

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training  
Foreign Affairs Oral History Program  
Pickering-Rangel Project

**CONGRESSMAN CHARLES RANGEL**

*Interviewed by: Clayton Bond  
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**INTERVIEW**

*Q: Thank you, sir. And so part of what keeps me busy in this work is this small bit that I'm doing in relation to the huge work that you have been doing to try to help support efforts to make the Foreign Service be more effective for America and for our world. And so making sure we have the best talent, including a Foreign Service that represents the diversity of our country. So I have the pleasure of working on this oral history project for the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training and to interview you, sir, being someone who has pushed so hard and achieved so much to help the Foreign Service be more diverse.*

*It's a great honor to interview you and to get more insights from you in terms of the history of not just the program that is named after you, but also other efforts that preceded it to bring more diversity into the Foreign Service. I recently had the opportunity to hear from Dr. Melissa Jane Taylor, of the historian's office at the State Department. And she gave this long history of over many decades, maybe 100 years of efforts to bring more diversity into the Foreign Service. And one of the things that she referenced was your 1978 letter to President Carter after a trip. I think you mentioned it was like 20 some days to Southeast Asia, to Asia, Southeast Asia, to Iran and then London before coming back to the US. And you asked President Carter, you noted that you didn't run into any Foreign Service officials of color at any of the missions that you visited except for one - Horace Dawson, who was with the U.S. Information Service in Manila, I believe, at that time. And you referenced in that letter efforts that you had made with Secretary Kissinger before, and also with Secretary Vance before to try to bring more diversity into the foreign service.*

*So I wondered if you'd be willing to talk more about that, those earlier efforts, what the response to those efforts was. And then I wanted to ask you about more particularly the graduate foreign affairs fellowship program that later became the Pickering program, as well as the Rangel fellowship, how those came about. And then I think in our earlier*

*conversation, unrecorded privately, you talked about the development of the Payne Fellowship and how you and then- Congressman Payne and, then his son, worked together on those fellowships. So if you'd be willing to talk about that as well. But if you wanted to start with the 1978 letter and efforts leading up to that and the response to that, I'd be grateful.*

RANGEL: Well, you had indicated that you had read my book.

*Q: Yes, sir.*

RANGEL: What that means to me is that my life story is just one of millions of stories of people that call themselves American. And as far as the world is concerned, Charles Rangel wouldn't qualify to be a grain of sand on the beaches of the world if I had to stand out. The only thing that could possibly make me unique is the unique idea of the United States of America, that allegedly would shatter the walls of race and color and culture and language and bring people from all of these countries to the United States of America. Not to forget their backgrounds and beautiful histories, but to remember them and to form a union that would ultimately make us as close to perfect as possible. And certainly the whole idea of a person like Rangel, with my very limited background, participating was not only not thought of by those people drafting the outlines of this nation, but it's my understanding that they were not considering people of color from any nation. And the more I read, the more I look at their attire, and the riches that slavery brought, to such extent that, as beautiful as the language is of equality and freedom and justice for all, somehow, they manage to own human beings and not think of them as a part of this broad, broad, broad picture that they had of the United States of America.

Having said that, it would seem to me that my job would be to join that group of people who wanted to make the original concept more perfect. And as Europeans from Southern Europe and the Italians and the Irish had their difficulties and the Jews, and the Chinese had their problems, and the Africans had no problem because they weren't even there. So having said that, population changes and immigration have now reached the point that it is abundantly clear that, notwithstanding the thoughts of the original writers of the Constitution, that the majority of the people And that being so, it would appear to me that if one wanted to have a stronger America, we would have to have better relationships with other parts of the world, mostly made up of people of color, and not the areas that Hitler and the Germans were looking for. If people were to walk into the house of representatives and find it to be a white population, both Democrats and Republicans, or look at the State Department that would reflect white America, then the cover of the book would reflect not the pages of color, but certainly the lack of influence of people of color. So I never really, even though I have more than my share of self-esteem, considered

myself as making any great contribution in chipping away at the walls of prejudice and bias in this country, because if it wasn't for the thousands, tens of thousands of people of color who preceded me, I never would have been in a position to have done anything.

And clearly, you can best sell an idea, no matter what it is, to somebody when you're able to convince them that, even though you're doing what they ask, in the short and long run, they are beneficiaries with the State Department looking more like America and America looking more like the world. It just makes sense that you have to do it. It just makes sense that you have to have the State Department reflect the population of America from a practical point of view. Even if the State Department is trying to persuade the world of a particular political or economic point of view, if they thought that we have people of color that would be appreciative of their effort to join with America, it would make sense to be more cooperative.

And yet we've had people in the Caribbean and South Africa and Africa generally that will consistently vote against the United States resolutions in the UN, not because they cared for the Soviet Union, and not because they disliked the United States, but only because they wanted to get our attention----to get our attention and to be reminded that our support of colonialism was a short-range gain for us and European countries, but in the long run we may have benefited, but for the good of the world, we all have to now work together and understand how we can help each other.

And that goes for the future, where people like you, Clayton, and others would have to continue to try to get this country to understand that no matter what branch of government or business that you're talking about, foreign governments reflect their feelings about that part of our population that they believe have some type of a cultural tie. So it's only human nature that Jewish people would be more concerned about Israel than Gentiles, or that African Americans feel a sense of pride in Mandela or that those of Caribbean background that have shown that the international claim is enjoyed by our Western Indian population. And the more we add to the composition of the State Department, the Congress, and the face of America, the more the rest of the world is more inclined to understand us better as we understand them better.

But to think that asking the State Department to just open up a little crack in their door for the Pickering, Rangel, and Payne programs to allow more of America to come in and to represent not just black folks and people of color, but to represent the United States of America, it only seems to me that you are just adding to the quilt of the multiracial nature of our great country. And that it makes it easier to sell who you are in terms of compassion, culture and understanding when they know that you are indeed a part of the American family.

I had success in sponsoring the African Growth and Opportunity Bill. And quite frankly, I had visited Africa, but I didn't feel I had any better understanding of Africa than I did in Mississippi. My book indicates that I was raised in segregated Harlem. I never met a white person in Harlem and can think of very few that I met recently in Harlem. And so to an extent, you're not really a whole worldly person if you limit your exposure to it. But the truth of the matter is that in pushing the Growth in Africa bill, I found Africans coming to my office that spoke English better than I, sharing with me their ideas and making certain that the trade bill did not treat Africa as a continent, but treated them as countries with different languages, culture, and needs.

And the Congress was just surprised to see so many beautiful, handsome people walking across the hallways of the Congress with these beautiful robes and dress and eloquence and language. And the reason they hadn't seen them is because they were under the true impression that blacks didn't count because we weren't in the Congress when I went there. There were only seven members of color, which my group made it thirteen and now it's sixty. So now people, blacks from Cuba, Bolivia, Colombia, are seen walking the hallways and looking for a member of Congress, who would be sympathetic to their needs. And so it's difficult for me to take credit for being a pioneer, when I truly believe that whatever efforts I made and continue to make, because there's a long way to go, I'm only limited by my life expectancy to improve the makeup of the State Department, so it looks more like America. It's not for me, but it's ordered to make us a more perfect union. That's about the size of it.

*Q: Thank you, sir. How did the various administrations that you raised these concerns to, this opportunity to, how did they respond?*

RANGEL: The most difficult challenge in persuading the State Department to open up its doors to people of color was the fact that all of the Secretaries of State would agree so rapidly that it would be, and "State your case," ----the case I was making so eloquently----"but refer to tradition and the inability to get the Congress to support executive changes." Of course, we recognized that, you know, the Supreme Court, the State Department, and the Congress all reflected the biases of our nation were built in, and to some extent, of course, it would take time to get them to understand. But one of the things that we did----when America was trying to influence countries that were substantially people of color, like in Colombia and Bolivia, and certainly Africa and the Caribbean---- that we would ask them just what they were doing for people of color in their own country. They would then start meeting with us because while initially, there weren't any blacks to deal with, as the Congressional Black Caucus and the Hispanic Caucus grew, their influence, because of them representing countries of origin for so

many people of color in the United States, made it much easier when people wanted to do something.

Quite frankly, the people who did the least were the most eloquent, like Eagleburger and they could recite the necessity. Kissinger would take me to the Virgin Islands and to Africa, and certainly to Colombia and Peru and other countries and the Congressional Black Caucus, the more influential the State Department knew we were. But that didn't cure the problem of how to become a part of the State Department. To a lot of Americans, the State Department was a private club and you've been able to succeed and qualify on paper. But when someone is going to be able to evaluate your qualifications through an interview, everybody has some bias as to what the qualifications are. So I'm trying to think of who to give most credit to, because when Colin Powell went over to the State Department, it ramped up the success we had in forming the Rangel Scholarship program.

*Q: I had the chance to speak to Ambassador Marc Grossman who at the time was undersecretary for political affairs after having served as director general of the foreign service. So I was asking him about the origins of the fellowships and the Rangel Fellowship, and he seemed to recall your reaching out to Secretary Powell. And I wondered if there's anything that you might wish to share here about that reaching out to Secretary Powell.*

RANGEL: I can't think of any secretary or assistant secretary that did not completely agree with me that they needed to do all they could do to break down the wall of prejudice. And we know that the country responded to a lot of things in times of emergency. There were times that we couldn't even have Black ambassadors because none of them had gone through the State Department training, and we had to get private Black citizens to just come in and qualify with some limited training for ambassadorships. But I'm trying to see who really pushed it over the top. But if it's going to be based on the eloquence and support without making the difference, I just have to give this more thought because behind the scenes I knew we had many fighters, and which one was the most successful. I had ambassadors working with me, Ambassador Perkins, Dawson, and they had a group of ambassadors I would talk with. We all would sympathize with each other, but we never were able to see who was fighting you because they were not particularly proud of their position. And it was done in the country's best interest to exclude those people that could make us stronger.

*Q: [a sound in the background]*

RANGEL: That's my wife who I've been with for 70 years and every once in a while, she lets me know I used to be somebody important. So she was listening to me and yelled, well done, well done. She's really what kept me going. I don't remember having a hard time politically and in my over 50 years of politics, that I had to explain to her what we had to do. Even when I ran for Congress for an empty seat ---held by Adam Clayton Powell, who was the best known and highly qualified and efficient member of Congress----and I went to talk with my wife----and he told me do what you had to do, he wasn't coming back----it was she who knew that I was running and it was she who stuck with me the whole way. I was always four or five years behind students because of my military service and starting off as a high school dropout. But she was from Wilberforce College. I went out with her, and we never looked back since.

*Q: Nice. My dad went to Central State.*

RANGEL: Okay, well, it was under her class that Wilberforce became Central State. Charles who, what was his name? Charles what? [Mrs. Rangel responds in the background - Wesley. Wesley. Charles Wesley.]

*Q: You mentioned Secretary Kissinger and then Secretary Eagleburger, and it reminded me of in the book that Ambassador Perkins wrote, he talked about when, Eagleburger was like a mentor to him in his career.*

RANGEL: Who said that?

*Q: Ambassador Ed Perkins, and that with Secretary Kissinger I got the sense that there was some mentorship there. When Ambassador Perkins became Director General of the Foreign Service, Eagleburger encouraged him to see what he could do to bring more minorities into the Foreign Service. Or at least that's how Ambassador Perkins recounts it. And so then Ambassador Perkins talked about working with the Congressional Black Caucus. And I wondered what you might wish to share about the Congressional Black Caucus' support then of what became the Foreign Affairs Fellowship Program. In the early 90s, I believe it was.*

RANGEL: Do you know where Eagleburger is now?

*Q: I don't, I'm afraid. I should find out and talk with them. But no, I don't know.*

RANGEL: Eagleburger. Oh boy. Normally when I'm giving a speech, I ask was there anyone in this audience that was born before me? And there's not too many here.

*Q: Oh, I now see, he's passed away.*

RANGEL: So I say, well, if there's someone here born before 1930, I can tell this damn story the way I want, and I don't expect to be challenged. But Eagleburger, when he worked for Kissinger, used to drink a lot when the day was over. And an international Caribbean conference was being held in Peru. We started drinking and becoming friendly enough for me to tell him that he wasn't doing me any damn favors. And why would the State Department and kids be so bullheaded about this? I'm all heated about this. When I was trying to make the country be more acceptable to people. We all understood all of the problems we were going through. And sometimes he would get a little annoyed, but he had a lady that worked for him that was like his right hand and traveled with him. I didn't know her that well, and she wasn't a part of the conversations, but she was always present when he was with me. And so once I must have said something that annoyed him or annoyed his liquor, and he says, God damn it, Rangel, I've always had a compassion for people that had any types of handicaps. Why do you think I hired this woman here? She's a cripple, but God damn it, she's a woman. And I hired her. By the time that woman got finished with him, it was one of the most successful arguments I had against Eagleburger. And he was so embarrassed as to what his liquor made him say because he was so wrong, and his prejudice came out with a witness. And of course, I've never told this story before because it would have served no purpose, but I understand how difficult it is for people who enjoyed the benefits of white preference to tell them to give it up.

*Q: Or share?*

RANGEL: Well, you don't share preference. If you don't have a preference, it means you've got to do it on the merits. And if a person is born, no matter how liberal they may be. But they know in this country, because of their compulsion, they're going to receive it a different way. To me, that allows you to have a more positive attitude, and it makes you a little more acceptable because you have more self-esteem than you should have, like me. I just assume I had it. You don't have to have it, but it gives me a little edge thinking it when I go in. So it's difficult.

*Q: Assume the virtue [referring to a line/mantra of Mr. Rangel's, from his book].*

RANGEL: It's difficult. I think you talked about it. It's difficult to get people who for hundreds of years, through no effort or their part, to know that they're going to enjoy these benefits of wealth and insurance and health care and economic opportunities and homes to say, as you would say, to share. But I would say, to give up the preference that you get and come into a situation where we all compete against each other, it's not easy to do. But when you got a constitution with this flowery, glorifying language about

equality, it's kind of hard for them to say, but you know we didn't mean you. So it works out.

*Q: It is interesting because there's that and there's this sound argument that you have made and that others have made, and one has to wonder, did it resonate with Eagleburger and Kissinger and some others, even just pragmatically, that, in order for the United States to be successful in foreign policy, we need to have better representation. But maybe it's not possible for people really to separate their privilege, the preferences that they get because of how they look from, you know, from this sound pragmatic argument that we actually need more color in order to be a better foreign service.*

RANGEL: I spoke to several Rangel scholars today and I would tell them a story that in the 1980s, we didn't have that many women members of Congress. And so the embassies would prepare trips for the wives to go shopping and to do a lot of things and the members would be involved in meetings during the day. But one thing that still happens, maybe to a lesser degree, that at the conclusion of a congressional delegations meeting, the ambassador or the embassy would have a departure party where the full staff would be invited, as well as Americans that may be in the area so that they could meet some of their stateside, the congresspeople. But one thing the wife and I always would talk about and enjoy is that while we were all aware of who was serving us as staff from the embassy, when it came time for them to bring their spouses to the departure reception, you never knew who the hell they were going to bring. And it just showed that no matter what ideas people had when they joined the foreign service, that when they meet people that love and share all the other things they have in common, it can override the built-in preferences that we practice. It's almost fun because you dare not tell them that they are a mixed couple because they would think there was something wrong with you if you had to identify them by their nationality. And I'm telling you, if you really want to start a unique group, find out how many people that you never would expect would be meeting much less getting married and having children and to have them to form a group with their experiences, I would love to see that meeting because it shows that love and affection overcomes prejudice. And I don't know too much about that, but I know it works.

*Q: I do too, as I, myself, am part of a mixed couple.*

RANGEL: And I will tell you something too that I have said before and that is, if ever you want to find a grateful people it's the Korean people toward Korean veterans. My outfit was the first, and I had a very warm relationship. As for my colleagues, we had very, very high kill in action, wounded in action, missing in action, prisoners of war. So there weren't that many people left really from the outfit that went overseas with me and



quite frankly, we went overseas in 1950, and we were hit by the Chinese. We went overseas in July; we were hit by the Chinese in November. So that's a whole lot of years and longevity and life expectancy made it more important to honor them every time they had something to celebrate in South Korea. These South Koreans in the United States would use you to remind them how grateful they are that the United States saved them from communism, and they became one of the world's most effective traders.

Having said all of that and recognizing that, for all of these years, the number of Black troops that were stationed in Korea and the number of offspring from these Black males that impregnated these Korean women as American soldiers did all over the world, you would be hard put to find a mixed person of color in Korea, and I've been going there since the war, and I would ask the question, where the hell are the children of color? And there's culture about women, first not having children out of wedlock, then you add to that not having relationship with non-Koreans, and then you add to the prejudice against black males, whether they're GIs or not, and then you add to that that they would tell you that they're colorblind and that they know some black woman, and that some Korean woman had a black father that sings in the opera in Korea. But I can tell you, I can get as close as an outsider can to my Korean friends, but I cannot break their silence on how many kids that they sent to orphanages or got rid of or to say they don't exist. And you can go to the PX and walk the streets of Seoul and do the same thing in the United States. And unlike where you have US military installations, you ain't got a seat. It's unbelievable. Of course, people would tell you that unless you married a Japanese person, unless both parents are Japanese, you'll never become a Japanese citizen. I don't think that way, but I do know that there are some countries that frown on marriages outside of the national bloodline, you know that to be true.

*Q: I'm wondering if I could ask you some questions if you'd be willing to share more about the development of the Rangel Fellowship Program, how it came to be based at Howard. I'm thinking that I don't recall exactly when Ambassador Dawson got to the Bunche Center. I think he was there at the time that the Rangel Fellowships came about. Secretary Powell, I believe, was Secretary then. And then I imagine that President Swygert was still president of Howard. And I understand from your book that, and some, an earlier conversation, the connection you and President Swygert had going back before his time at Howard. I wondered if you'd be willing to speak on any of that.*

RANGEL: Swygert was one of my greatest supporters in my campaign for Congress. And fortunately, he had come from Washington, D.C. and before law school, he was a policeman. And as far as I was concerned, Washington, D.C. was in the South, and I wouldn't admit it, but I wasn't anxious to leave New York and go South even to become a member of Congress. And between his friendship and our family friendship, I felt far

more secure, and he was willing to take a cut in salary to become my chief of staff. It was so close that one of his older brothers married another member of my staff. Family. And then I was successful in convincing my governor to make Swygert the president of the State University of New York at Albany.

I don't want to get into the sensitivity I have even today as to whether we're doing all that we can because, since my retirement in 2016, I have not been able to say that. Congresswoman Bass, who came to Congress afterward, fell in love with Africa and she was just so good. She now left Congress to become the mayor of Los Angeles. And my buddy Greg Meeks, on the Foreign Affairs Committee, has so much on his plate, I can't ask him to monitor it.

I don't know whether the historic Black colleges have really seen the opportunity that they have by encouraging their students to just take a look at these programs, just to take a look at Foreign Service. Because to me, it's more than the financial income. It's more than a job. It's being able to see people. I think that it would be ideal for young blacks to know about the Foreign Service. And even if they leave after 15, 20 years, their abilities are so sharpened and increased. But that's another subject. What's the next question?

*Q: You've been very kind with your time, with your insights. I wonder, could I ask you to say some words about the Payne Fellowship, your work with Congressman Payne, Senior, the late Congressman Payne, Senior, and then the late Congressman Payne Junior, and your work with them, their work in creating the Payne Fellowships with USAID.*

RANGEL: Well, I walked in the path of the Pickering Program, so I didn't have to sell a new idea to make it possible to do the training that's necessary at the State Department to ensure you would know that when fellows completed the program that they would be eligible to serve as foreign service officers. And I want to mention that the experience of black ambassadors that have retired has been essential to the programs' success and longevity. They don't get the accolades, but I couldn't have found where the doors were, much less to open them if it wasn't for them.

*Q: That makes me think of my mentor Ambassador Ruth Davis who has been so connected with and supportive of these programs - I imagine she is among the ambassadors you were referring to.*

RANGEL: Oh my God, she was, she was, how is her health now? How is her health?

*Q: Not great, I'm afraid, but she's hanging in there.*

RANGEL: Get Michelle Ambassador Davis's telephone number so I can call her.

*Q: I will.*

RANGEL: Okay, thank you.

*Q: Yeah, she would love to hear from you.*

RANGEL: And when it comes to Payne, Payne was running for Congress for so long, but he was running in the Democratic primary against a guy named Peter Rodino, who, in the white community, was a civil rights leader. Payne joked and told people that if we had supported him, instead of Peter Rodino, he would have had the same seniority as Charlie Rangel. But one of the things besides politics, Payne had worked with the YMCA in a program that took him around the world. And so I learned so much from him in planning our trips. And the fact is that so many people in the foreign countries already knew who he was before he got to the Congress. And needless to say, his shocking and unexpected death brought to Congress his son, whose personality exemplified what every dad would want if he had to leave a son like he has done. I unfortunately was not in Congress when we lost Payne, but we all worked together. We were not at all competitive and we all wanted to help each other's program. It was a family, and I enjoyed every minute.

*Q: There's something that I feel like I want to share with you. You mentioned the African Growth and Opportunity Act. Then speaking of the late Representative Payne, senior, I did my internship with the Pickering Fellowship in Southern Africa at the time that AGOA was coming online. And so I got a chance to work on that effort to help Botswana and help our embassy in the country of Botswana to see if Botswana could benefit from the African Growth and Opportunity Act. And Rosa Whitaker came through.*

RANGEL: I just could not say how much Rosa has done for the continent, training and helping. She's quite a person.

*Q: Yes.*

RANGEL: Jim McDermott, Congressman Jim McDermott from Seattle, from Washington, state of Washington. Okay. His chief of staff was Mike. They worked with me on the bill.

*Q: Nice. And then I remember the late Congressman Payne, Senior's, staff coming through, also for the purpose of seeing whether Botswana could benefit from the African*

*Growth and Opportunity Act. And so just to share with you that as a beneficiary of these diplomatic fellowships that you helped to create, I could see that as an intern then and be inspired by what I was seeing, by what you were doing.*

RANGEL: Let me tell you a funny story, because I have to leave now. But it was interesting to see folks so damn enthusiastic about the passage of this bill because I didn't remember hearing too much of their comments during the debate. Well, when I found out that the Israeli embassy was hosting the heads of the African countries, I said, what the hell is going on here? There's something that I'm missing between the African countries and Israel that my Jewish colleagues know about. And what it was, in order to get us more votes on the floor, some of these countries had gone into contracts with Israel to receive some of their goods and wares so that they would be able to get the benefits of the program and Israel would get a piece of the action. They were sophisticated enough to cut that without any help from their friends in the United States. And I was so proud of a group of ambassadors that have been so contained by British politics and dealing with the State Department that I said they now have come to that you have to deal with them because they know how to get votes. And that made it all worthwhile.

*Q: Nice. Thank you, sir. Thank you for all you have been doing and continue to do.*

RANGEL: It's all been fun. I've enjoyed it. Michelle has kept me together with the program. She has so many other things. And we've got some things we're trying to do. Yes, and thank you for serving as an advisor to the programs for the time you did.

*Q: Thank you, sir. And thank you, Mrs. Rangel.*

RANGEL: Okay, buddy. Good luck.

*Q: Thank you.*

*End of interview*