haiti is pretty unique. I'm fluent in Creole. I can talk to anyone, elite or poor. When I left Haiti the first time, and every time since, I always feel that the more I know about Haiti, the less I understand.

Q: Interesting. Anyway, is there anything else on Haiti looking at the multiple years you were involved with the country, whether living there, working from Washington in the office of Caribbean affairs, and then being called back ten years to fifteen years later for work on the earthquake recovery program. Anything else to say about any of that?

ECKERSON: Yeah. I read all my performance evaluations that I received when I served in Haiti. They were all about me and left out all that should be said about Mike White. Mike White was incredible. He was a real visionary. He's the one who designed the framework for the public private delivery system. He was my mentor, and I learned from one of the best. We went through a lot of different and challenging things together and became best friends. Haiti was really good for my career. I faced multiple, multiple problems and had to cope with multiple, multiple solutions. The more unique stuff you face, the better prepared you are for when it comes at you again. When we get to Ethiopia, I will have several things to say about what I learned from Haiti that helped me in Ethiopia.

Q: That's an interesting point. I had always thought Haiti would be a bad place to start a career because it is such a mess, but you've made a very good point -- it's a very good place because you must learn to think and adapt and be creative.

ECKERSON: It will be interesting to see what happens in the careers of the junior officers we sent to Afghanistan and Iraq. In Afghanistan, you manage huge programs. But, you are stuck in a fortified compound with armed guards at every entrance. You can't get out to see what is going on, and how effective our programs really are. You manage contractors, approve massive budgets, and rely on second and third hand information to assess the success of our assistance.

It's not like Haiti, where you were always in the field, learning and talking with people benefitting from our programs. You felt like you were able to shape what we did to really help people.

Q: That's very interesting. When we reconvene, we'll talk about Ethiopia.

Q: This is October 24, 2022, and this is session number three with Dave Eckerson. Perhaps we could start with how the assignment to Ethiopia came about. Did the Africa Bureau seek you out? Or did you seek this out?

USAID/Ethiopia, Deputy Mission Director (and Acting Director), 1996 - 2000

ECKERSON: John Breslar told the Senior Leadership Group (SLG) that I was a promising young manager and should be considered for a Deputy Mission Director position. I interviewed with the Africa Bureau, and they selected me to be Deputy Director in Senegal, since I was fluent in French. Just before I was ready to head off to Senegal, the SLG decided I was better suited to go to Ethiopia, given their large health budget. Marge Bonner was the Mission Director. Walter North was her Deputy. They wanted me to go to post quickly, since Walter had been assigned to Indonesia as Mission Director, and Ethiopia was facing a drought.

I arrived in Addis in late August 1996. At the time, the Agency was in the throes of a major reorganization. The Administrator, Brian Atwood, wanted to change the way the Agency functioned. He wanted us to be less bureaucratic and operate more like the private sector. The private sector was moving to a model of creating teams composed of people with different areas of expertise to develop products and processes quickly, creatively, and effectively. So, Atwood ordered all Missions to create cross sector teams to manage our programs.

Q: Right. And this was part of the reengineering effort that was taking place.

ECKERSON: Yes, and it became very problematic. Normally, an Office Chief manages all the office staff, and the staff in turn manage programs. Under re-engineering, each Mission had to develop a set of Strategic Objectives and then create Strategic Objective Teams to manage each one.

In theory, if HIV/AIDS was the Strategic Objective of the health Office, the head of the team could be someone with extensive HIV/AIDS experience, and not the Office Director. If the Strategic Objective Team Leader was not the Office Director, you faced a huge problem. A person who reports to the Office Director could be managing more money and people than his/her boss. No Office Director in the Agency wanted that to happen. They would be losing management power, and you get promoted in this agency by demonstrating you can manage a lot of money and people.

It was a nightmare, and we walked a tightrope to satisfy all the zealots in Washington that had no idea what we faced in the field. Mission programs had to be re-defined and re-jiggered to fit within a framework of Strategic Objectives. The Strategic Objectives would form the basis of a new country development strategy. And finally, we had to work within a hierarchy of Offices to create cross sector teams to manage the Strategic Objectives.

In Ethiopia, we created a strategic objective for each technical office, and each office director became the strategic objective team leader. It was smoke and mirrors, and just about every Mission in the world did the same thing.

Q: One of the other parts of this, as I recall, was to broaden the involvement of others on the strategic objective teams and give them a sense of ownership. So, people from the controller's office and contracting office and in some cases, even the executive office would be on the teams. Did that happen in Ethiopia? If so, did it improve performance and the job satisfaction of people, particularly those in the support offices?

ECKERSON: That was probably the one element in the concept of moving to cross sector teams that really worked. Technical offices and their directors retained control of their Strategic Objectives, but they had to include staff from the Controller's Office, Program Office, and Contracts Office on their SO teams. This meant that every office in the mission had insight and input into the management of our strategic objectives. Funding issues and financial management concerns raised by other offices were able to be addressed before they became major problems.

It was an important step in getting a fuller complement of points of view on the table. But it was a process, and success didn't happen overnight.

You needed staff buy-in to make it work. You needed Mission leadership to bring people together and allow voices to be heard. You needed to get everyone on the same page, and then make decisions that were in the best interest of the mission writ large.

In the past, technical offices wanted to make decisions on funding levels, obligations and contracting from their own internal perspectives. Now they were forced to involve staff from other offices in their discussions, and it created far more transparency and ability to elevate critical issues for discussion by senior management.

I think the cross-sector team structure was one of the best elements of the reorganization. It was an important step forward. In Ethiopia we scheduled performance reviews every six months with every Strategic Objective team. I don't know if other missions did performance reviews every six months before the reorganization. But, I do know they became institutionalized under the reorganization process. Throughout my career, every Mission was required to do a performance review twice a year.

Q: This was your first deputy mission director job. I believe Marge had already been there at least a couple years. What kind of a director deputy relationship did you have? Was it an alter ego role? Or did you split responsibilities? Or how did that work as a first-time deputy for you?

ECKERSON: We had a great relationship. She was a superb mentor and delegated lots of responsibility to me. Her husband was an education officer, so I managed the Education Office, Health Office and Controller's Office. Marge went back to Washington and retired

a year after I got to Ethiopia. After one year on the job, I became the Acting Mission Director.

I had a steep learning curve in Ethiopia. I was there for four years, and I was acting Mission Director for more than two and a half years. Marge left and it took almost a year before Keith Brown replaced her. Keith was the Regional Mission Director in Kenya managing the Global Horn of Africa Initiative (GHAI).

GHAI was a highly political program designed to mitigate against future droughts in East Africa. The program had meager funding, and it was designed to rip off funds from bilateral Missions to support the regional initiative. Missions hated it, and Keith had his hands full trying to get out from under it.

When Keith finally got to Ethiopia, the Africa Bureau got a new political Assistant Administrator. She in turn named Keith to be her Deputy in Washington. So, Keith stayed less than a year and left me acting again. It was almost a year before Washington sent Doug Sheldon to be the Mission Director. I served as his Deputy for about four months before I left Ethiopia to attend the Senior Seminar.

I have to say Marge was the best of them all. She was a no nonsense, straight shooter. She was a superb manager and excellent mentor. She taught me a lot.

David Shinn was the Ambassador when I arrived in Ethiopia. He was an expert on Africa and a consummate professional. He had already authored several books on African history before serving in Ethiopia.

Shinn entertained non-stop at the Ambassador's residence. Shinn often attended a reception at another Embassy, then returned to the residence and did a reception there, followed by a dinner with different invitees. As Acting Mission Director, I had to represent USAID at receptions three or four times a week. I had three young kids and a wife who wanted me home after work for family time.

When I was in Haiti, David Cohen once told me that he hated to attend Ambassador receptions. He coped with them by going early before any guests arrived. That way you can be there when the guest of honor arrives. You chat with the guest and Ambassador, and they know you were there. When the room fills with people, and before the invited guest gives his eloquent speech, you duck out through the kitchen and go home. The Ambassador knows you were there. You did your thing and gave the invited guest the USAID perspective. And you are free to have time with your family before bedtime.

Q: That's a very important lesson learned to be documented.

ECKERSON: No kidding. It sure helped me get along well with David Shinn.

Q: Yes, he had been the State Department office director for East Africa before and was heavily involved with creation of the Greater Horn of Africa Initiative.

ECKERSON: Let's talk about the GHAI. I was the acting mission director when it was rolled out. All the Missions in East Africa were tasked with figuring out how to deal with this highly political initiative. There was one huge problem. The regional office under Keith Brown wanted to control all the money. GHAI became an earmark, without any funding. Every mission in the region resisted using their operating year budgets to support a regional program. It became a very real and very testy bureaucratic challenge. Especially for me, since Keith was my de-facto boss from afar.

In the end, the Missions won. Every Mission listed the resources in their bilateral programs that supported the objectives contained in the GHAI. We kept control of our funds and programs by simply "attributing" what we did in support of the initiative. But, we had to shoulder the burden of incessant reporting requirements to Congress.

I was the rookie Mission Director in the region. But, Ethiopia had more funds than any other Mission, and we had a lot to lose. Ethiopia came out of it unscathed. In the process, I learned that Missions are in constant threat from Washington and Congress over who decides how to run our development programs.

In the end I would say the GHAI was not the most effective initiative that the agency has ever undertaken.

Q: As I recall, one of the important themes was looking at the relief to development continuum and getting a greater synergy between relief and development operations. There was also a focus on conflict resolution which the regional office in Nairobi probably played a greater role in.

ECKERSON: Yes, and to your point, that was the focus of what we did in Ethiopia. Just about every NGO involved with food relief focused their programs in marginal areas where there was little hope for development to take root. We spent a lot of time, effort, and money to get them to reorient and redirect their programs to geographic areas where there was a possibility to move from relief to development. They were very resistant to the idea and did not want to change their way of doing business. Our point was simple. Use your resources effectively and invest in areas where you can make a difference in the lives of people.

Ambassador Shinn had my back on funding issues with the GHAI. He totally supported my position that we were best positioned to use our bilateral funds to advance the relief to development continuum in Ethiopia through our programs, rather than through programs managed from Kenya. GHAI didn't stick around very long after most Missions refused to fund the regional programs.

Q: It was an initiative of Brian Atwood, so when he left in 1999 or so, it probably lost steam.

ECKERSON: Right. But, ICASS followed on the heels of the GHAI. I don't know if you remember ICASS, or where you were when ICASS rolled out. It was a far more serious problem for us.

Q: Just for the record, that was the joint administrative services in the embassy?

ECKERSON: ICASS was short for the Interagency Council on Administrative Services and Support. It replaced the old way of attributing how much USAID would pay every year for administrative services from embassies around the world.

In the early 1990s, the State Department decided they needed a new way to determine how much USAID and other foreign affairs agencies should pay embassies for services they receive for security, local hiring, mail, management of commissaries, and other administrative services.

In the past, State got an attribution in the foreign affairs budget to cover these costs. It was a lump sum based on estimates submitted from the field and in Washington. Every year, State would determine how much each agency needed to pay them out of their operating expense funds.

The budgeting process was standardized, and not very precise. State also felt they were not recovering their true costs. So, they worked with all foreign affairs agencies to develop a process to ensure that every agency would pay their fair share.

The ICASS budgeting format was person-based. The more direct hires you had, the more you had to pay into the joint services pot. The first year was a testing period to determine if it could work and fix any glitches that arose.

I was the young acting mission director, trying to understand what it all meant. It was a major concern throughout the Agency. It became my major concern when the head of State's Management Office, the infamous Pat Kennedy, came to Ethiopia during the final months of the testing period.

Kennedy came to my Office and met with me along with the Embassy's Administrative Officer. I felt like I was David in front of Goliath, and the odds were heavy in favor of State's heavy hitter.

It was not a nice meeting. Kennedy basically said State was sick and tired of supporting USAID and not getting reimbursed for all the costs they incurred. He was extremely blunt. He said State was going to get as much money as they could from us.

I was polite and listened as they both went on to say they were going to charge ICASS services for our direct hires, our grantees, and our contractors.

I told them I read all the proposed rules and regulations proposed for ICASS. There was never any mention of grantees and contractors having to pay for services.

They told me ICASS was like joining a country club. Contractors and grantees use the Commissary and American Club. If you use those amenities, then you have to pay the ICASS cost to use them.

I told them to do that, we would have to amend every contract and every grant in our program. We would have to add funds to pay for their ICASS costs, since they were not included in their budgets.

After they left, I went straight to the Ambassador and told him I felt this cost was not justified and would have an impact on every USAID Mission in the world. We would be forced to do hundreds of contract and grant amendments in all our programs. I told him the issue was way above my pay grade. I asked him to allow me to go back to the ICASS Governing Council in Washington and ask for clarification.

Ambassador Shinn felt that it would be difficult to go against Pat Kennedy, but he agreed to let me raise the issue with Washington. So, I sent a long email to the USAID Management Bureau and Africa Bureau senior staff outlining the huge issue that we were facing in Ethiopia.

I received overwhelming support from everyone, saying they would raise the issue in the ICASS Governing Council. We all agreed this would be devastating for all Missions around the world if our contractors and grantees had to pay ICASS costs to use Commissaries and American Clubs

USAID/Washington never raised the issue in the ICASS Governing Council. I kept asking for resolution and got silence in return. The ICASS test period closed, and the system went live. All agencies were sent bills for their ICASS services.

I went to the Ambassador again and told him I had no choice but to inform all our contractors and grantees that they could not use the Commissary and American Club after the end of the fiscal year. USAID did not have the time, nor inclination to amend their contracts and grants to pay for ICASS services.

He was very concerned that if we did that, it would be a major blow to morale in the American community. But, he recognized the situation I faced with my Agency in Washington that was doing nothing to help resolve the issue.

Ambassador Shinn was a good Ambassador. He told me to do what I felt was best. I called a meeting of all our contractors and NGOs. I briefed them on the issues. I listened to their concerns. I told them we didn't want to deny them access to the Commissary and the American Club. But, State was being unreasonable, and the ICASS Governing Council in Washington was not acting on the issue.

I told them I was sorry, but we couldn't take money out of their programs to pay for access to the Commissary and American Club. It would not be the right thing to do. They

were not happy, but they understood my dilemma. After the meeting, I sent a letter informing them that they could not access the commissary anymore, and they could no longer go to the American Club.

Three months later, the American Club and the Commissary Committee felt the fiscal pain (and anger) from the loss of so many members. They told the Embassy Administrative Officer they wanted our contractors and grantees back, without having to pay ICASS fees.

They prevailed, and our contractors and grantees were allowed to return to the Commissary and American Club without having to pay ICASS anything.

Q: I'd forgotten about that. There certainly were a lot of battles during that period.

ECKERSON: It was terrible. The irony of it all came later on in my career, when I was Mission Director in Uganda. My Ambassador, Jerry Lanier, nominated me for the Outstanding ICASS Chairman of the Year award for my role in managing the Embassy ICASS council. I actually got it, and my arch enemy, Pat Kennedy, came over from his regal office in the State Department to award it to me at the annual USAID Mission Directors Conference. It should also be noted that just about every award the State Department bestows is accompanied by money. The ICASS Chairman of the Year Award comes with nothing but a piece of paper and a frame.

Q: That's a nice story.

ECKERSON: I also want to talk about what it was like working in Ethiopia. I've been all around Africa. I have never been in a country as unique as Ethiopia. Ethiopians do things their way. They have their own plan for what they want to do or accomplish. You either follow their plan, or you take your development dollars elsewhere.

The Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, had a vision and a plan. His political party controlled the country and had overwhelming power to implement it. It's important to note that Meles and his party were Tigrayan, and the region where they came from bordered Eritrea in the north.

Q: And at this point, when you got there in 1996, he was one of the bright young leaders in Africa. There were people writing articles about the African Renaissance, and Meles was viewed as a leading light in that process. I think while you were there, the war with Eritrea also broke out probably so he went from being that hero to being a little bit suspect.

ECKERSON: Exactly. But first, a bit of history. The Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) under Meles, and the Tigray Liberation Front (TLF) under Isaias Afewerki came together and defeated the Russian backed Derg in 1991. After the combined forces took power, the United Nations conducted a referendum in Eritrea to

determine if Eritrea should be an independent country or remain a federated state of Ethiopia. The vote was overwhelmingly in favor of independence for Eritrea.

Tigray remained in Ethiopia, but the rest of the region became Eritrea. The relationship between the two countries became contentious. But, since Meles and Afeworki had been comrades in arms, there was peace between them. Meles also had family ties in Tigray and Eritrea.

However, the referendum later served as a litmus test on your citizenship. If you were from Tigray and your family voted in the referendum, you were always considered suspect in Ethiopia. Especially if you lived in the capital, Addis Ababa.

Q: Even though Meles was Tigrayan?

ECKERSON: His mother was Eritrean, and his father was Tigrayan. He actually changed his first name to Meles to honor a student who was killed by the Derg at the University of Addis Ababa.

Meles was very smart and very clever. I was in a meeting with him once with a Congressional delegation and the USAID Administrator. Meles told them about a book he had just read about the South Korea “success story”. He noted that it was interesting that the CIA and U.S. military stood up South Korea after the Korean war and made the country into what it is today. But, he also noted that at that time, many South Koreans did not want to go in the direction of becoming a little America in Asia beholden to the United States. Then he added that Ethiopians had their own path that they were following. He welcomed any assistance targeted to help them get to where they wanted to go.

That was the essence of how you worked with Ethiopians. It was always their way or the highway.

For example, we had a lot of money under a Congressional earmark to deal with HIV/AIDS. We had to ensure it went to fund specific interventions like testing, counseling, condoms and medicines.

The Ethiopians refused to deal with HIV/AIDS as a single problem. They would only deal with it in the context of delivering health services. It was very challenging to satisfy our earmark requirements and support their holistic, and basically right, approach.

I've never worked in a country where the government was so adamant that they're going to do everything their way. Ethiopians have their own solutions, and they do not rely on outside experts to tell them what to do.

Q: Following up on that. I know there were some strong supporters of Ethiopia within AID in Washington, as well. People who were quite close to Ethiopia, including Dick McCall, Gayle Smith, and Susan Rice. It must have added to the complexity. You couldn't

argue with the government about things because they would just go directly back to Washington.

ECKERSON: You are absolutely right. The three of them had deep connections and a lot of history in Ethiopia and Eritrea. McCall was the USAID Administrator's Chief of Staff. Rice was State's Assistant Secretary for Africa. And Gayle spent years as a journalist on the front lines covering the war with the Derg.

They played a major role trying to avert the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. I got to Ethiopia in 1996 and the war started in 1998. Again, when the war started, I was Acting Mission Director.

Basically, the two sides disputed the international border between Ethiopia and Eritrea that was created after the fall of the Derg. The conflict centered around Badame, a small town on the northern border. Eritrea claimed the town was historically theirs, and shouldn't be part of Ethiopia

News broadcasts about the dispute began to get more and more heated, and both sides began stationing troops along each side of the border. It was like World War I. Each side started digging huge trenches across from each other. It was clear that something was about to happen.

The United States sent Susan Rice, Gayle Smith, and Anthony Lake to the region to try and avert the conflict. They met with Meles and Isaias in Rwanda under the auspices of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). Everyone in the Embassy felt the negotiations would stop the conflict. It seemed crazy that the two countries would ever go to war.

But, the egos of Meles and Isaias prevailed, and the negotiations failed. Meles and Isaias hated each other. I'm not sure which side fired the first shot, but the war began, and it was horrible. It coupled trench warfare of World War One with World War Two weapons. There were rocket launchers and MiGs and exposed soldiers in trenches. Over 250,000 young men died.

The Ethiopians constantly raided neighborhoods looking for young men to send to the front to fight the war. They also rounded up Eritreans and sent them to the north, leaving them to cross mine fields to get back to Eritrea.

At the start of the war, Bill Clinton was having a problem with his intern in Washington. The State Department, especially the Management Office, was scared that something might happen to Embassy personnel in Ethiopia and Eritrea while Clinton was dealing with his issues.

At the same time. Ambassador Shinn and his fellow Ambassador in Eritrea were having a cable war with each other. Each of them was sending messages to Washington saying the other side was the aggressor.

While it seemed premature, both countries were put on ordered departure. Washington felt that Addis could be bombed by the Eritrean air force, and they did not want to accept the risk. All families had to leave post, and only a few specified key personnel could remain. Even worse, we were told to evacuate all our expatriate personnel and shut down our development programs.

Ambassador Shinn was furious with both his counterpart in Eritrea, and the State Department, especially for ordered departure. Our Defense Attache briefed the country team after hearing that Washington felt Addis could be bombed. He acknowledged that the Eritreans had Soviet MiGs, and they could conceivably bomb Addis. But the MiGs were old, and their gas tanks were very small. While they could get to Addis and bomb the city, they would not have enough gas to return to Eritrea.

In the midst of all this, my contracts officer, Carolyn Eldridge, came to see me in my office. She was a savvy contracts officer with years of experience in Washington. She came to Ethiopia on a detail, and this was her first real tour as a Foreign Service Officer.

Carolyn told me that she had been reading the Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM) that governs overseas operations. She told me that according to the FAM, a Mission Director has the same authority as an Ambassador under an ordered departure to determine which contractor and NGO personnel are essential.

I took her copy of the FAM and showed it to Ambassador Shinn. He agreed to request Washington to allow me to determine what contractors and grantees were essential personnel.

Two days later, the State Department requested a list of essential contractors and NGOs in the USAID program. We sent them a list of everyone running our development programs, and they agreed to let them stay.

Q: How much of your direct hire staff was able to stay?

ECKERSON: Not many stayed. Most left because their names were not on the essential personnel list. In Ethiopia the list included me and all the Office chiefs in the Mission. Many of the Mission direct hire families had children, and the international school teachers had to leave so the school closed. But it wasn't like Haiti, where when you went to the Mission, everything was empty. All our FSNs came to work every day.

Q: Were there any issues with FSNs? Did you have a broadly representative FSN staff? Were there some who came from Tigray? Were there any tensions within the mission?

ECKERSON: That's a good question. But no, I don't think there was any real dissension in the Mission. We had a couple of Tigrayans. But, if you are from Tigray, you are also an Ethiopian, and you're living in Addis.

For the most part, you didn't feel the country was at war in Addis. However, our FSNs with teenage children were worried about their kids being drafted into the military and sent north with a gun to do battle.

In 1998 we were not co-located with the Embassy. We were downtown in an old hotel, and the Embassy was up on a hill above the city. We did have our own Ethiopian Defense Force team on the roof with a machine gun to protect us during the war.

The war was almost over when I left Ethiopia. In the dark of night, the Ethiopians pulled a bunch of their soldiers out of the trenches and moved to the east where there was a massive hill. The Eritreans felt nobody would be able to get over that hill without being nailed.

But, the Ethiopians overran the hill, and came down behind the trenches of the Eritreans. All of a sudden, the Eritreans were in a sandwich of Ethiopians. They were decimated, and the Ethiopians surged deep into Eritrea. Eventually the Ethiopians held up, and both sides started negotiating to stop the war.

It took several years of international arbitration to come up with a new border. Ironically, Eritrea got to claim Badame as their own town. Just before I left, Ambassador Shinn left and Tibor Nagy replaced him. Thanks to Carolyn Eldridge, I had just been promoted into the Senior Foreign Service. I told Tibor I was interested in going to the War College.

He urged me to go to the Senior Seminar instead. He explained that at the War College you listen to lectures and take tests. At the Senior Seminar you travel around the country, and you see how America solves its problems.

Tibor had been in the Senior Seminar. He wrote a letter of recommendation for me, and I got in.

Q: We'll go on to that in a second. Can I ask a couple more questions about Ethiopia?

ECKERSON: Sure.

Q: You mentioned that you were overseeing the health and the education programs when you first went out as deputy. Do you recall whether you had much of a family planning program? I asked in part because several years later, Andrew Natsios was very interested in expanding the family planning program in Ethiopia. And was there any resistance on the part of the Ethiopians to doing a family planning program? Or, if we were not doing much, was it just a lack of resources?

ECKERSON: Ethiopia had one of the fastest growing populations in Africa when I was there. The Ethiopian Orthodox church was against family planning. There was a real need to do something, and our efforts to promote family planning in the Ethiopian context were unique.

In 1996, there were only three or four non-project assistance programs left in USAID Missions around the world, given the risk they entailed by giving cash directly to governments. Ethiopia's non-project assistance program provided ten million dollars to the government that was directly wired to paying off their U.S. debt. In exchange for money, Ethiopia adopted a national policy on family planning, and allowed commercials on national TV for condoms and family planning services.

Q: Okay, that's interesting. It sounds as if there were some policy constraints, and you all were trying to deal with them through non-project assistance.

ECKERSON: The issue was the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which had a powerful voice. They were very conservative. The old Patriarch died while I was there, and the Patriarch elected after him was very concerned about HIV/AIDS.

We used a grant we gave to the World Health Organization to help the Patriarch spread the word about the dangers of HIV/AIDS. Under the grant, WHO bought the Patriarch a custom designed Land Cruiser that was painted with slogans about the dangers of AIDS and prevention messages, especially the use of condoms. It was a proverbial "Batmobile" that the Patriarch used to travel all over the country, talk to churches, and distribute condoms.

Q: Like a popemobile?

ECKERSON: Exactly. It wasn't as secure as the Pope's. But he loved it.

Q: That's good. Another long-term priority for the Ethiopia program related to agriculture and food security, including food aid. Did you get involved with those issues around food security, especially given your nutrition background?

ECKERSON: Sure. I was very much involved. Our major challenge was trying to get the major NGO food assistance programs we supported to redirect their assistance to areas where they could make a difference. Programs in the far north had little chance to be sustainable. They promoted dependence in an area where there was little chance for development success.

The government urged NGOs to move to other marginal areas of the country, where there was more potential to grow crops and move people out of poverty. They requested NGOs to relocate programs around Gambela in the southwest. It was a marginal area with an underserved population. It also had great potential for agriculture. But NGOs were reluctant to leave their "bread and butter" feeding programs their donors loved to support in the arid, impoverished savannah.

Q: Okay. That's fine. One other thing happened in East Africa, about this time was the bombings of the embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. Did that have any impact on you all?

ECKERSON: Not really.

Q: I was just curious if it had an impact on your own ability to travel around Ethiopia, whether the security folks began to crack down more generally.

ECKERSON: We weren't really constrained other than when the war broke out, we couldn't travel near the north.

The aftermath of the bombings was felt all over the world, though. Congress passed legislation that required all U.S government personnel serving overseas be co-located in embassies. USAID Missions moved into embassies, and we no longer had our own buildings and freedom from daily contact with the Embassy culture

Q: Well, that obviously had an impact, ultimately. Any thoughts about the role of FSNs in Ethiopia? Since the mission had been there for a while, I assume it had a large number of Foreign Service Nationals?

ECKERSON: Yes, USAID had at least 60 FSNs in Ethiopia. They were well organized and had an elected FSN Council. I would meet with them regularly. Their major concerns centered on their pension fund, promotions, and health care benefits. We tried in vain to get a few of them promoted to grade 12. But, the Embassy hated the fact that our FSNs were graded so much higher than theirs.

Q: Right. And they presumably played major roles on the strategic objective teams that you spoke about earlier.

ECKERSON: Our FSNs were amazing. Many of them had Master's degrees from Great Britain and Europe. A few had degrees earned under the Derg in Russia. In every Office we had senior FSNs who out-performed and were better managers than some of our direct hire staff.

Q: Since the topic of today in USAID circles is "localization" and since you've already spoken about the Ethiopian government making clear its priorities, do you have any thoughts about the effectiveness of working with local organizations? Were you directly working with any local Ethiopian NGOs? Any thoughts about responding to the priorities that they defined?

ECKERSON: Most of our programs with local NGOs were through umbrella grants, which was the way AID did business then. We gave funds to either a contractor or grantee, and they in turn gave funds to local organizations. All the umbrella programs had an ex-patriate chief of party, and staff to ensure fiscal accountability. They were also charged with improving the capacity of their local grantees to manage funds on their own. Giving grants directly to local NGOs was in vogue at the time. While umbrella grants were designed to strengthen the NGO systems and to ostensibly someday grant directly to them, it just never happened. Later in my career it got better.

Q: Okay. That's fair. I assume that relations with Washington were good. Certainly, there were a lot of folks in Washington interested in Ethiopia, which was a plus although I suspect there were also some frustrations.

ECKERSON: I had pretty good cover in the African Bureau. Again, the biggest issues we had were with State doing ordered departure, and with ICASS.

Q: That's fine. I believe that Phil Gary was the East Africa office director in the Africa Bureau during at least part of the time that you were there?

ECKERSON: Yeah. We dealt with Phil and with Gary Bombardier on a regular basis.

Q: Gary Bombardier was the DAA overseeing East Africa?

ECKERSON: Yes. He wrote my evaluations because I didn't have a Mission Director most of the time at the end of the rating period.

Q: One last question since you mentioned meeting with Meles. I've always heard that the USAID mission in Ethiopia had historically had significant access to senior Ethiopian officials. Was this true? Was it more or less than you'd experienced in other countries? I don't know how frequently meetings took place with Meles, but were there ever any issues with the embassy over those meetings?

ECKERSON: In all meetings with Meles, Ambassador Shinn was there. If the Ambassador was meeting with Ministers in Ministries we worked with, he would often invite me to attend.

In my capacity, I dealt with Ministers in the Humanitarian Assistance and Health Ministries. We also met often with senior Provincial and Regional leaders. USAID staff were able to meet with just about anyone we wanted to in the government.

Q: Okay. Anything else before we move on to your plum assignment to the senior seminar?

ECKERSON: I would only add that it was a great experience to be acting Mission Director for such a long time while I was in Ethiopia. It was also very challenging when Keith came to take over after I had been running things for so long. The same was true when Doug Sheldon came in after I had been acting for a year. It felt good to be promoted into the Senior Foreign Service after four years of being the on again, off again boss.

Q: Okay. Now it's 2000. And you're about to head off to the Senior Seminar.

Senior Seminar, 2000

ECKERSON: The Senior Seminar was an amazing experience. To be accepted you had to have been recently promoted into the Senior Foreign Service, or recently promoted to the rank of colonel in the military. There were members from every branch of the military. We had members from the Coast Guard, Army, Navy, Marines, and Air Force. There were members from every three-letter spook agency in America: the CIA, the DIA, and the NRO. There were a total of thirty people in our class. Half of them were newly minted Senior Foreign Service Officers from the State Department.

The goal of the Senior Seminar was to take leaders from all branches of government involved in foreign affairs and immerse them together in a learning experience. We got to know each other, and learned what each of us did within the foreign affairs community. We studied leadership, and how America works to solve problems in the United States.

The Seminar was conceived under the Eisenhower administration. We met at FSI on the third floor of the oldest building on the campus. The building was used as a dormitory during the war. There were pictures on the walls of every class since the early 1950s. The pictures reflected the passage of time, from the beginning when everyone in the class was male and white, to recent classes that revealed how diverse classes had become. The Seminar started in August. Our first trip was to Seattle where I lived before joining USAID. I took all the military guys and several non-State classmates to a Mariners game. It was a great bonding experience.

On our first day back, the Director of the Seminar, Aurelia Brazeal, announced there would be elections that afternoon to elect a president of the class. Her announcement took everyone by surprise. When we broke for lunch, the military guys came up to me and told me I should run for president. We joked around and I said OK. Then I then sent an email to the class saying I had been drafted by the military to run for president, and my campaign pledge was: "beer on every bus".

Almost immediately after I sent the email, the phone rang in our office. It was Aurelia Brazeal. She demanded that I go see her immediately. When I got to her office she was livid. She told me the Inspector General had just done an audit of the Senior Seminar.

The audit's findings questioned the worth of the Senior Seminar. The auditors felt the Seminar was a lark. They saw no real benefit from all the costly travel it entailed. They noted that several participants retired right after graduation, eliminating any long term benefit from the training. They also noted that in some instances, classmates had affairs which destroyed their marriages.

I told her I wasn't aware of the audit and apologized for my email. I headed back to the lecture hall and watched as the State Department nominated four different people to be the president. The military nominated me. The 15 State Department classmates split their votes between the four State candidates. and I snuck through to win.

We all spent a year traveling and learning together. It was an amazing experience. We went all the way up to the Arctic Circle to see the footprint of mining oil on the tundra.

oil. We went down to Miami to see the footprint of immigration coming from the south. We went to Boston to interview Eli Weisel on the holocaust. We spent an afternoon alone with Oprah Winfrey in her studio. All travel was organized by us for us. Trip planning, itineraries and people or sites to see were developed by committees of classmates. Different people were selected to plan trips to the north, south, east and west. Someone would say: "let's see Oprah in Chicago" and then people would figure out how to do it. We had amazing access, especially when people knew we were from the State Department. There were several structured activities. We all went to Indiana to see how the American farm system worked. We were split into groups of two-three people and spent a day and a night living with farming families.

Every person who was a member of the class was required to show the class how their agency functioned in the foreign affairs community. We went to military bases around America and visited most major institutions like the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and National Reconnaissance Organization (NRO) where we had all-day briefings on their history, and how they functioned.

There were a core set of people invited by the Senior Seminar leadership who came and presented lectures on leadership while we were in Washington.

Everyone had to do a volunteer experience. I spent a week in a D.C. church working at a food bank.

Finally, we were given a month to write a paper on a topic of interest to us. I went to the west coast and interviewed senior managers in the Gates and Packard Foundations and wrote a paper describing the rising influence of private foundations on international development overseas.

The whole experience allowed us all to understand what each other and our respective agencies did to support United States foreign policy. We spend a lot of time traveling and witnessing amazing things together. We became brothers and sisters. We bonded, trusted in each other, and formed a deep collective friendship that continues to this day.

Q: In many ways, even if only indirectly, it was a form of senior management training; it taught folks how to mobilize others.

ECKERSON: It was all about leadership. We were the new leaders, learning about how leadership works. In Washington, we had a range of government leaders, from the head of OMB to the USAID Administrator, give lectures, and then engage in thought provoking question and answer sessions.

In the field we looked at leadership through the lens of how people in cities and towns across America were solving problems dealing with poverty, racism, and access to quality education. We also saw up close and personal how our military services train and operate.

At the end of the seminar I learned that the president of the class was required to give the graduation address. Had I known that at the beginning of the seminar, I'm not sure I would have run for president. There were no graduation addresses on file from previous seminars. I was searching in vain for what to say while my classmates were off celebrating their graduation.

The graduation ceremony for the Senior Seminar is a big deal. It is always held in the Benjamin Franklin Room of the State Department. Many attendees are members from previous seminars who have climbed to the highest ranks of senior government leadership. The Secretary of State gives the keynote address.

I sat on stage with the Director of the Seminar and Colin Powell walked up and shook our hands. His speech writer took his leatherbound speech and placed it on the lectern.

I was announced as the president of the class and walked to the lectern and gave my speech. I said that our class had members from all agencies involved in the foreign affairs of the United States. I talked about how we saw Eli Wiesel in Boston and learned about the Holocaust. I explained how we went south to understand the racial history of where the blues came from. I told about how we looked at the issue of poverty in Jackson, Mississippi. I traced what we did and what we learned. In the end, I likened our class to an all-star sports team. I said we came together, and we played a great game. But more importantly, I felt we were always going to be joined together by this experience.

Everyone clapped, and then Colin Powell stood up, walked up to me and shook my hand. He continued on to the podium, took the leatherbound speech and placed it under the lectern. Then he proceeded to talk about when he had the rank of major, he worked with majors from all nations in Europe in conferences and training sessions to solve military problems affecting their countries. He went on to say all the majors he worked with eventually became generals. He added the bond they formed and the trust they had in one another served them and their countries well in serious situations later in life.

Powell's aide came up to me later and thanked me. He told me Powell loves it when he can riff off a good speech.

The end of my Senior Seminar story is sad, unfortunately. Fast forward a year later. I attended the graduation ceremony of the forty-fourth seminar, the class after ours in the same Benjamin Franklin Room. This time, Colin Powell didn't attend. He was represented by the Under Secretary of Management.

Q: Armitage?

ECKERSON: No, it was Grant Greene. He was one of the generals along with Armitage that Colin Powell brought to State to help him in his new job. Greene hated USAID.

Anyway, Greene stood there, and listened to the president of the senior seminar give his speech. Clearly, the guy had found my old speech and modeled his after it.

But, his was more geared to “let the good times roll”. He said his class went to a bar in Chicago and heard great blues. He talked about the fabulous food they ate in New Orleans. His speech was all about having a fantastic time. He did not talk about anything substantive that they did.

Grant Greene gave a few mundane remarks, and the ceremony was over. Greene immediately went back to Colin Powell and told him what he witnessed. He told him he felt the Senior Seminar was a waste of State Department money. Powell agreed. Greene then went over to Foreign Service Institute and told them to shut the Senior Seminar down.

That was the end of the Senior Seminar. State changed the way they did leadership training after that. They broke their training into short segments that their officers take as they get promoted. There is no long-term leadership training anymore.

There still is a Senior Seminar Alumni Association, the SSAA. Most of us are \$20 a year, dues paying members. They have an annual newsletter that tells what alumni are doing, and who has died. They sponsor a lecture every summer at the Dacor House. But, it is just a matter of time before that too, will go.

Q: That's too bad. The fellow who looked at your speech as the model didn't quite get the point.

AID/Washington, Coordinator for New Entry Professional Training Program, 2001

ECKERSON: I never bid on my next assignment while I was in the senior Seminar. When it ended, I didn't have a job and was placed on the compliment. I went to HR and talked to the head of Executive Placement. I told him I just wanted to hang out for a while in Washington and try to decide what to do next. He told me there was an FS-01 job that had just been created to run the New Entry Professional Program. It sounded like a good fit, and they slotted me into the position.

I began my assignment in September 2011. I was working at the Ronald Reagan Building in the Human Resources Office. On the first day of our training program, 30 young newcomers to the Agency were seated in a conference room at the RRB. I was about to address them when the public address system announced a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center in New York City. The next announcement a few minutes later announced a plane had crashed into the Pentagon. Everyone was told to leave the building. It was an incredibly powerful moment. Were you in Washington then, Carol?

Q: No.

ECKERSON: Most everyone left the building. I stayed along with several others and watched everything unfold on TV. It was an amazing sight outside. 14th Street filled curb to curb with a slow parade of people walking across the bridge to Virginia. No one was

driving a car. You could see smoke coming from the Pentagon. The air was acrid with the smell of burning electrical wire.

Q: Dave, to just go backwards again, to put some context here. The New Entry Professional program came about when leadership saw the critical need to get new blood into the agency and to expand the USAID foreign service.

ECKERSON: Exactly. Andrew Natsios was the Administrator at the time, and he convinced Congressional staff and the OMB that we needed to ramp up hiring. There had been a hiring freeze for several years. You could tell when you walked down the corridors of the RRB that we needed an infusion of young talent. The halls were filled with middle-aged or old men and women. There were hardly any young faces around.

Congress gave us the ability to hire to attrition, which was about 100 people a year. We started with classes of around thirty people, three times a year. We developed a curriculum that explained the nuts and bolts of how the Agency develops strategies and programs; how our budget cycle works, and how the Agency is structured. We had senior leaders in the Agency deliver all aspects of the curriculum. We also hired several retirees to coach NEPs in their respective backstops, and mentor them during their first years in the Agency. Finally, we made all the NEPs rotate through short term assignments in different Bureaus. Each rotation was tailored to their particular need and experience before they were assigned to Missions in the field.

It wasn't long before several senior managers in Washington learned that I was hiding out in HR in an FS-01 job. George Wachtenheim was the first to call me to his Office and ask me why I was in an FS-01 job when I was a Senior Foreign Service Officer. He told me I needed to do something more appropriate to my rank. He told me to go talk to Janet Ballantyne, who I knew well when she was the Nicaragua Mission Director, and I was her Desk Officer in Washington.

Janet was the Counselor to the Administrator. At Natsios' request, she was in the process of carrying out a review of every program in the Agency. The review was intense. Every Regional Bureau and Central Bureau came before us and presented their programs. We would drill into their presentations, and question different aspects of what they were doing. Our principal aim was to identify programs that performed well, and those that did not. We also looked at finding levels, and how fast or slow funds were being spent.

The reviews lasted several months. Janet and I sat at the head of a conference table, and Bureau staff ringed the table and all the seats along the walls. It was like a packed courthouse, waiting for us to question and judge what they were doing. Do you remember them? They were a big deal at the time.

Q: I was overseas, but I heard of it. Then, I came into the counselor job and saw some of the remains of the portfolio reviews.

ECKERSON: Natsios was very interested in how AID did business, and if we were structured to do our work effectively. The results of the portfolio review led him to create a re-reorganization working group. He put me in charge of the working group.

Q: So you did a year or so as the New Entry Training Coordinator. And then morphed into this new role that was part of PPC?

ECKERSON: I was not assigned yet to PPC. I did all of this work while I ran the NEP program.

Q: This was even while you were still, theoretically the New Entry Training Coordinator, you were doing these things?

AID/Washington, PPC Bureau, Director, Office of Strategic and Program Planning, 2002 – 2004

ECKERSON: Yes. But after a few months, HR assigned me to PPC to run the Strategic and Program Planning Office.

When I got to PPC, they were in the process of moving the budget function back into the Bureau and linking back again to strategic planning and programing. It was a real challenge, sorta like putting Humpty Dumpty back together again.

Administrator Natsios was a Republican under the Bush Administration, and he had total support of our Congressional overseers. He wanted to make the Agency more strategic and better structured to improve the effectiveness of our programs.

When I started looking at how the Agency was organized, it was not clear why some Missions had far more staff than others to manage the same amount of funds. Morocco was an extreme outlier. The Mission had twelve direct hires to manage ten million dollars.

There was a reason, and it wasn't strategic. Rabat has one of the best International Schools in the world, and many USAID families want to be there. It was the way it had always been, and nobody thought to challenge it.

Natsios basically told me to do two things. He wanted me to align the workforce strategically in accordance with the budget. He also wanted me to look at our regional programs and find a way to use them more effectively.

Q: And to rationalize the workforce.

ECKERSON: Yes. The result of all the analysis we did in the working groups led to a staffing template that was quite contentious.

But, the Joint State-USAID Strategic Plan was even more contentious. Under the Bush Administration, there was an initiative called the President's Management Agenda to

improve management in the federal government. OMB told State and USAID that they could no longer have separate strategic plans. Since 1999, Jesse Helms forced the USAID Administrator to report to the Secretary of State. State Department and USAID were now integrated in their missions. They needed to develop a joint strategic plan.

Natsios told me I needed to work with State and get it done. My task was viewed by many in the Agency as selling out to State. There were fears the next step would fold us into the State Department.

It just so happened my counterpart in State assigned to lead the joint planning effort was one of my former classmates in the Senior Seminar. He too, was criticized by his State colleagues for working with us. Folks in State wanted nothing to do with USAID in their strategic planning process.

Sid Kaplan and I were good friends. We were both in senior positions in our respective organizations. We trusted each other, thanks to all we went through together in the Seminar.

It took us four months to develop the joint strategic plan. We created joint working groups to hammer out various sections of the plan. Sid and I chaired all the meetings with USAID Deputy Assistant Administrators and Deputy Assistant Secretaries from State. To the consternation of many in State and USAID, we created a Joint Policy Council and a Joint Management Council to oversee implementation of the plan. The Councils, composed of senior managers from State and USAID were tasked with resolving issues that arise in the implementation of the joint strategic plan. The Councils were also mandated to coordinate policy in countries where we work, and to coordinate the management side of the equation.

Sid and I were cursed and reviled by our colleagues. But we did it. We created the first Joint State-USAID Strategic Plan, and it was approved by our respective bosses and the OMB.

Q: I do remember the joint strategic plan. In fact, I think I came across a glossy copy of it recently in some papers of mine.

ECKERSON: Yeah. Well, OMB loved it. It gave USAID a lot of credibility in some of our later discussions.

Q: Actually, it was a very good document. And I think it ended up being very helpful, later, when the further integration happened. You created an initial framework for that.

ECKERSON: Which I think helped to preserve some critical aspects of our autonomy from State when other battles over integration came to pass.

Q: Just before you go on, were you involved at all in the so-called White Paper during the Natsios period? Barbara Turner, the DAA in PPC was one of the leads. It categorized countries, e.g., as fragile, middle income, high security interest, etc.

ECKERSON: Barbara Turner was my boss.

Q: Right. Were you involved with that white paper?

ECKERSON: I was involved in everything. It was all linked to the business model that we created from the work we did on reorganization, regionalization, and workforce planning.

The regional platform analysis we did was the final link to pulling everything together. We sent teams to all the regional missions in the field. We also went to countries serviced by them.

I went with Tom Rishoi and Dave Cohen to Almaty, Serbia and Ghana. Other teams went to Asia and Latin America. When all got back to Washington we looked at our observations and data and realized there was not a “one size fits all” solution. Some factors were critical. You needed to have regional missions where there were good airline connections. You needed enough staff in the missions to service the demand from Missions, especially Contracts, Controllers, and Executive Officers. Regional programs were more problematic. Many were technical specific and linked to Congressional earmarks. It was not clear how effective they were, given the time and resources they required. Several missions were not even aware of regional programs operating in their countries.

We crunched all the numbers, and weeded out extraneous factors to determine what should constitute the relative size of a mission. Then we analyzed every mission in the world in relation to their operational year budgets, USDH staffing levels, and the number and complexity of the programs they managed.

Based on our analysis, we created a staffing template that classified every Mission in the Agency as either small, medium or large. The template proposed USDH staffing levels for each category of mission. We presented the staffing template to Natsios and he loved it. We presented it to the OMB and they loved it as well, and said they were going to use it as a model for other Federal Agencies to emulate.

All the regional bureaus and missions in the Agency hated it. The template went viral after we rolled it out to a few missions to get their reaction to it. No mission in the world wanted AID/W to tell them what their staffing levels should be based on a cookie cutter formula. The template became known as “Eckerson’s Template”. I was cursed in mission staff meetings around the world. People still link my name with that damn template.

I worked very closely with Rose Marie Depp in all the work I did in PPC on staffing. Rose Marie was the head of the Human Resources Office. She was part of the

Management Bureau, and deeply involved in creating a new operational model for human resources in the Agency. The administration named John Marshall, a political appointee, to run the Management Bureau. He had been on the IBM team that evaluated the New Management System fiasco that delivered nothing from a \$100 million investment under Brian Atwood's re-organization initiative.

Rose Marie Depp did not like John Marshall. John Marshall did not like Rose Marie Depp. Rose Marie was a very principled Officer, and she had no tolerance for some of the things Marshall wanted her to do. She was also not afraid to tell him how she felt.

Rose Marie and Marshall got into a huge pissing match in a meeting on a Friday morning. That afternoon, Rose Marie sent an email to Natsios and told him she was retiring. She could not work for Marshall any longer.

She came to work the following Monday, cleaned out her Office, and left the Agency the same day.

AID/Washington, Director, Office of Human Resources, 2004 - 2006

When Rose Marie left, Natsios called me into his office. He told me her job was critical to his desire to reform the Agency. He felt that I was the best person to run the HR Office, given all I had been doing.

I told him that the HR job was the worst assignment possible for a Senior Foreign Service Officer. It was a dead end, especially since it was an Office under the Management Bureau. I asked him if he could upgrade the Office to a Bureau, or at least unleash it from the Management Bureau, and allow me to report directly to him.

Natsios told me that the OMB was trying to flatten the organizational structure of the Agency. But, he told me I would have a very important title in the Federal government. As head of the USAID Human Resources Office, I would be one of only thirteen Chief Human Capital Officers (CHCO) in the Federal government.

I had no choice. I emptied my office in PPC that was down the hall from the Administrator's suite. I wheeled my stuff into an elevator and went down to the second floor into an Office that everyone in the Agency felt was worthless.

Q: A quick question. It's interesting that AID is still trying to rationalize the placement of personnel. Is it still an issue because it's so hard. Or, is it because it's hard to make change? Or is it because a workforce is never as mobile and as flexible as you would want it to be? What drives the difficulty in making rational decisions?

ECKERSON: Well, the dynamic is that one size never fits all. Natsios was all in on one size fits all. He was former military. He told me to implement the staffing template immediately for every Mission in the world.

I told him that was not a good idea. I proposed we let Regional Bureaus decide individual mission staffing levels but hold them to what the template gives them for the total number of staff in the region. If the Africa Bureau thinks they need more staff in Ethiopia than projected, then they can add staff there. However, they have to reduce staff elsewhere and stay within the total number projected for the region.

He really wanted to have absolute control over the numbers. But, to his credit, he agreed with me.

Q: The bureaus then were able to manage it in a way that worked out best for the individual bureau?

ECKERSON: Yes, but it wasn't perfect or easy. The staffing level in bloated Morocco went down. There was better rationalization of services from some regional missions. We sorted out appropriate roles between Ghana and Senegal in West Africa serving French and English-speaking countries.

It was a serious attempt in our Agency's history to rationalize how we did business. It was driven by the OMB, and the like-minded vision of Natsios to be more rational in how we allocate our workforce and our resources.

Q: It was a heroic effort. And I think it did make some progress, but probably not as much as you all would have liked to have seen.

ECKERSON: Well, everything got turned upside down when we went into Iraq and Afghanistan and had to staff up those two missions. That was a huge challenge when I was running HR.

Q: Having to recruit for those new priorities?

ECKERSON: The challenge was finding incentives to staff up missions where most folks didn't want to go.

Q: How were those incentives determined?

ECKERSON: We looked at what other Agencies were doing. We brain-stormed. We spent a lot of time trying to figure it out.

Q: And were ours similar to what State was doing or did we have some differences?

ECKERSON: We were in the same boat. The Congress and the Military were demanding we put more staff in the missions. We had to find a way to do it.

Q: Okay. Let's stop for now and get back into the HR issues next time.

Q: This is our continuing interview for David Eckerson. Today is November 7, 2022. When we last spoke, you were the Director of the Office of Human Resources in AID. We spoke about some of the work you did on templates for mission staffing. And we agreed that we would next talk about the challenge of staffing for Afghanistan and Iraq. If you can tell us about how you managed to lead us through that complex ordeal.

ECKERSON: Staffing Iraq and Afghanistan was probably one of the biggest challenges I faced in HR. And frankly, we got lucky.

Dennis Diamond was our lawyer in HR. Dennis was very close to Bob Lester. Bob Lester was the Agency's point of contact with Congress. His main interlocutor in Congress was Charlie Flickner. When I arrived in HR, Charlie Flickner was about to retire.

Q: And he was on the House Appropriations Committee.

ECKERSON: Charlie was the guy AID always dealt with on the Appropriations Committee to get what we wanted. When Flickner announced he was retiring, he said to Lester that he wanted to give USAID a gift before he left.

We needed staff, but we didn't have any operating expense funds required to bring on more US Direct Hires. Dennis and Lester knew the Foreign Service Act backwards and forwards. We needed Officers who were direct hires so they could have all the authorities needed to run programs. Personal Services Contractors (PSCs) would not suffice.

Lester and Dennis decided to request Congressional authority to hire Foreign Service Limited officers (FSLs), a category all of us had never heard about. They were limited career officers, and their terms expired after five years. They could not be extended, and the Foreign Service Act stipulated they could only be hired to serve overseas. But, they too, had to be funded from operating expense funds.

Lester and Dennis convinced Flickner to give us the authority in our appropriations bill to use program funds to hire FSLs. The FSLs could be posted overseas or in Washington. In the first year, we were given 85 FSL positions for critical priority posts overseas. In the second year, we could hire 100 FSLs for overseas positions, and 75 for positions in Washington.

The FSL hiring authority was huge. It allowed them to fill positions on provincial reconstruction teams that were impossible to fill. No USDHs wanted to serve on them, and they were critical to our development program. The Department of Defense and the Department of State were hammering us to force USDHs to fill those positions.

Our authority to hire FSLs also allowed us to competitively select candidates for the positions. We set up a hiring team linked to the Afghan Task Force in Washington and sent out worldwide job announcements for the positions. Since the candidates were competitively selected, we were allowed to say that if they performed well, they would be

eligible for conversion into the Foreign Service after two years in the field. This was critical to get people to apply to serve on very dangerous reconstruction teams, since they would then have a chance to get into Foreign Service.

Q: And were some of those people then who were bidding personal services contractors already working in AID missions?

ECKERSON: Yes. In fact, that was probably one of the major incentives to get PSCs into the Foreign Service.

Besides the FSL authority, we needed incentives for USDHs to go to Iraq and Afghanistan as well. FSLs could not fill all our positions. There were also other positions in the world we had trouble filling that were critical to our national security interests and development needs.

So, we created the concept of Critical Priority Posts. USDHs had to be selected to fill these positions in the annual bidding process before any other positions were announced and filled.

To sweeten the Critical Priority Post pot, we told all prospective bidders that when their tours of duty were over, we would do our best to give them their first choice when bidding on their next assignment.

Natsios and I presented all these incentives at an Agency-wide all hands meeting. There was a lot of discussion, and a “no holds barred” atmosphere. In the end, everyone seemed to understand what was at stake, and how we were trying to overcome the staffing challenges.

Q: One of the other things that was done was the active recruitment of third country nationals. They were encouraging senior FSNs in missions around the world to become third country nationals to work in either Iraq or Afghanistan. Was that on your watch or had that happened earlier?

ECKERSON: It was pretty much on my watch. We've always had that category. But, there were far more open positions for TCNs in Iraq and Afghanistan than in other Missions around the world. They paid very well, given the danger pay, and positions were in high demand. We announced all the TCN jobs worldwide, and those jobs allowed us to assign less USDH staff to Critical Priority Posts as well.

Q: And very good people went; they left the missions they were in and took advantage of that opportunity.

ECKERSON: I lost several good FSNs to TCN positions in Critical Priority Posts when I was the Mission Director in Uganda.

Q: Can I ask another question or two about staffing? Much later issues were raised about staff care and PTSD. Was there any discussion of that early on?

ECKERSON: Are you talking about the Staff Care contract?

Q: The staff care needs for people serving in difficult environments in both places?

ECKERSON: Well, when I got to HR there was only one person who did that for the whole Agency. You know her. Everyone did. God bless Martha Reese ... she just passed.

While I was in HR we recognized the huge requirement to provide support for the emotional and mental health needs of Agency staff. Martha did so much, but it was not enough, especially given the strain of critical priority posts.

Q: Right. But you were thinking about it early on.

ECKERSON: Absolutely. But we didn't have any money to fund a contract.

Q: And then she recommended you needed something more than just herself?

ECKERSON: Yes. She was the one who eventually developed the concept and the scope of work for the contract for staff care. I was no longer in HR when it happened.

Let me go back to where we left off when I started my work in HR. We had finished the staffing template that everyone in the Agency hated. When I got to HR we expanded the staffing template to become what we called the workforce planning model.

The workforce planning model was a tool we used to discuss our staffing budget to OMB. Mike Casella was our examiner, and I spent long hours with him over my career. The model was based on management units. The more units you had, the more staff you needed. We were able to demonstrate to Casella that we had many countries that had really big budgets, but some of the funds were just cash transfers to governments. We had other countries that had smaller budgets, but a lot of management intensive work. We tried to standardize how we analyzed each country's staffing needs. It wasn't perfect, but Casella loved it. It was a rational tool that demonstrated we needed more staff. As a result, OMB gave USAID a 25 percent increase in staffing that year because we could demonstrate we were rationally assigning our staff.

Q: The OMB increased the OE budget.

ECKERSON: Absolutely. If I remember right, we were given funds to hire 350 new staff above attrition. It was huge. I think we had dropped down to only 750 Foreign Service Officers in the Agency.

Staffing was the first issue I faced when I got to HR. But there were several other hot-button concerns that I had to address.

One of them was diversity. I learned there were a number of “affinity” groups that were created to address concerns felt by the Hispanic, LGBTQ, Asian, and Afro-American staff in the Agency. They were separate and distinct groups. I met with them all, and we decided to create a Diversity Council to bring all their concerns together.

Mosina Jordan created the initiative. I was tasked to make it happen.

Q: She was a DAA in the Latin American Bureau, and then she replaced me as counselor in the summer of 2005.

ECKERSON: It may have been under your watch. Do you remember when the Diversity Council was created?

Q: Yes. I was on the council initially.

ECKERSON: It became a powerful voice for diversity concerns. I think the Diversity Council was especially effective in finding ways to attract more diversity candidates to apply for positions as we ramped up staffing in the Agency.

I don't know if it still exists. I think it was folded into the Office of Civil Rights, when the Agency needed to create an independent office to ensure compliance with Equal Opportunity legislation.

Q: I'm not sure what happened to it. But, certainly the issue of diversity is even more important now than it was then. So, I think more people are paying attention to it. It's important to note that there was a very early effort back then.

My first six months in HR were intense. There were so many things I didn't know about the Human Resources Office, and the complex role it played in the Agency. Dennis Diamond and Frank McDonough were at my side constantly. They both had incredible knowledge of federal regulations, the Foreign Service Act, and the regulatory environment that guided our work.

I talked to everyone in the Office. We had several all-hands meetings to discuss what worked and didn't work supporting the needs of Foreign Service and Civil Service employees.

Based on what we learned, we created ten priority initiatives, and a set of actions for each one. They were all focused on improving the way we did business. They were also designed to hold ourselves accountable to our clients.

We developed a set of metrics to measure our success that we called HR ROCS. I can't remember what ROCS stood for.

Some of the actions we did were very controversial. Staff complained that they never had enough time to do their work. They wanted dedicated time every day to be free from meeting people so they could do their filing and paperwork.

I agreed and gave staff two hours every morning when they did not have to meet with people so they could get their other work done. We also created a single telephone line for incoming calls that went directly to secretaries. The secretaries would make appointments for employees and assign meetings to relevant HR staff. We kept track of all meeting requests, and whether or not they happened.

We actually locked the doors to the HR Office for two hours every morning. The whole idea centered on holding people accountable for what they did or did not do.

It was a great notion that completely failed. Knowing that they had two hours free from clients every morning, HR staff started coming in later and later to work.

I learned a lot about HR staff in the process. The majority of them were single, Afro American women who had problems with their kids, and problems with childcare. They had difficult lives, and complex choices to make every day. If they had a kid who was sick, and had no childcare, they had to stay home. If they had to go down to the courthouse to bail their teenager out of jail, or visit a teenager in jail, they didn't come to work.

More time in the morning without meetings led many of them to stay home to deal with constant domestic concerns.

While we did better in other areas, the locked door policy didn't last long. Employees complained that HR was locking them out from seeking services. I met with everyone, and we discussed the situation. They agreed it wasn't working out, and we went back to our original hours.

One of the other priorities we set was to improve services to Foreign Service Nationals in the field. I convinced Natsios to declare 2005 "The Year of the FSN". He thought it was a great idea, but he didn't give me any money.

Missions really liked the focus on FSNs. We were able to get them to fund three regional conferences in 2005 to discuss issues of concern to FSNs. We did one in Asia, one in Latin America, and one in Africa. Missions paid the per diem of their FSNs to attend the conferences. We found some money for Washington staff to travel to the field. In some cases, Missions paid our way. There were several issues that were universally raised in the conferences. All FSNs were concerned about their pensions. They raised issues about pay scales, promotions, and separation. Many of the issues were country-specific.

But, one issue of universal concern centered on comp time. It came up in every conference. FSNs were not given comp time if they worked on weekends or had to travel. Direct hires could get comp time for both. I raised the issue with the Human Resources

Office at the Department of State. My contacts there agreed FSNs deserved comp time and raised the issue with the Director General. The DG did not want to “reward” FSNs with comp time. She felt it was not the right thing to do. I raised the issue with Mosina, who was the Agency Counselor at the time. She met with the Bureau for Management at State and convinced them that it was an equity issue that was demoralizing FSN staff in both State and USAID. The Management Bureau agreed with Mosina and issued a policy notice saying that FSNs in State and USAID could get comp time for working on weekends and travel.

Q: That was a big accomplishment.

ECKERSON: Another good thing we did came about through the Management Council we created under the Joint Strategic Plan. As the head of HR, I represented USAID on the Council. My old nemesis, Pat Kennedy, represented State’s Management Bureau.

We had some very contentious discussions in several meetings of the Management Council. But, in one of the early meetings, we actually agreed on some things that were good for both State and USAID. John O’Rourke was a senior officer in the Human Resources Office at State. He was on the Council, and was the brother of Tom O’Rourke, a good friend of mine who worked at USAID. Tom died of a heart attack a year before I became head of HR. John and I got to be good friends after he learned I was close to his brother. I worked with John a lot on issues that bridged State and USAID interests.

Spousal employment overseas was important to both our organizations. Eligible family members needed jobs at the Embassy and at USAID. I felt USAID spouses should be on the same footing as State Department spouses. The problem was available jobs and USAID positions were not classified as EFM positions. John and I convinced the Management Council to allow USAID to create EFM positions. We sent out a joint cable to all USAID Missions saying that if they had funds to create positions graded GS 7 or below, they could be classified as EFM positions in the Embassy.

Q: There were assistant project manager positions, I think.

ECKERSON: Yes, and a lot of Missions created positions that State and USAID spouses filled. It was a win/win for everyone. More spouses got jobs. Salaries were low, but since they were EFM positions, you gained priority hiring status for any GS position in the federal government when you returned to the United States.

On another front, the Agency faced an operating expense crisis in 2005 that was exacerbated by the additional costs we incurred sending all our new junior officers overseas. At the same time, we had many Personal Services Contractors (PSCs) in Missions that could be replaced with our growing cadre of junior officers, many of whom had been PSCs. Besides PSCs, we had at least twelve different categories of program funded non direct hire positions in Missions overseas.

Thanks to Dennis Diamond, we were able to convince our appropriators in Congress to allow us to support our junior officers below the grade of FS-04 with program funds.

The Junior Officer Program Authority (JOPA) that Dennis negotiated required Missions to eliminate a program funded non-US direct hire position in order to use program funds to support junior officers in the field. Basically, the junior officer salaries were paid with OE, but costs to pay for their housing, educational expenses, and other overseas costs could be program funded under the new authority.

Q: They were direct hire employees, but you were still able to program fund them? And they weren't FSLs, they were regular Foreign Service officers?

ECKERSON: Correct.

Q: Right. But this was additional program funding authority for direct hires.

ECKERSON: Yes, and it worked very well with our technical officers in health, agriculture and education. It was more difficult for Contacts, Controller and Executive Officers, since most of them couldn't be PSCs due to the nature of their work.

The JPA authority saved the agency almost \$10 million a year. It provided critical support to the Agency when we faced a severe OE shortfall.

There was a funky little catch to how it worked in the field. Several Missions had PSC positions approved by the Ambassador, but were not filled. Those Missions were able to eliminate those vacant positions and fill them with junior officers. This allowed us to get even more officers in the field for our programs.

Q: So, was this just during the period of their first tours? These Development Leadership Initiative folks, only their first tour could be program funded?

ECKERSON: Yes, unless they remained at FS-4 or below after their first tour.

That was another thing that we changed. Many junior officers came in at the level FS 6. Some of them had been making far more money in their previous jobs. It was a challenge to convince some of them to accept making less money. It became very demoralizing if they weren't promoted quickly.

Boards are given a finite number of people they can promote every year. Because of that, some officers were not being promoted. We changed the rules, and allowed automatic promotions from FS6 to FS 5, and FS 5 to FS 4. There was a requirement for raters to certify the officers were ready for promotion. The change really unclogged the system. It also saved the promotion boards a lot of work.

Q: Interesting, that's the way it was when I was an intern. Our first two promotions were automatic unless you screwed up.

ECKERSON: Right. I'm not sure why it changed, but we put it back the way it was. At the same time, I remember all the work we did to resurrect the Agency memorial plaque.

Q: Because there had been an old plaque in the State Department building fifth floor conference room with names of USAID staff who had lost their lives. It was in the room where the swearing-in ceremonies used to be?

ECKERSON: Yes.

Q: And then when the AID moved to the Reagan Building, that plaque didn't come along, and there wasn't anything. Yes, I do recall that. In fact, you and I, at the ceremony, read off all the names.

ECKERSON: Yes, that's right.

Q: But anyway, you were going to describe how you went back and did that. So please go ahead.

ECKERSON: I just remember all the work involved determining who would be on the plaque, especially the ones that may have been spooks, but they were under our payroll in Vietnam. I just remember it was fraught with complications.

Q: It was a very interesting design for the plaque. Did HR arrange for that as well? If you recall, it wasn't just a plaque. It was a very interesting pattern, and it's still on the wall in the Reagan building.

ECKERSON: I really don't remember, but you're right about that.

I want to go back to another thing we did on the Management Council. In the beginning, it was pretty effective promoting dialogue, and getting some things done. State had a problem recruiting good management officers. We felt that in some cases that State had jobs that might appeal to some of our officers. So, we agreed to identify jobs that could be posted on each other's bid list for cross-over assignments.

Steve Callahan was the USAID officer to cross over to State to be the Management Officer in Peru. His assignment was really groundbreaking. But, USAID got very few bids from State officers. Several of our junior EXOs went to State. Some State officers bid on DG positions we posted, but I don't think any were selected. The cross-over assignment idea fizzled out after a few rounds of bidding. State wanted to go all in to poach our EXOs, and our folks realized their promotion potential was far greater working in USAID than in State.

Q: Well, it probably did work in some good cases. But when you departed, there wasn't an owner for it anymore. It probably just dissolved.

ECKERSON: Again, a lot of what I was able to accomplish on the Management Council was linked to folks who were in the Senior Seminar with me. Sid Kaplan was a senior manager in the Policy Bureau, and Linda Tagliatella was a senior manager in the Human Resources Office at State. There was also a reservoir of senior seminar classmates serving as Ambassadors all over the world. They were very helpful when issues arose between State and USAID in their countries

Q: Did your time in the Senior Seminar make the HR director job easier, especially because of the big issues with State?

ECKERSON: Absolutely. We were able to work hand in hand, trust in one another, and figure out how to resolve contentious issues.

My wife, Connie was also a key factor in my success harmonizing relations between USAID and State. When we came back from Ethiopia, Connie got a job as the Director of the Overseas Briefing Center (OBC) at the Foreign Service Institute. One of her major accomplishments was automating information that explained what life was like at every Embassy around the world. She turned piles of paper and reports that people had to read at the Briefing Center into electronic files that could be read anywhere in the world on State's internal website.

She also solicited videos to show what it was like to live and work at different Embassies. She developed a questionnaire that Foreign Service Officers filled out to describe housing conditions, what life was like for families, for single people, and other relevant areas of interest at any given post.

The whole system was designed to give Foreign Service Officers information about the Embassy and countries where they might want to go. It was a great recruitment tool for State

Connie convinced State to allow USAID Foreign Service Officers access to the Department's internal website. A worldwide notice was issued that provided AID officers with a link to all the Overseas Briefing Center information. The USAID link to OBC information still exists, and continues to help both State and USAID officers decide what Posts are of interest to them.

It was a pretty interesting time in our lives. We were both in the human resources realm, on different sides of the street.

Q: I recall that being used also for recruitment for Iraq and Afghanistan. I remember seeing some videos of what it was like, where people were living.

ECKERSON: That was the whole purpose. Connie was constantly telling Ambassadors this information was one of the best things they have to recruit people to their Embassy. If they took it seriously, and provided good information, they would attract the best officers.

Q: Can ask another question related to that, but it's the opposite side of the coin. I can remember being at posts when they were trying to justify allowances. They described the posts as awful to try to justify the hardship allowances. Did HR or the joint management council ever look at that issue?

ECKERSON: I don't think the Management Council ever addressed hardship allowances on my watch. Usually hardship allowances are based on data from market surveys and cost of living data.

However, for Afghanistan we went directly to our appropriators and requested they allow us to raise the hardship allowance from 25% to 35%. We justified it by our need to have a better incentive to recruit people to serve in Kabul.

We got the hardship allowance raised to 35%, but State remained at 25%. State went ballistic. It was not pretty. It took them a year to get their allowance raised. In the meantime, we were able to fill nearly all our positions. Money was a key factor. Folks who served in Afghanistan made a lot of money.

As the Agency's Chief Human Capital Officer (CHCO) I began attending monthly meetings with all the CHCOs in the Federal government. I realized that the top priority of every agency around the table was transforming their paper filing systems into electronic filing systems.

USAID was woefully way behind the curve, especially in the Human Resources Office. Our file room for all the Foreign Service personnel files was staffed by one person and assisted by two mentally handicapped staff. All the files were locked up. We would unlock the room if anyone wanted to look at their files. It was very inconvenient.

I convinced Natsios that we were at serious risk if there was ever a fire, and all our personnel files went up in smoke. Our whole promotion process was tied to paper personnel files being read by the Boards. If they were ever destroyed, we would have no basis to promote anyone.

Natsios gave me \$600,000, and we put it into a contract with an Office of Personnel Management firm specializing in moving paper systems to electronic systems. It took a year to do the work. The contractor boxed all the files up in batches and carted them off to be scanned at another location. It was a nightmare. We found lunch bags with rotten peanut butter and jelly sandwiches stuffed behind the filing cabinets. We found files of people who had been retired for 15 years. Normally, we are supposed to send those files to St. Louis for long term storage the year a person retires.

When we finally finished the work, members of the first review board to use the electronic files were not happy. They demanded paper files, and we had to print records for every officer in the Agency for them. It took several years before Board members would read electronic files. But now, everything is in electronic form. Awards given at

post are entered immediately into the system. The system is light years better than what it used to be. The transformation of the filing system may have been my biggest accomplishment in HR.

Q: To get all of that digitized and to get AID into the twenty-first century.

ECKERSON: It was a challenge.

By the way, I also took some of the funds Andrew gave us to digitize the evaluation files and used them to buy into a learning management system (LMS). The LMS is still operating and has been enhanced significantly. When we first rolled it out, it was bare bones, very simplistic.

But during the Year of the FSN, another issue that consistently came up was a desire for Mission drivers to learn English. So, we created an online English course in the LMS that became available to Missions around the world. They made remarkable use of it. Many missions put computers in driver waiting rooms so chauffeurs could sit and practice English while awaiting their next job. It was pretty cool.

Another challenge I faced was Doug Aller, the Executive Secretary and White House Liaison in the USAID Front Office. Aller was an uber Republican, a conservative, and he hated the TAACS (Technical Assistance and Advisors in Child Survival) advisers. He told me he wanted the program eliminated.

Q: For the record, I might say that one of the main implementers of that program also worked in the reproductive health area.

ECKERSON: That was the reason they wanted it to go. He and other conservative Republicans did not like the contractor since it was a major player in the family planning arena. I can remember sitting with all the TAACS advisers in a meeting when I told them USAID was ending their program. It was not pretty. They were all very senior technical people, and highly respected in the health sector. We tried to keep as many as possible by moving them to PSC jobs, or getting them Foreign Service limited appointments, especially those who were serving in Washington.

By the way, the FSL authority is still active, and used almost exclusively in Washington now. It is also very controversial since many Foreign Service Limited appointments are being used to hire political appointees. This goes against the traditional hiring mechanism of an Administratively Determined (AD) appointment for political staff.

Q: Interesting. Does AID have a cap on the number of AD appointments it can do?

ECKERSON: Yes.

Q: That's how they exceed the cap by doing FSL appointments. That's a real abuse of the system, but probably bipartisan abuse, I would assume.

ECKERSON: Yes, exactly.

Another issue I had to resolve was sort of quirky, but interesting. Before we invaded Iraq in 2003, the military and USAID developed a secret plan to use our development assistance to stand up a new government after the invasion. Tim Beans was the head of Contracts for AID in Washington. He was an amazing officer, and actually pre-competed contracts before the invasion began, so that our contractors were mobilized immediately when all the fighting stopped.

Tim had been in Washington for a long time, and put in several bids to be posted overseas. Natsios refused to let him go. He wanted Tim to stay in Washington and manage the Iraq contracts. The Promotion Boards were about to meet, and Tim would be a prime candidate for promotion into the Senior Foreign Service. However, to be eligible to be promoted to senior rank of Counselor, you have to have eight years of overseas service.

Tim only had six years overseas experience. If he went overseas he would have a shot at promotion in his second year. By not being able to go, he would have to serve two years in Washington, then two more years in the field before being able to be promoted.

It was not fair. So, we created an amendment to the rules that became known as the Beans amendment. The amendment stated that if someone had been in Washington for six years and bids on an overseas assignment, and the Administrator determines you cannot go overseas because you're needed domestically, then you can go before the promotion board.

Q: Because he was a Foreign Service Officer contracting officer.

ECKERSON: It could be any Foreign Service Officer. But, the key point is that officer must bid on an assignment and not be allowed to go.

The Foreign Service Union went ballistic over the amendment. They had to agree to it and didn't. It became very ugly. We took the case to the Impasse Board of the National Labor Relations Board. And we won, which we didn't think we would.

Q: Because one had to have been overseas for a certain number of years to be promoted? And that was the constraint?

ECKERSON: Exactly. You had to have been overseas eight years before you could be promoted into the Senior Foreign Service. Beans had been ranked number one for promotion by the Boards for three years in a row. But, he couldn't be promoted.

The rule didn't go into effect until he had been in Washington for two years and then went to Thailand. He never benefited from it. And to date, I don't think anybody has.

We actually stopped someone from trying to use the amendment when Randy Tobias was the Administrator. Tobias wanted to do a lot of things that were not legal, and I was the one that had to say no. Randy Tobias did not like me at all. Especially when he tried to invoke the Beans rule for one of his favorite employees, and I refused to accept it.

He wrote a letter saying his employee needed to stay in Washington to work on critical health activities. But, the woman in question never bothered to bid on an overseas position. I denied her request. Tobias was incensed, and I became his enemy.

On another front, I re-organized the Human Resources Office. There wasn't a clear distinction between staffers working to support Foreign Service officers and those who supported GS employees. I felt we needed more clarity in how HR staff supported all employees in the Agency.

Q: So, what did you do?

ECKERSON: I created a Foreign Service Division and a GS Division. Each Division reported to a Division Chief. The position of GS Division Chief was reclassified to a GS-15 and filled by a GS employee.

I created a separate position to manage support to Foreign Service officers and to Senior Foreign Service officers. I recruited Bill Martin to fill it, and when he retired, I recruited David Leong to fill it.

Q: That was to manage senior management positions?

ECKERSON: Yes. I felt someone needed to manage all aspects of the Foreign Service. Previously, support to Foreign Service officers was split between a team that managed the Senior Management selection process, and another team that supported Foreign Service Officers and the regular FS assignment process. I wanted to make sure all facets of support to the Foreign Service were under one chain of command.

Q: Let me just ask two questions. One, going back to Afghanistan and Iraq for a moment. We've interviewed a lot of people who were mission directors in both places, and almost all of them noted the difficulty of one-year tours, the multiple R&Rs, and the lack of continuity. When the decision was made to have one-year terms, did people think this would be the only way to attract staff? Did people consider whether this was a good way to implement a program?

ECKERSON: Well, the only thing I would say is with the FSLs, if you wanted to be considered for getting into the Foreign Service, on your FSL appointment, you had to be there for two years.

Q: Oh, okay. So that was an incentive for them to stay longer.

ECKERSON: Yes. We were able to recruit a lot of people through the FSL program. But, there was a concern that the FSLs we hired did not have the typical skills and experience of our USDH Foreign Service officers. Working on a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Afghanistan was not the same as serving as a health officer in Peru. Some FSLs who converted to USDH career officers had problems with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder throughout their careers. Others were not comfortable working in countries that were not in conflict. The whole goal of the FSL authority was to fill critical positions in Afghanistan, and it worked.

Q: Another question relates to coordination with the State Department and the unions. The job required a lot of time on external relationships. You had to deal with a lot of different external stakeholders, including State, the unions, and OMB. Any thoughts about the importance of being able to manage those relationships as a director of human resources?

ECKERSON: To be successful in HR and in USAID writ large, it's all about managing relationships. Our OMB relationship was really critical. Casella and I got along very well. I spent a lot of time convincing him we were trying to improve the way we did business. He liked being informed about what we were doing and gave us resources to do it.

My Senior Seminar classmates in State were incredibly important. Just alluding to them as close friends in conversations with other State senior officials gave me credibility in wider circles within the Department.

The mechanisms for coordination we set up between State and USAID under the Joint Strategic Plan worked fairly well while I was in HR. The Joint Management Council was especially effective during my tenure, mainly due to the fact that Sid and I chaired it.

But people moved on, and priorities changed. While the Joint Management Council and the Joint Policy Council may still exist on paper, they never meet.

Q: Probably when the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) was done they developed new mechanisms, and the old ones disappeared.

ECKERSON: There is always something new, and always a desire by State to control AID. They came very close to taking over our financial management system at one point. OMB declared that our financial systems should be merged, since we both used the same Momentum software system. Dave Ostermeyer and our controller's Office saved the day when they demonstrated that our use of the software focuses on grants and contracts. State basically uses the system for payroll and purchasing, two radically different needs. We struck a deal with OMB and State to co-locate both our systems at a financial center in North Carolina. However, we control and operate our financial system independent from State.

Was the F Bureau created during the time you were HR Director? If so, that involved the secondment of a lot of USAID people to the F Bureau. Did you get involved with that?

ECKERSON: Unfortunately, I was very much involved. It was horrible. OMB wanted the budget function that was shared between State and AID merged into one Bureau within the State Department.

We worked with State to create the F Bureau from scratch. We developed job descriptions and had to clear everything with the unions. The Bureau was located in the State Department and contained over 20 dedicated positions for USAID employees in it. All the USAID positions in the F Bureau came from PPC. It was not pretty. We had to tell PPC staff their positions were being transferred to the new F Bureau, and they could no longer work in the Ronald Reagan Building (RRB). Most of the PPC designated staff went over to State. But after a few years, just about everyone from PPC found a way to get a new job back at USAID in the RRB. The F Bureau is now a totally State Department entity, devoid of USAID expertise. All our dedicated positions are now filled by State employees.

Sorry, I forgot about the F Bureau. That was a nightmare my mind wants to forget.

Q: Okay. That's fine. There was a lot going on during that two-year period.

ECKERSON: Yeah. It was during the Tobias era. He created the F Bureau when he became the Administrator after Natsios.

Q: I think it had been agreed upon as Natsios left. He had an agreement with the Secretary of State and then it evolved a little bit differently than Natsios had expected.

ECKERSON: It evolved a lot differently. Tobias wanted to merge AID into State. He wanted to radically change the way AID did business. Most everyone in AID did not like the man.

Randy Tobias had a special interest in changing the way the Human Resources Office functioned. He wanted it to work for him and do the things he wanted it to do. Many of the things he wanted to do were against Federal regulations. Tobias did not like me, since my job was to ensure things were done right, and in accordance with the rules. There was a lot of tension between us. I tried to be diplomatic and helpful, but I refused to do his bidding. However, thanks to a stupid email I sent to Roberto Miranda, Tobias found a way to fire me.

I met Roberto when I was working in PPC. He was a GS-15 who worked in the Administrative Services Office. The Administrative Services Office was where most EXOs worked when they were on rotation to USAID/W. Normally, the Office Director was a Foreign Service Officer, but the Agency created a Senior Executive Service position to manage it. Roberto was named to fill the position on a provisional basis.

The job demanded more than Roberto could handle. He was a smooth operator but lacked managerial experience. He was way over his head trying to deal with all the

procurements and other bureaucratic responsibilities. When I was in PPC, Roberto would come into my office after the daily senior staff meeting to seek my help with his job. He didn't understand why the budget office told him he would lose funds in his account at the end of the fiscal year if they weren't spent. I explained how he needed to forward fund his contracts to use up his remaining budget allocation. I became his go-to mentor. Every week he came into my office and asked me how to solve the problems he faced that he didn't understand.

Roberto was also one of those people who sent a read-write receipt along with every email he wrote. This allowed him to verify and save every email exchange he had with me and anyone else.

His penchant for saving emails led to my downfall. In an email exchange on a very busy day, I mis-spelled his name and ended it with a "a" instead of an "o", calling him Roberta. He immediately came back to me, asking why I called him Roberta. In my stupidity and love of jocular humor, I responded: "I called you Roberta because anyone who sends read- write receipts with their e-mails is a pussy".

Three years later, I was the Director of Human Resources. Steve Callahan told Steve Wisecarver, who was the Acting AA of the Management Bureau, that Roberto had locked everyone out of the Administrative Services Office mailroom so he could photocopy invitations to his family reunion. Callahan described in detail how Roberto was not capable of managing the Office.

Wisecarver agreed that enough was enough. Roberto was still not tenured after three years of service. So, Wisecarver served Roberto notice that he no longer had his SES appointment, and his grade was reverting back to a GS-15. Roberto countered with a diversity complaint against Callahan and Wisecarver. He claimed racial bias, saying he was treated unfairly because he was Hispanic. After Roberto filed his complaint, Wisecarver and Callahan came to my Office and asked me to testify on their behalf about their integrity, and the professional reasons for why they decided to demote Roberto.

I agreed. Then, a week later a woman from the Office of Diversity requested a meeting with me. She came to my Office in HR and asked me if I knew Roberto Miranda. I said yes, I had known him for three years. Then she pulled out a piece of paper from a leather binder and handed it to me. It was a copy of the email I had sent three years earlier, calling Roberto a pussy. She asked if I had sent the email to Roberto and I said yes, but that it had been sent as a joke. That copy of my email went straight up to Administrator Tobias. Tobias immediately told Mosina Jordan, the Counselor at the time, and Jim Kunder, to fire me.

Q: And at that point, Jim was the acting deputy administrator?

ECKERSON: Yes. He called me to his office, shut the door, and explained that Tobias was livid. He wanted me to step down immediately. He said that if my email ever got to the Washington Post the Agency would be in deep trouble.

I explained to Jim that I felt I was the best person to be in HR and help Tobias advance his reform agenda. I was revolutionizing HR and bringing it into the electronic age. But, it was to no avail. Mosina and I were not getting along very well at the time either. She was adamant that I step down immediately.

I went back to Dennis Diamond, my HR lawyer, and Frank McDonough, my HR labor relations director and asked them what I should do. They suggested and helped me draft a letter to Tobias that said I recognized I had a problem, and was committed to undergo training to improve my professional demeanor. I also stated he should deny me the ability to be promoted for two years. Mosina at least agreed to take him the letter. He refused to change his mind. So, I told Mosina and Kunder that if that was the case, I wanted him to tell me face to face that I had to go.

Only Dennis, Frank, Mosina, and Kunder knew that I was told to leave my job. Kunder told Tobias that I wanted a meeting with him to discuss his decision to fire me. Three weeks passed before I got a call from Tobias' secretary to go up to the 6th floor and meet with Tobias. It was the week before Christmas, and Tobias was heading back to Indianapolis that night to be with his family. I went into his office and told him straight away that all the reforms he was proposing to re-shape and improve the Agency's strategic focus and operations were spot on. I believed they were the right thing to do. I also told him that my extensive experience overseas, and all that I had learned running HR for two years was what he needed to best align the Agency's human resources to his reform agenda.

Tobias thanked me and told me he felt that I was an excellent Foreign Service Officer. He felt I was well-meaning, and capable of contributing to his reforms. But, he said the head of his Human Resources Office needed to be "purer than the driven snow." I knew then that it was really over. I told him I was here to serve the Agency. I would do whatever the Agency asked me to do. Then I got up and walked out of his office.

While I was technically told to leave my job, there was no one available to replace me. So, for two and a half months I remained the Director of HR. It was quite awkward, and rumors started circulating in the Office and in the hallways that I was going to leave my job. No one knew why.

In February, Kunder heard that Gene George was in town to start his paperwork to retire. Kunder met with him and offered him my job to run HR. Gene was intrigued with the idea, and accepted the job. He thought I was moving on to a new assignment.

The next day was a Friday. I got a call from the Administrator's Office in the morning and was told Tobias wanted to have an "all-hands" meeting with the HR staff that afternoon at 4:30 PM. He wanted everyone there, and he wanted a lectern to use for an announcement he would make to them all. I said I would do what I could, but I didn't think that many HR staff would be around at 4:30 PM on a Friday afternoon. I found a lectern and sent an email around to everybody saying Tobias was coming down to make a very important announcement to all HR staff.

By that time, I think most staff in HR didn't know why, but sensed that Tobias wanted me out of my job. I stood at the conference room door waiting for Tobias, and watched as my staff filled the room. Everyone came. They sat on the floor. They crammed into every available space, standing along the walls and jammed into the corners. It was amazing. Tobias arrived 15 minutes late, accompanied by three senior staffers. I was standing at the door as he entered. He shook my hand and left me there, as he headed directly to the lectern.

No one said anything. No one clapped on his arrival. So, in the silence of the moment, he started speaking. He said he felt human resources were central to the success of the Agency, and one of his highest priorities. He announced he was changing the organizational status of the Office. It would no longer be a part of the Management Bureau. From now on, the Director of Human Resources would report directly to him. Then he announced that I would be moving on, and Gene George would be arriving soon to run the Office. He talked about all the management experience Gene had, and his interest and expertise in dealing with human resources issues. He ended his speech by telling everyone how much he valued working with them.

He stood at the podium, expecting a reaction and got nothing. There was dead silence. No one clapped. No one asked a question. Tobias awkwardly turned and looked at me, still standing in the doorway. He asked me if I wanted to give any parting thoughts. I said, "Sure" and walked to the lectern.

As I left the doorway and headed into the room, people started clapping. When I got to the lectern, everyone in the room was standing and clapping. They stood and clapped for a long time. Someone said it was at least 4-5 minutes. It was unbelievable. My body was tingling, and I was holding back tears the entire time. When the clapping died down, I told everyone that my job in HR was the best job I ever had. I thanked everyone for all they taught me. I ended by saying I was a Foreign Service Officer, and it was time for me to move to my next assignment. I added that I would never forget all the amazing things we accomplished together.

As everyone stood and clapped again at the end of my speech, Tobias and his senior staff slipped away from the doorway and went back to his Office.

AID/Washington, Asia Near East Bureau, Special Assistant to the Assistant Administrator, 2007 - 2008

When Mark Ward, the Acting AA in the Asia Near East (ANE) Bureau heard I was out of a job, he asked me to work for him as his special assistant. While I was in the ANE Bureau I bid on several overseas assignments. I was selected to go to Uganda as the Mission Director. I worked in ANE for almost a year before I headed off to Uganda.

I began working in ANE with a group of military planners from the Pentagon for several months to develop a joint stabilization policy. The idea was to lay out what the military's

role is, and what USAID's role is when the United States tries to stabilize countries in conflict.

I spent almost a month in a conference room with three majors and a captain from the Pentagon explaining what USAID does to stabilize countries in conflict. The officers I worked with were an elite group of strategic planners from different services stationed at the Pentagon. Their job was to understand and translate what USAID does in conflict situations into the military vernacular and context. They were copious in their documentation and put all they heard and understood from me into diagrams, lists, and notations on white boards all around the conference room. They posted notices to all who used the room to not erase anything from the white boards. At the end of our discussions every white board on all four walls of the conference room was plastered with words and diagrams.

Then they took all the information they gathered and went back to the Pentagon and developed a joint security stabilization policy that incorporated what the military and what USAID can do together to stabilize countries in conflict. The policy paper they wrote got rave reviews at the Pentagon, and we all received Superior Honor Awards for our work.

Q: You were a special assistant to the assistant administrator. Mark, the acting assistant administrator?

ECKERSON: That's right.

Q: And this bureau was overseeing both Afghanistan and Iraq?

ECKERSON: Correct. When I was there they were also trying to split the Bureau in two, to create the Asia Bureau and the Near East Bureau. My HR experience was put to use making that happen.

But, my work in Afghanistan was the most distinguishing thing I did for Mark and the ANE Bureau. In January 2008, I went to Afghanistan for three months to help the new Deputy Mission Director manage the Mission while the Mission Director went on home leave. Unfortunately, because of a variety of issues, the Mission Director could not return to post.

Q: So, you were the acting Mission Director until he was replaced?

ECKERSON: Well, not in actual authority and title. Barbara Krell was the Deputy Director and officially delegated to be the Acting Mission Director. But she basically checked out the whole time I was there. She stayed in her apartment just about the whole time I was there, ostensibly writing personnel evaluations. Barbara would come over to the Mission from time to time but did absolutely nothing.

Q: So, she was technically the acting director, and you were an advisor?

ECKERSON: Technically, yes. In reality, I was both the acting Director and Deputy Director.

It was not easy. The Mission was a disaster. The Mission Director and Deputy had a horrible relationship. He would put her down and berate her in Mission staff meetings. The Mission staff were in shock and asked me what they were supposed to do.

At the same time, Ambassador Wood and DCM were very upset with AID. The Mission Director was not sharing any information on our programs.

When I went to my first country team meeting, it was clear Ambassador Wood, the DCM, and all the Generals around the table had little respect for USAID. When it came time for me to report on USAID business, I apologized for not knowing the full extent of what we were doing. I did mention a few things that I felt were important to share with the country team. Ambassador Wood and DCM looked at me with raised eyebrows and told me Robin had never told them anything about what was going on with our program.

I spent three months trying to understand every aspect of the Afghanistan program. I met with all the USAID Foreign Service Officers, every Third Country National, and every Afghan Foreign Service National. I instituted Office staff meetings with me every week. I also held a senior staff meeting every week. I chose to live on the USAID compound in a hooch alongside FSNs and TCNs instead of living in the apartments reserved for Foreign Service Officers on the Embassy compound. My hooch was basically a shipping container that had a toilet and shower at one end, and a bed at the other end. It was a two-minute walk from the Office.

I got to the Office every morning at 7:30. I would work until around eight at night, and then slip into the dining hall before it closed to get food. I would take it back to the Office and work until around 10 PM. Then I'd return to my hooch, drink a few beers, watch TV and go to sleep. I'd start all over again the next day. I worked every day until I left. I would take some breaks to work out at the gym, and on Fridays I spent a few hours at the local Afghan market held on the International Security Force compound perusing rugs and stuff to take back to family and friends.

I became quite close to Ambassador Wood and DCM. They really appreciated the information I shared with them, and what our programs were doing throughout the country. We had serious issues with Bechtel implementing our infrastructure activities. Bechtel was literally doing everything on their own, and not consulting with the USAID program manager. There were serious delays in the implementation of their activities, and their program was critical to joint development efforts with other donors. I stopped many things they were doing, and shifted resources and effort to install generators in major towns critical to peace-keeping efforts. The Inspector General got involved later and determined that Bechtel was not complying with their contract and cut them off.

Working in Afghanistan was a remarkable experience. The programs were huge, and the challenges were difficult. USAID actually managed an airline company that flew our partners around the country. While I was there, I established order in the Mission, and got staff rowing in the same direction. I bonded with the Ambassador and DCM, and established trust between the Embassy and USAID in our shared efforts.

After I left Kabul, Ambassador Wood sent a personal message to the USAID Administrator, Henrietta Fore. He praised what I accomplished and told the Administrator that I was only there for a short time but did a remarkable job representing USAID. He said I turned our program around and aligned it perfectly to advance USG strategic interests.

Q: And this was a time when security was probably more difficult than it had been in the very early days?

ECKERSON: Actually, security was not a big issue when I was there. I was able to go into Kabul for meetings, and I flew to a town near the Iranian border for a day to see several USAID-supported programs. But, after I left, security got progressively worse.

Q: Today is November 14, 2022, and this is our fifth interview with Dave Eckerson. When we finished up last time, you'd left HR. You were working as a special assistant to the assistant administrator in Asia Near East Bureau. Could you tell us more about what you were doing in that position?

ECKERSON: I spent considerable time developing pre-departure training for our staff going to Iraq and Afghanistan. The Bureau gave me funds to do a contract with the International Resources Group where Tony Pryor was working on developing training materials with the military. They were creating very interesting video scenarios to show what it was like to work at military checkpoints in Afghanistan and Iraq. The idea was to demonstrate what it was like to control people coming and going, and how you do it in a way that is not going to get you shot or put people at risk.

Tony and I worked with several Colonels at the Pentagon to develop a series of pre-departure training modules relevant to what USAID staff would face in our work. We put the modules online, and when staff were assigned to Afghanistan or Iraq they were required to take the courses before their departure.

Q: It was beefing up the preparation of staff to go to Iraq, Afghanistan, and these tough places.

ECKERSON: Yes. It was in line with the joint stabilization policy we developed with the military. It was the first time that I worked closely with the military, and it served me well when I got to Afghanistan, and later when I was in Uganda.

Q: You said that you'd gone out to be acting director between Robin Phillips and who came in after him.

ECKERSON: Mike Yates. Mike arrived just as I was leaving Kabul. I got back to Washington mid-March and left for Uganda in July.

Q: This was in 2008?

ECKERSON: Right. Initially, I really wanted to go to Madagascar and bid it number 1 since the Ambassador was a colleague from the Senior Seminar. But the Senior Management Group said the Madagascar mission was too small, and they wanted me to manage a more challenging Mission. So, I was assigned to Uganda.

Q: Good. So, you were back in good graces?

ECKERSON: Yes. And frankly, not many people knew I was fired from HR. Everyone thought that it was time for me to go overseas, and Gene came in to fill my position.

USAID/Uganda, Mission Director, 2008 – 2012

ECKERSON: Uganda was my first assignment as an official Mission Director. I was acting Mission Director a lot in Ethiopia. But, when we returned to Washington I went to the Senior Seminar and began my Washington assignments. At the same time, my wife got a job at State to run the Overseas Briefing Center. She needed five years to vest in the General Schedule retirement system, so I didn't bid on overseas jobs until she advanced in her career and earned her retirement benefits.

When we went off to Uganda, we were empty nesters, and none of our three kids were with us. While we missed the kids, it helped me to focus on my new job.

There was a lot of stuff going on. If you remember, you asked me earlier about our Non-Project Assistance Program and Cynthia Rozell. Cynthia had been working with the mission and with Nancy Eslick in the program office to create a non-project assistance program in the north, where Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army had displaced more than two million people during their reign of terror. When I arrived in Uganda, Kony and the LRA had been driven out of Uganda. They were on the run, between Sudan, Congo and Somalia. The Embassy had a special team intensely tracking their whereabouts, but they never found him.

Q: But he wasn't in the north?

ECKERSON: No. But there were still thousands of people living in camps, fearful of going back to their homes. We wanted to use non-project assistance, i.e. an infusion of cash, to influence people to leave the camps and go back to their villages.

Q: This was a priority as you got there.

ECKERSON: The highest priority. USAID had authority to design direct cash transfer programs, but Congress hated them. USAID used them all over Africa in the 1980s and 1990s, until Inspector General George Beckington uncovered massive fraud and abuse in the programs. As a result, Congress set up stringent accountability and reporting requirements that made them very difficult to get approved by our oversight committees. Cynthia Rozell was unique. She was one of the few people in the agency with the historical memory of how these programs worked and how they had to be designed. I was very intrigued with what she was doing, since we had implemented one in Haiti for family planning.

So, the first thing I wanted to do when I settled into my job was meet with the Minister of Planning to discuss the program. I had been in country about a week. The Embassy had just joined other donors in instituting new working hours for staff where everyone would work ten hours a day from Monday to Thursday. On Fridays you would only have to work until noon and have the rest of the day off.

I got a call on a Friday from the Ministry of Planning saying the Minister wanted to meet me. I had a suit on, but no one else in the Mission was wearing a suit. I went to every Office and asked for someone to go with me. No one felt comfortable going without being dressed for the occasion. But all my senior FSN staff told me it would be OK if I went alone to meet the Minister.

So, I went to meet the Minister all by myself. His secretary led me into a huge conference room, and it was filled with every department head of the Ministry. I took a seat alone at the other side of the table, facing the Minister and his staff. The Minister asked me why I came alone and I told him I thought I was only going to meet with him alone.

It was an embarrassing moment, but we all ended up having a very engaging conversation. I brought up the fact that we are trying to work on developing a cash transfer program like other donors. I said USAID wanted to find a way to give the government of Uganda money directly, because everybody was criticizing us for not being able to do it.

It was an interesting bonding moment with my new government counterparts. I left the meeting feeling like I had gained a foothold on a partnership.

It was not easy, and it took us two years, but we did get the non-project assistance program approved by USAID/W and Congress. The program provided money in the north to demonstrate that the government was there, building buildings, and delivering services. We focused the program on building health clinics, schools, and government offices. We used the inauguration of each building as an event to show people the government was delivering, and it was safe to get out of the camps and back to their villages and homes.

We had to convince USAID/W and the Hill that the program was financially sound and accountable. The program essentially transferred cash to the Bank of Uganda. Then the Bank of Uganda advanced money to the north through a joint bank account that was controlled by both a USAID contractor and District officials.

The government was not happy that the funds did not go through their normal budgeting and cash advance process. But, we had to make sure it was separate from their standard accounting procedures. So, it went to a private bank in the north.

Before we transferred any funds to the government of Uganda for the program in the north, they had to demonstrate to us that they paid off international debt, starting loan guarantees owed to the United States that originated in the 1970s under USAID loan programs. Four times a year we would get a printout from the Bank of Uganda, demonstrating that they used our funds to pay off debt, and we would disburse funds to them to transfer to the private bank in the north.

Q: This was because the Congress began to require reporting on how the dollars were used? Debt payment was probably the easiest way to do that?

ECKERSON: Yes. But, if you remember, we were trying under USAID Forward to work as closely as we could with government institutions. In order to do that, you had to do incredibly laborious and time-consuming financial assessments of their ability to manage that money.

The challenge we faced was getting David Ostermeyer and all the controllers in Washington to accept the detailed financial assessments other donors used for their budget support to the government. We were able to deliver a pile of thick, voluminous, and recent donor assessments to them all, and they approved the program. In response to massive public opinion to help those suffering from Kony, and after seeing the assessments, we convinced Congress to approve the program as well.

We hired Dana Fisher as a Personal Services Contractor to run the program in Gulu. I had worked with Dana in Kabul, and she was amazing. She arrived and bonded with government officials, NGOs and private sector folks to get things moving instantly.

Then another nightmare hit us after the Embassy bombings in Kenya. The State Department issued a security requirement that all US government personnel had to be located together in Embassies, or in locations approved by Regional Security Officers.

We had several FSNs, a USAID contractor, and Dana managing them in our Gulu Office. It looked like we were going to have to close the Office and work from Kampala.

Fortunately, we also had a great Ambassador, an amazing Management Officer, and a level-headed Regional Security Officer. Uganda had a very unique inter-agency environment. To a person, everyone in the inter-agency got along with each other. Everybody helped each other out. Everyone rowed in the same direction. The regional

security officer went to Gulu and did a security assessment of our office. Since we were co-located in a building with the Bank of Uganda, there were already armed guards and tight security in place. We installed a few cameras and were allowed to stay in Gulu.

Q: That's great to have been able to set up an office there as well as being very innovative in your programming.

ECKERSON: Gulu was an interesting place. It was overrun with NGOs who were there to help all those suffering from Kony and the LRA. The District Chairman was a very dynamic, and extremely charismatic government leader. He had a great name as well ... Norbert Mao. Chairman Mao ran the Gulu District government for the whole time I was in Uganda. Dana left to join USAID after a year, and Jeanne Briggs replaced her as a PSC before she, too, joined USAID. Just before I left, I actually created a USDH position in Gulu and put it on the bid list. HR assigned a junior program officer in her second tour to run the program. She and her husband arrived right after I left.

Q: Wow.

ECKERSON: Unfortunately, she did not have the experience or management acumen of Dana and Jeanne. Soon after she got there, our FSN staff in the Office were found to have been doctoring their travel vouchers and pocketing money. The program was due to end, and the Mission closed it down early. This all happened after I left. But at the time, it was a great program. Lots of people came to me asking how to set up remote offices in their countries. Indonesia was able to do it. I think a few other places did as well.

Q: Right, because there were a lot of people exploring decentralization efforts. Was the program successful in increasing the government of Uganda's investment in that area and helping to stabilize the region?

ECKERSON: Sure. Also, from a purely parochial U.S. government point of view, since we had a non-project assistance program, I was invited to join the prestigious donor financing committee. USAID was always viewed as doing our own thing with our contractors and grantees. In the first donor meeting I ever went to in Uganda, the Norwegians and the Danes told me the US Government doesn't do development. They claimed USAID was not building sustainable institutions since they did not give funds directly to governments. That was the attitude I faced until our non-project assistance program started operating. I felt very proud in my last year in Uganda when I was asked by the EU and British to give the annual donor financing address to the Uganda government.

Q: Other bilateral donors were also supporting programs up there?

ECKERSON: They were. But they literally just wrote checks to the government. Accountability was an issue.

Q: And they were doing sector programs with central government ministries?

ECKERSON: Yes. In health and agriculture.

Q: But, the U.S. was the major donor up in the north?

ECKERSON: Absolutely. We were constantly going out with Chairman Mao to inaugurate a health clinic, rebuild a school or open a new government office building. When I got to Uganda there were still a lot of internally displaced persons camps. Our strategy was to get them out of those. One of the reasons they wouldn't leave was because there were schools in the camps. If you opened up a school in a village, people would leave the camps and return to their homes. The strategy worked. But it wasn't just us. There was a massive influx of development assistance from donors and NGOs. It was both good and bad, because there was a lot of dependency being built up.

Q: Right. Dave, you had mentioned that the embassy was very supportive. Who was the Ambassador when you first got there?

ECKERSON: Steve Browning was the Ambassador. He was a former Management Officer.

And after him, it was Jerry Lanier. Jerry just passed away after a short battle with Alzheimer's. He was a great Ambassador and a good friend. It's really sad his life was cut short.

The Embassy in Uganda was one of the first Embassies built that co-located all U.S. government personnel into one building. When they built the building, it was shaped like a U, with one side for USAID, and the other for the State Department, CIA, and the military. In the middle of the U there was a wall on every floor separating USAID from the other agencies. You had to go outside the building on our side and enter the building on the other side to deal with the other agencies.

Q: Is that because one half was classified and the other side was unclassified?

ECKERSON: Exactly. We did not handle any classified materials. Thanks to Ambassador Browning's management officer background, about six months after I arrived, he ordered his staff to knock down the walls on each floor that separated us. After they knocked down the walls, he moved the management office and health unit to the center of the building for easy access to all agencies.

Before the walls came down, all our FSNs who left our side of the building to enter the Embassy side to get a cup of coffee in the cafeteria had to be security screened. When I first met with our FSNs, they asked me why they had to be screened to enter the other side of the building since they had already been screened to enter the compound. They were quite agitated, and felt they were being held to a double standard. I raised the issue with Ambassador Browning and the Regional Security Officer and they agreed it wasn't fair or required. Our FSNs were allowed to enter the Embassy side of the building without being screened, and I gained instant credibility with all our FSNs.

Q: Yes. Sometimes it's amazing how small things like that can be put in place without too much thought.

ECKERSON: Yeah. There were a couple other things that were pretty interesting that happened in Uganda. One was our monetization program managed by Mercy Corps that sold Title 3 donated wheat on the local market. The money raised by the sale of wheat supported the costs of nearly half of our NGO humanitarian assistance programs.

Q: With local currency generated through the wheat sales? Did Mercy Corps bring in the wheat or just get the proceeds?

ECKERSON: Mercy Corps imported the wheat and the government of Uganda was livid. They felt their laws required us to pay tax on the imported wheat because it was processed into grain and bagged.

I had our lawyer come over from Kenya, and we had a series of long and thoughtful meetings with the government. The whole issue was really a fight between the Ministry of Finance who wanted tax revenue, and the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Foreign Affairs who wanted humanitarian assistance programs. In the end, the Ministry of Finance acknowledged their laws permitted tax-free import of raw materials. So, we got them to agree that wheat could be considered a raw material that bakers buy to produce bread.

Another side of our monetization efforts was aimed at helping the World Food Program in Uganda buy food on the local market. WFP faced two serious constraints to buy food locally. They did not have enough storage capacity outside of Kampala, and they did not have the management expertise to build warehouses. We were able to tap into ten million dollars of Food for Peace funds that we gave to the World Food Program to build local warehouses. To ensure that that money was well spent, the World Food Program allowed us to manage the design and technical oversight of the construction. As I left Uganda, ten warehouses were under construction in all regions of the country. These warehouses would allow the WDFP to store wheat bought in Uganda or in Kenya or wherever they bought food locally in the region.

Q: They brought it in. They sold it. But that was for wheat?

ECKERSON: No, no, it was for all kinds of locally grown food.

Q: Because they didn't grow wheat in Uganda, right?

ECKERSON: They did, but not much.

Q: World Food Program, if they were buying food locally, they were probably buying maize?

ECKERSON: Yes. They usually bought either maize, rice or sorghum. It was a great partnership in terms of advancing the whole notion of buying locally, rather than bringing in hardshell red, number two wheat grown in Eastern Washington, transported to Louisiana and shipped across the ocean. The carbon footprint sucks and imported food hurts the growth of local economies.

Another thing that happened when I got to Uganda was initiating the use and review of performance monitoring plans.

Q: Right, I believe you helped set up that system when you were in PPL.

ECKERSON: Yeah ... and every technical officer in the Agency hated me for requiring them.

Q: Just a reminder. (Laughter)

ECKERSON: Well, when I instituted the first quarterly reviews of performance in Uganda the results were terrible. I refused to approve any performance plans going forward, and I sent every technical Office Director and the Program Office back to the drawing board.

Q: But what was not good? Was it weak indicators? I'm trying to understand whether you didn't like what you were monitoring or whether you weren't achieving your targets?

ECKERSON: Let's start with their objectives. There was nothing finite or measurable in their objectives. There were very few result indicators. One had no idea if our programs were successful, or how funding was being used to promote results.

I reached out to Tony Pryor and IRG to assist us to develop viable performance monitoring plans and indicators. We were in the sweet spot of Raj Shah's USAID Forward initiative to advance principles of local ownership, empowerment, and measurable results. I don't know if you were the Counselor then or not.

Q: No, I was retired by then.

ECKERSON: Well, Jim Michel followed you. He was the one that convinced Raj that we should start doing country strategies again. Jim Michel heard about all the performance monitoring plans we were creating and asked me to develop a county development strategy for Uganda.

We were the third country in the Agency to develop a Country Development Strategy Statement (CDSS). The first two were done by Peru and another country in Latin America. They were not stellar strategies.

We started by focusing our programs to operate in only twenty critical districts in the country. We chose the districts based on their development potential. Then we realigned our Food for Peace program, our health and education programs, and our agricultural

program to operate as much as possible in the 20 districts. We required all of our implementing partners in any focus district to work together with district governments to align their program resources with district operational plans.

Q: That's the way it's supposed to work. That's what localization is all about.

ECKERSON: Well, it caused civil wars in just about every district. It was unbelievable. Every implementing partner wanted to have a direct relationship with the Chairman of the district. They did not want to work together with other contractors or NGOs. We explained that our programs had to be an integrated USAID effort to help districts advance their own development priorities.

We sent out joint teams of FSNs and USDHs twice a year to monitor our sectoral programs operating in each of the 20 focus districts. Their goal was to ensure our development partners were working together to support district development efforts. The NGOs managing our feeding programs were especially upset with the realignment. They wanted to be in areas that were always in need of emergency food assistance. These were areas with little potential for development. We told them they could still operate in those areas, but they would have to use other resources to support their programs there.

Q: If you need additional resources to work in an emergency, you can get them through the emergency mechanisms in Washington.

ECKERSON: Exactly.

I have to say our strategy development took an enormous amount of time and effort. Tony Pryor and his IRG team did an amazing job holding numerous staff retreats, helping our teams develop objectives, results frameworks, and linking everything to performance monitoring plans.

At the same time, Raj started to unfold his wings and demand more and more from Missions. The President's Emergency Program For AID Relief (PEPFAR) demanded enormous effort. And then he threw the Feed the Future initiative on us, and we had to develop a Feed the Future Strategy. We were overwhelmed to say the least.

Our Feed the Future strategy came along at the same time all the major donors were focused on CAADAP, the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program. CAADAP was initiated by the African Union and was African-led. The donors began to quickly align their assistance to support it. Uganda was one of the first countries in Africa to develop a National CAADAP strategy. We were able to link our Feed the Future strategy directly to Uganda's CAADAP. Donors pledged nearly three hundred million dollars to support Uganda's National CAADAP effort over ten years.

Q: Your country strategy tried to focus programs in twenty districts. When Feed the Future came in, it was a Washington driven initiative. Were you able to convince them to focus on the geographic areas that you identified?

ECKERSON: Yes. We had to go to Washington to defend our Feed the Future strategy, and everyone loved our linkage to CAADAP and our focus on 20 districts. Raj Shah loved it, and coupled with our new development strategy, our Uganda program became a poster child for Raj Shah's reform agenda.

Q: You were a major PEPFAR recipient.

ECKERSON: Oh yeah. Uganda was praised for all it did to prevent AIDS at the onset of the epidemic. As more and more donor funds for AIDS prevention poured into the country, especially from the United States, Uganda began reducing budget support to the Ministry of Health. When CAADAP funding came online from donors, Uganda reduced funding to the agricultural sector. Then a report surfaced that Museveni had diverted government funds to buy a personal jet. He also used donor funds to provide increased support for the military. It was not a pretty picture, and eventually, donors froze their budget support.

Q: That was all the budget support that was being provided by World Bank and the other donors.

ECKERSON: Yes, and fortunately USAID funding for our programs was not affected.

However, funding for PEPFAR became very contentious, but it wasn't over misuse of funds from the Ugandan government. The problems were all about how the massive amount of PEPFAR funds were shared between U.S. government agencies.

Before PEPFAR, CDC and USAID had a harmonious relationship, especially in the campaign to eradicate smallpox and vaccination programs to protect infants and children from childhood diseases. Everything was good until PEPAR was created as a whole of government approach to address the pandemic. Under PEPFAR, every country had a PEPFAR coordinator chosen by the Ambassador. The coordinators were responsible for chairing meetings that budgeted the country's PEPFAR funds. Depending on the country, some coordinators were from USAID, some were from CDC, and some were from other sections of the Embassy. Under the coordinator's leadership all agencies involved in PEPFAR created country strategies and implemented PEPFAR programs to address prevention, testing and treatment of HIV/AIDS.

PEPFAR got especially contentious when it started doing treatment of the disease. Medicines were very expensive. AID programs focused on identification and prevention. We always felt that governments should pay for treatment. Congress felt the situation was so dire that the U.S. government should pay for treatment as well.

Our monitoring systems began to show that our implementing partners were beginning to spend their treatment money a lot faster than their prevention money. In Uganda they started to go over their budgets for treatment.

We told our partners to only spend what they had budgeted on treatment. I went back to the PEPFAR Office in Washington and told them we couldn't afford using our prevention funds for treatment. They were not happy, because this was starting to happen all over Africa. We were the first country to say we would not cover rising treatment costs. The head of the PEPFAR Office told me I had to talk to the PEPFAR coordinator, Deborah Birx.

A conference call was scheduled with Deborah Birx at CDC, the PEPFAR Office in Washington, and me. I joined the call first, and the second person to join was Deborah Birx. I identified myself as Dave Eckerson from USAID Uganda and she just started lambasting me, saying, "What are you trying to do?" And I said, "Well, I'm trying to keep within budget, and I'm trying to make sure that we have a balanced program. If you want to put more money into treatment, well, then you can do it in the next budget cycle. We can't let you overstep your budget line in Uganda when we have other things we have to do with that money."

I was not her favorite person after that. From that point on, treatment became a serious issue in every country in Africa. This led to a growing rift in the CDC/USAID relationship, since their focus was on treatment and ours was on prevention and the battleground became the PEPFAR budget in each country.

Q: Didn't the ABC prevention methodology (abstinence, behavior change, and condoms) become increasingly controversial within Uganda itself? Was part of the problem that some of the NGOs didn't want to do prevention because they were being stymied a little bit by government policy?

ECKERSON: It varied by what partner you were talking with. I mean, if it was Planned Parenthood, it'd be different than the Seventh Day Adventists. But it was a big program, and Uganda was a highlighted country. And the data was showing that in Uganda as opposed to what it was like in the heyday, it was not getting any better. In fact, it was getting worse. I had two great Ambassadors, Steve Browning and Jerry Lanier, who backed me, and who backed the concept of whole of government. Our goal was to do it right.

Q: There's another PEPFAR question I'd like to ask you about. There were many implementers and huge numbers of health workers were on the contracts or grants that were funded by the U.S government. I know of at least one implementer who was concerned by the number of Ugandan health workers on their staff, that in a more perfect world, they would be working in Ugandan institutions. Health manpower then became a serious problem, in part because the government wasn't paying people enough, and the implementing partners could all pay more. During your time in Uganda, did you begin to see more and more of the health manpower being diverted to PEPFAR implementing organizations?

ECKERSON: It was worse in Haiti. But, NGOs in Uganda clearly hired many very talented health workers from the Ministry of Health.

CDC had a serious problem with their local Ugandan staff. CDC created a center of excellence in Uganda to address Ebola, Monkeypox, and all the nasty diseases that hatch in the Uganda jungles. The Center housed world class scientists who were on the front line of defense against Ebola and other serious infectious diseases. CDC paid Ugandan doctors at the center with U.S. government funds. This became a serious PEPFAR issue, because it is against U.S. government regulations to pay local salaries that should be paid by host governments. CDC's claimed their local doctors worked for the Ugandan government until two o'clock every day. After that, their second job was working for CDC as contractors. This issue became very murky and, in the end, CDC was forced to hire the doctors, and not let them collect government salaries.

Q: Was it discussed within the country team as a long-term strategic issue for Uganda

ECKERSON: No, not really.

Q: And Washington never raised it either?

ECKERSON: No, the only place where everyone felt it was an issue was in Haiti. It was very egregious. The best and brightest doctors and health workers were employed by NGOs in Haiti . In Uganda, the problem was not that serious.

One of the biggest challenges I faced in Uganda came about during my last year at the Mission. Uganda passed an LGBTQ law that Museveni signed that was very discriminatory against folks that were LGBTQ. At the same time, we had an FSN on our staff that refused to sign a travel voucher for one of the key LGBTQ activists in Uganda to go to a conference in South Africa. It became a serious problem. Her job was to approve vouchers if there was no valid reason not to approve them. She was a very devout Jehovah's Witness, and to her and her religion, being gay was a sin. She had worked at the Mission for a long time and was very competent. Everyone in the Mission liked her.

I immediately consulted with our regional lawyer and lawyers in Washington. The lawyers said she held a belief that was discriminatory to the laws of the U.S. government. Further, she was required to sign the voucher, and if she didn't, she had to be fired.

I talked with her privately after my consultations with the lawyers. She was very calm and deliberate as she told me it was against her faith to sign something that would promote homosexuality in the world. I told her I understood her religious concerns, but as an FSN working for a U.S. government agency she was required by law to sign vouchers if there was no legal reason not to sign them. That was her job, and that's what we were paying her to do. I gave her a choice to either sign the voucher, or I would have to ask her to resign.

She said she understood and told me she could not sign the voucher. She looked at me with really sad eyes and told me she would have to resign. She came in the next day, packed up all her belongings, said goodbye to her colleagues, and left her job.

The news of the resignation spread like wildfire throughout the Embassy. There were a lot of FSNs in the Mission that felt homosexuality was bad, and many of them went so far as to say anyone who was gay should be jailed or even killed.

I got our regional legal adviser to come to the Mission immediately after her resignation. Ambassador Lanier and the Embassy Management Officer were involved throughout the ordeal and we agreed the problem was an Embassy-wide issue, and not specific to USAID staff.

We developed an ethics course on discrimination and made the course mandatory for everyone in the Embassy. We spent a week delivering the course and we gave it to everybody, from the drivers to US Direct hire staff. It was a challenging period of time. But, after all was said and done, everyone in the Embassy and USAID understood what discrimination was, and what U.S. government laws, policies, and regulations were in place to protect against it.

Q: Well, it sounds like you handled it well.

ECKERSON: It was one of the hardest things I had to do in my career.

Q: You mentioned Museveni signing that law. Going back to the HIV/AIDs topic, he and his wife became more and more strict in terms of social mores and messaging more generally. Was that difficult for you all to deal with? With the family planning program and the HIV AIDS program?

ECKERSON: Yes, it was very difficult. The relationship between Museveni and the U.S. Government. Very schizophrenic. On the one hand, Uganda was putting his troops in Somalia and supporting everything that the U.S. government wanted to do in the Horn of Africa. On the other hand, you had Museveni running roughshod over his country, ignoring rampant corruption, trampling human rights, and abusing the electoral process.

Q: Did you have much personal involvement with him? I know there were certain AID directors over time who did have a lot of personal contact with him. Did you as well?

ECKERSON: Not like Dawn Liberi. Dawn Liberi became close to him right when he first came to power. He was just out of the bush after years of fighting. He would ask donors questions about what to do to promote economic development. Dawn had incredible influence on him. She spent a lot of time at his house discussing a range of development issues with him, and he listened and acted on many things she suggested. I've been in meetings with him, but I had no sway with him at all.

I did have one very interesting encounter with Museveni, though. The Embassy Public Affairs Office asked me to appear on Uganda's equivalent of the Oprah Winfrey show. I agreed and went down to the station one afternoon for the weekly broadcast.

I didn't realize that the other guest was Museveni. We chatted back and forth, and I was able to bring up family planning and the fact that Uganda was one of the most populous countries in Africa with a very high fertility rate. I asked Museveni what he thought about that.

We had an interesting discussion. He made the point that economic development was critical to family planning acceptance rates. He stressed that when a country's GDP gets high enough, then family planning rates go up. All was contingent on economic growth. He went on to say that in Uganda, families needed seven kids in every family to survive, because three of them died. You needed four kids to plant the cocoa and the coffee. As production and yields increase, and infant mortality declines, more people will accept family planning.

It was a very light hearted conversation. But, it was really the only direct conversation I ever had with him.

Q: Well, that's good. I assume that you had some democracy, governance, human rights money in the mission? If so, what kinds of things were you able to do there? I suspect it was small and on the margin.

ECKERSON: We had a small DG budget, but received a sizable increase for when Uganda had a national election in 2010. We used some of the funds to contract with IFES who got the Uganda Elections Board to let us post the locations of all the polling places in the country. This allowed registered voters to find out where they were supposed to vote with their cell phones. At the District level this allowed the Elections Board to hold local government leaders more accountable.

We also used DG funds to help Districts develop their district operational plans. This was all part of our strategy to make local government more open and transparent to their constituents.

To monitor results of our country strategy we contracted a firm to develop a monitoring and evaluation system that linked to all of our performance monitoring plans. The system was internet-based, and we required all our implementing partners to enter their performance data into this information system every quarter. It was a system open to all our partners, so everyone could see how everyone else was doing.

We also were one of the first Missions in the Agency to recognize collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA). Tony Pryor and Stacy Young in IRG introduced the concept to the Agency, and it is now ingrained as one of our core values. Simply stated, it means we need to understand what we are trying to accomplish in our programs and then learn what

is really happening as we implement them. As we learn what is working and not working, we need to adapt what we are doing to make them more effective.

Q: That's good.

ECKERSON: We actually created a position in the Program Office for a CLA advisor.

But the hardest part of CLA is adapting contracts and grants to change what they are doing without having to re-compete the awards. We really lucked out in Uganda when a new contracts officer arrived at the Mission who had previously worked for the Department of Defense.

He was the most innovative Contracts Officer I ever met in my career. To tackle the adaptation issue, he would talk about how the Navy builds an aircraft carrier. It takes twenty years to build an aircraft carrier. So, the Navy awards a twenty-year contract to a firm to build the ship. Over time, progress and innovation make radar, weapons systems, and electronic systems change. The Navy builds stages into their long contracts where work stops and every element of the contract is assessed to determine if changes need to be made to reflect new conditions. They can change the scope of work if required and not have to re-compete the award if the contract is written right.

In that vein, we created a flagship nutrition program that was a series of small grants for kitchen gardens, local Vitamin A fortification, and several other interventions. After a year, we would assess which programs were working the best, and re-align the grants to replicate them.

Our CLA advisor was integral to this program, and to others in the Mission.

Q: It was a PSC position within the program office. That sounds very innovative, and I liked the mention of the contracts that are adaptable. Of course, with the military those probably lead to huge cost overruns, but we won't--

ECKERSON: We won't go there. Finally, I think I can close Uganda on the military front. When I got to Uganda, there was a small grants program out of the Combined Joint Task Force, Horn of Africa (CJTF/HOA). The Task Force base was based in Djibouti, and it had a branch of civil affairs officers it deployed around Africa to implement small development projects. While the Task Force's major efforts were to ensure security in the region, the civil affairs units were there primarily to train soldiers how to work in the African context and culture.

The projects they chose to implement in Uganda were not appropriate to the needs of Ugandans. They built several schools in isolated communities, but never considered that the Ministry of Education might not want the schools there, or if they had teachers to staff them. The schools all remained empty after they were constructed.

There was a yearly meeting of all US military stationed in Africa every year in Stuttgart Germany. The embassy was always invited to attend, and Ambassador Lanier allowed me to attend the last year I was in Uganda. I suggested that the next Civil Affairs Team headed to Uganda work with USAID to determine what projects they might implement. While the Civil Affairs teams had some funds to use, I said USAID might be able to supplement their funding with our development assistance funding.

When the team arrived, I took them to Karamoja, a very isolated and poor area of the country. The region is inhabited by herders and is also an area where there is a lot of illicit mining for gold and precious metals. I led the team on an assessment of the region to ascertain what they might do that would be of value to people living there.

We found a fairly large village on the backside of a mountain that had fertile land around it but had no way to transport crops to the main road on the other side of the mountain. It would be an excellent learning experience for the team to build a road to connect the village to a major trade route. The team wrote a description of the proposed road project and submitted it to Djibouti for funding.

Their proposal called for a significant amount of money, and CJTF/HOA refused to fund it. I was able to attend another conference in Stuttgart and met with the commanding general of all US Forces in Africa. I explained the project concept to him and told him that whatever CJTF/HOA could not fund, USAID would fund the rest. He was delighted, and fast tracked the project to approval before I left Germany. Unfortunately, the fast tracking came to a dead end when we were told USAID funds could not be disbursed until a huge environmental impact assessment was undertaken. I left Uganda while the team was still waiting for the impact assessment. I don't know if they ever built the road, but it was a good example of collaboration between the military and USAID.

Q: But a great idea to try to direct those kinds of programs to things that can make a difference, as opposed to being only training activities. So you were in Uganda for four years?

ECKERSON: Yes.

Q: And so it's getting to be time to leave and people in Washington start talking to you about what you're going to do next?

ECKERSON: Oh yeah, there was lots of discussion about where I would go after Uganda. I was 64 years old. You had to retire at 65 in the Foreign Service, but they often gave waivers to stay on. I knew I could get a waiver, but unsure if I wanted one.

I was due out of Kampala at the end of May 2012 to attend my son's college graduation. Bambi Arellano was the Counselor to the Administrator, and she kept calling me about possible jobs. They really wanted me to go back to Haiti and run the Mission. I refused. I had been there and done that, and I didn't want all that stress again. Bambi called me again, and asked if I would run HR for a second time. I refused that one as well.

At the same time, my stock in Washington was rising. I kept getting emails from colleagues telling me Raj kept mentioning my name in meetings, asking why other mission directors don't have a country strategy like Eckerson. He would also ask why Missions couldn't do more local contracting and work closely with local governments like Uganda.

As my departure from Uganda approached, I just wanted to retire. Uganda was an amazing experience. We accomplished so much. I wanted to walk away from USAID at the peak of my career, feeling good about all that I was able to do.

Then Bambi called me again. She told me Raj wanted me to replace her and be his next Counselor. She told me it was the only job in the Agency the Administrator can approve without going through the Senior Management Group approval process. She said I had to take the job, at least for a year until I turned 65.

AID/Washington, Counselor to the Administrator, 2012 - 2013

As you know, when you're the Counselor there isn't a job description telling you what you are supposed to do. You serve at the behest of the Administrator, and your job is to figure out what that means. There is one thing that isn't written down, but everyone knows. As Counselor, you are the highest-ranking Foreign Service Officer in the Agency. You are expected to protect the Foreign Service from the political aspirations of a politically appointed Administrator.

I should add here that as I left Uganda, I was promoted to Career Minister, the highest rank you can have in the Foreign Service. It is equivalent to the rank of a two-star General in the military. Review panels only read the last five years of your evaluations. Every year an evaluation disappears, and a new one comes on-line. It took five years before my disastrous HR evaluation disappeared, and when it did, I made Career Minister.

Raj was 42 years old when I became his Counselor. He tasked me with making his USAID Forward initiative my primary responsibility. I set up meetings with all relevant Bureaus and Offices and we developed a reporting framework that could track progress on key aspects of the initiative. A core group met monthly to track progress and report to the Administrator.

There were several issues in HR that came to my attention. One was the promotion process for Senior Foreign Service Officers. When you are a Mission Director, just about everyone writes their own evaluation and gives it to their Ambassador to sign as if he/she wrote it. They usually tinker with what you write, but the major effort is done by you. Because USAID/Washington didn't believe Ambassadors knew how to evaluate Senior Officers, they required Deputy Assistant Administrators in Regional Bureaus to write reviewing statements about your performance as well. Again, Mission Directors always had to write something for the DAAs to use to evaluate their performance.

I heard that the State Department had changed their evaluation process and now required Senior Foreign Service Officers to write their own performance narratives. I got briefed on the State system by one of my old Senior Seminar colleagues, Linda Tagliatela, in the Director General's Office. Linda chaired a meeting between State HR staff and USAID HR staff and I that was quite illuminating. State required that their Senior Foreign Service officers write their own performance narratives based on their work objectives. They described their performance from their own point of view. Their supervisors, either DCMs or Ambassadors, then wrote reviewing statements based on what was in the personal narratives.

It was honest and straight-forward, and far less time consuming for the Officers under review. I worked with our HR team to revise the Senior Foreign Service performance evaluation system. We held video conferences with every Mission Director in the Agency soliciting ideas and feedback. It was an interesting process. Most everyone felt it was a good idea and would save time and make the evaluation process more open and transparent. Several Mission Directors, who were women, felt that men were in their comfort zone extolling their accomplishments. However, they felt women had a difficult time bragging about all the great things they did.

We sent out the findings of our discussions, and to a person, everyone agreed to change the system. We got the union to agree to the changes, and the new system for Senior Foreign Service evaluations went into effect right after I retired.

Q: It's more transparent.

ECKERSON: Yes. After we did that, HR created a new team to overhaul the performance evaluation process for the entire Foreign Service. I was involved in that process after I retired. mean, the changes they made are based on HR principles in the private sector. There is less narrative, and more reliance on 360 feedback from peers.

Q: Right. And to make it a more honest process. Do you have thoughts about the use of 360 information for evaluations?

ECKERSON: Well, it can be problematic. In the past, people would ask for 360 on someone and get random superlative statements that they would add to their evaluation narratives. They were essentially meaningless and had no value added.

Under the new system, the 360s are required from at least two supervisors, two colleagues, and two subordinates. The 360 review is a series of statements that reviewers rank from one to five, with five being outstanding. It's akin to a Google review of a hotel.

When I retired, I didn't work for two years. Then Larry Sacks called and asked if I could help the Mission understand the annual evaluation process. It was amazing how little Mission Directors and Officer Directors understood about writing good evaluations. They knew little about the nuts and bolts of what Performance Boards were looking for, and what elements needed to be in evaluations to enhance getting promoted.

I really liked the challenge of El Salvador and ended up working for six weeks every year from 2015 to 2019 in Missions around the world during the evaluation season. I went to Haiti. I went to Jordan. I began my assignments with a seminar on all aspects of the evaluation process. Then I worked with supervisors and their subordinates to help them discuss performance with each other and determine how to describe significant accomplishments.

When I went to Kosovo, it was the penultimate experience. The mission was one of the last in the world that was not co-located in the Embassy. It was like old times, free from Embassy oversight and culture. The Kosovars loved America for what we did in the Serbian war. The Mission was really appreciative of all I had to offer. The junior officers were outstanding, and many got promoted that year. After I left Kosovo, I stopped doing any more work for USAID. I wanted to leave consulting on a high note, and I did.

Q: I've seen heaven.

ECKERSON: I did, really, and I haven't looked back.

During my time as Counselor, I also focused on regionalization issues. I had been working on regionalization for my entire career, and it was still an unresolved problem. I set up a Regionalization Steering Committee composed of representatives from every Regional Bureau to figure out the value, purpose and effectiveness of Regional Missions. We still have not gotten very far in standardizing or figuring out why some regional platforms are so big, and why many are so dysfunctional.

Q: And unnecessary probably.

ECKERSON: On one of my assignments, I took a stint as the Mission Director in Burma to let Chris Milligan take home leave. The Mission had a PSC Executive Officer from Britain who was solid but needed help understanding the intricacies of the EXO function. The regional mission in Thailand didn't have any people or money to send somebody down to help the guy out.

They had over fifty direct hires in the regional mission managing extraneous regional projects with funds from Washington. The funds were primarily from Congressional earmarks, and the programs were totally unsustainable. But, Thailand had an excellent international school that attracted folks to bid on Thailand. And the Mission created positions to take them in. But they didn't have enough positions or funds to support the EXOs in the region. There was something wrong with that picture.

As I reflect on what I accomplished as Counselor, I think I did little that was earth-shaking or significant. I served my time. I took a chunk of sick leave to get a new hip, and that served me well.

Q: I think probably few counselors do.

ECKERSON: Yeah. I mean, it was an honor. And clearly, I had a relationship with Raj, but it was like, I didn't see him that much. I did confront him once over his penchant to create new initiatives. Everyone was telling me he was out of control, and his flurry initiatives were killing them. I scheduled a one-on-one meeting with him and told him what people were saying. He listened, thanked me for my advice, and then continued to roll out even more initiatives.

Q: And I believe that you probably also spent time helping to establish the new policy bureau while it was being set up. I suspect you were helping Susan Reichle with that process.

ECKERSON: Sure. I also got involved setting up the new development lab. That was very challenging.

Now that I think about it, there was one thing I did at the end of my career as Counselor that was pretty significant.

Raj asked me to develop a new mission statement and set of core values for the Agency. I spent almost three months meeting with people from all parts of the Agency. I asked Bureaus to select a team of people to represent their workforce. I wanted junior and senior people from the Foreign Service, the Civil Service, Personal Service Contractors, and other types of employees in the Bureau. I wanted them to select people who could best represent them in the process to create a mission statement and core values for the Agency.

It was a fascinating experience. Raj assigned two young women to help me run the meetings and record the discussions. These women were amazing data-crunchers. They noted all that was said in over thirty separate focus group meetings, and then created a list of twenty words that had been used over and over again to describe our core values. We sent the list to everyone who participated in the meetings and asked them to rank order the words from one to twenty. They tallied the results on a Google scatter graph, and we used that to distill five words that became our proposed core values.

We also asked each focus group what they thought the Agency's work was all about. We compiled phrases from each group to create several possible Mission statements, and then sent them to all participants to rank order as well.

Half of the people we talked to felt what we were doing was a good thing but were concerned it would become politicized. Just about everyone we talked to, from administrative assistants to Office Directors said they were working at USAID because they wanted to make the world a better place, or they wanted to help other people. We put together a set of core values that are sort of like what they are now. But our proposed mission statement was not like what it is now. That got politicized.

Q: I believe Susan Reichle replaced you. Shortly after she was counselor, I was on a panel with her. I remember she shared the mission statement and talked through what a collaborative process it had been.

ECKERSON: It was collaborative, but the collaboration happened after I left. Just before I retired, I presented our proposed core values and mission statement to Raj's Management Committee. The Committee was composed of all the Assistant Administrators and Deputy Assistant Administrator in the Agency. Our work was favorably received, but the Committee felt it still needed some work. That work was done by the Assistant Administrators, who were all political.

Q: Yes; I think I remember hearing that there was the addition of national security towards the end.

ECKERSON: Yes. That's the way it is.

Q: Right. An interesting task to do at the end of your career and something important. I assume from the way in which you described those values that you would still recommend to young people that they look at USAID as a career?

ECKERSON: Absolutely. Times have changed. I've watched the agency evolve from when there were no young people in the Agency. I came in and I was the youngest person walking the halls back in the mid- 80s. I watched the Agency get younger and younger, and I watched the personal values of our new hires change. Today, there is a concern for work life balance among many of our younger officers. There is also a desire in many of our most talented young officers to become Mission Directors overnight, and not pay the dues that we paid.

I see that, and I accept it. We will need to promote people quickly these days, as more and more of our senior leaders walk out the door. The challenge will be to prepare our next generation of leaders to succeed.

But, I also see that we are entering into the age of Zoom, and I wonder what the role and delivery foreign assistance will look like in the future. There will be a transformation, and I don't know what it will look like. As long as people come into the Agency feeling they want to make the world a better place, then everything should be alright. But, I don't know how or what we will do to make that happen.

Q: Why don't we explore that a bit? I think there's probably something else that you didn't mention you did as counselor, but it relates to this question and the potentially different profile for FSNs in the new USAID. Do you have thoughts about that as well?

ECKERSON: Well, I would add that FSNs are the life-blood of our mission. They are who we rely on, we're just visitors to their country. And yet, sometimes it's hard to understand the dynamics of our FSN staff, especially in the context of their culture, and how they relate to each other, and to us in Missions.

Clearly, we need to find ways to empower them more. It's a difficult challenge because of our fiduciary responsibility, and the way the Foreign Service Act and our regulations restrict what they can and cannot do. Finding ways to help them feel empowered is important. It starts with their pensions. It starts with their severance packages. We don't have a uniform way to support them because each country where we work has different laws governing local staff.

Another issue is how to reward FSNs for their service to the US government, and how to protect them in times of crisis. We didn't do so well in Vietnam and Afghanistan. There has to be a better process to award Special Immigrant Visas to FSNs who have risked their lives to protect Americans. Special Immigrant Visas need to be far more accessible to any FSN who works for the U.S. government for at least ten years. At present, the process of awarding an FSN with an SIV is arcane, secretive, and slow. It should be a transparent, simple and quick process.

Finally, we have junior officers coming into the Agency and when they get to Missions they want to be in charge. There is often a negative dynamic between junior officers and our senior FSNs. I don't think our training programs are addressing the need to improve those relationships.

Q: Right. Dave, any final thoughts, looking at your career or about the future?

ECKERSON: I will let my career rest in peace. I think I have said enough.

Q: It's a very distinguished one and you made many important contributions. So, I hope you feel good about it.

ECKERSON: I do. I couldn't have asked for a better career. And Carol ... I just want to thank you for pulling all of this out of me. You are a fantastic interviewer.

Q: Thank you.

End of interview