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

AMBASSADOR JOHN MELVIN YATES

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is the 30th of October, 2003. This is an interview with John Yates. Do you have a middle initial John?

YATES: M.

Q: John M. What does "Yates" mean?

YATES: I have no idea. Everybody asks me and I say it's akin to William Butler Yeats, but he of course spells his name differently.

Q: No, but I was just wondering, most names have some origin meaning something; "Kennedy," for example, means "ugly head" in Gaelic, you know.

Anyway John, to start off with, when and where were you born?

YATES: I was born in Superior, Montana, on November 25, 1939.

Q: And can we talk a little about your family? Let's talk about your father's side; the Yates family, where did they come from?

YATES: Sure. Well, as much as I know my father was Swedish and Pennsylvania Dutch. He obviously came to Superior, Montana, in the '30s. He was a poor farmer, and his family had come from Minnesota. And beyond that I don't know very much about him.

Subsequent family research in Superior Montana, Mineral County Library and Historical Museum, verified through WPA (Works Projects Administration) records that Leon Yates

arrived in Superior, Montana in 1937 from 10 miles northwest of Kalispell, Montana, with a wife and six children. They arrived with one cow and four calves.

Leon was employed by the Agricultural Conservation Project. By 1939, he had 23 head of cattle and an apple orchard of 75 trees, raised wheat barley, clover and alfalfa and had plans to raise poultry. Both Leon and Violet were hard working and very productive. They were married almost 63 years and raised 10 children. According to the 2020 census, the population of Superior is 830.

Q: Do you know anything about his background, education or anything like that?

YATES: Yes, he went to school until he was 14 or 15 years old. When he hit high school and his father died, he became the support for the family.

Q: On your mother's side; what was her maiden name, where did she come from?

YATES: My mother's maiden name was McPheeters. Her family was also from Montana but had moved from Indiana in the early 1900s. Her family was considered to have "means" and had one of the first "overland" cars in Kalispell. They were fairly wealthy for the area, and she, on her side of the family, finished high school and went to Dillon Normal College in Montana.

Q: Teachers college.

YATES: Teachers college.

Q: It's interesting; there's a pattern I find so often where the man has to work early and the woman often has a teacher's degree and maybe finishes high school, if that. But then often the woman is able to get into normal school to get a teaching job which is about the only job open.

Q: How did your mother and father meet?

YATES: They both were in Montana. My father was a few years older. The story is that their fathers were talking as neighbors over a fence. Leon saw my mother through the fence and started talking to her and teasing her, when he was eight and she was four or something like that, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Q: Where did you live in Montana for your early years?

YATES: I lived in Montana until I was about four or five years old, and then I moved to eastern Washington.

Q: In Montana, you were living right on a farm then?

YATES: We had a farm, yes.

Q: So even at a young age I assume that you ended up with farm chores and things like this or not?

YATES: Well, you know, I had a lot of brothers and sisters.

Q: Oh boy.

YATES: A lot of brothers and my older brothers say I didn't do much and I probably didn't. I don't have too big a recollection of the farm; I started school in Spokane. I was only five or six, so I do have some recollections.

Q: How about winters?

YATES: How about winters? Cold. It's cold in Montana. It was a pretty modest family, poor I think we'd say these days, and we lived in a big old house in a little town and didn't have too much. But we worked hard. I remember celebrating our Thanksgivings there with special foods. Still is my favorite holiday, and I taught a lot of African cooks how to make a turkey.

Q: How big was your family?

YATES: I had nine brothers and sisters.

Q: Good heavens.

YATES: And I was the seventh one. I was the youngest one to be born in Montana and my next brother Dale was born in Montana, too. He was the first child to be born in a hospital. The last two siblings were born in Washington State.
Q: Your father, when your whole family moved to Washington State, where did they move to?

YATES: We moved to Spokane. My dad couldn't make a living farming and he started surveying wheat fields and became a surveyor. And during the time of building of the Grand Coulee and Bonneville dams in Washington State and during the Second World War when he was too old to be in the military, he moved out there and worked with the Army Corps of Engineers on those big projects.

Q: So you grew up in Spokane?

YATES: After a few years in Spokane, in 1948, we moved 80 miles south to Pullman, Washington. I don't know if you know the region or not.

Q: Not too well. I know Seattle, of course. You started school in Spokane?

YATES: Yes, I started school in Spokane.

Q: How did you find school?

YATES: How did I find school? My recollection of kindergarten, first, second and third grade, was that I liked it. I was a good student, but I don't know what subjects I liked best.

Q: Were you a reader early on?

YATES: I think so. I think I was reading probably before I went to kindergarten.

Q: Then you moved to Pullman. What was Pullman like?

YATES: Pullman is a university town in the middle of the wheat fields in eastern Washington. My parents had eight kids at the time, but they understood the importance of an education. They didn't have any money, so they figured the best way they could get their kids to go to college or to help them get into college was to move to a college town. My dad took a job there as a surveyor on the staff of Washington State University, and all my brothers and sisters went to Washington State University.

Q: How was elementary and high school in Pullman?

YATES: Pullman isn't a big university town. It had and still does have a very high-quality educational system, but a small school in a small town. Pullman had a population of 6,000 at the time and my high school class had 80 students. It was big enough to have most of the things that high school kids do but not too big to overwhelm, but it had a very high-quality student body.

Q: Do you recall any courses or subjects that were particularly interesting to you?

YATES: My high school principal taught American history and American government and he was a lawyer by trade. He was a very good teacher. The science teacher was also very good. A lot of the teachers that we had were not veteran teachers. I'd say a third of the teachers were getting trained. Some of them who were young and dynamic and some of them were older.

Q: In your family, were politics or events discussed much or not?

YATES: Some, I would say. I mean there were always discussions. We ate dinner together and people talked about events and things. Actually, in our town, a lot of us had a lot of strong opinions about different things. I can remember things like the end of the First World War, the dropping of the atomic bomb and the Rosenberg trial and things like that. I think my parents were sort of Republicans; I don't know why I think that. But, in any case I wouldn't say it was a political family. We would mostly pontificate.

Q: So you'd say your family was sort of modestly Republican in a way, would you say?

YATES: That's what they said they were, yes.

Q: In high school did you go out for sports or anything like that?

YATES: I did. I played football and basketball, and then in the spring, I played golf.

Q: Did you get involved in music, plays?

YATES: No. One of the regrets of my life is that I'm not at all musical. I think if I could change anything I would learn how to sing. But no music in high school for me.

Being a university town there are a lot of things to do in the summer, including things like play groups. I recall once being the cowardly lion in "The Wizard of Oz." I think I was12 years old, but principally my high school activities were sports and debate.

Q: How about reading? What types of books did you like to read?

YATES: At an early age I read just about anything I could get my hands on. But in those years, I think I really liked reading novels and stories about the world. I read Tarzan and "Black Beauty" and things like that as a pre-teen, also political novels. I remember "All the King's Men" and other books such as "Catcher in the Rye."

Q: In high school I assume that the plan in your family was to get all the young people into the University of Washington?

YATES: NOT University of Washington but Washington State University, but yes to get them into college.

Q: Washington State University. You went to Washington State?

YATES: I went for a year and then I transferred. I was the only one who went out of state.

Q: What year did you graduate from high school?

YATES: 1957.

Q: You went '57 to '58 to Washington State University.

YATES: That's correct.

Q: Were you embarked on any particular major?

YATES: Yes actually, I was. My dad was a surveyor and two of my brothers were civil engineers. I was good in math and everybody said I was going to be a civil engineer. So I

went to college, enrolled in pre-engineering. I couldn't run a slide rule and got the only D in my life in mechanical drawing.

So, I then transferred to Stanford and studied international relations.

Q: Oh boy. It was good to learn early on, wasn't it?

YATES: It was good to learn early on, that's right.

Q: For those that don't know, a slide rule was a very fine way of calculating using essentially a slide stick that you could do very good, fine calculations with the thing, but the computer has completely eliminated that.

YATES: I'm afraid if they'd had computers in 1957, I probably would have ended up as an engineer and wouldn't be talking to you today, Stu.

Q: So why Stanford?

YATES: It was considered to be the best school on the west coast, maybe even the United States, depending on one's source and bias, but it was an expensive private school. I had been admitted out of high school, but we couldn't afford to send me, so I went as a transfer student and got some scholarships and graduated from there.

Q: So you were there from what would be '58 to '61?

YATES: That's correct; I graduated in '61.

Q: What was Stanford like in those days?

YATES: Stanford was a very nice place. It was a very small school. The undergraduate school was only about 6,000 students and three to one were males to females. Pretty casual compared to other schools; a little bit Californian at that point, but I considered it then and still do to have among the highest academic professors. The libraries were wonderful.

Q: International relations, what did that consist of? Was it considered political science or was history?

YATES: The degree was actually international relations, but it was a heavy dose of political science, history and economics. I'm not sure they still have an international relations department. When I went, the IR majors had the same color of hood as political scientist counterparts.

Q: I know it's changed over the years but political scientists have gotten very much into the calculator and the models and all that, but was it the case in those days?

YATES: No, it was just starting. As a matter of fact, when I was applying to graduate school there were some there that were considered to be sort of behaviorists and were doing more models and things like that. What I studied was more history, and at that time, it was classical political science rather than what it has evolved to today.

Q: Was there any focus in your international relations area or type or something like that?

YATES: Early on I became interested in Africa. Even though Stanford had no African studies program, I did what I could do to get courses in African studies. For example, I could take a course in the Middle East, which they did have, with a focus on Sudan. And I took some political geography courses and concentrated on Africa.

Q: What attracted you particularly to Africa?

YATES: It was during the 1960 election when John Kennedy was running. Chester Bowles came to Stanford and spoke and talked about the importance that China had in the previous decades, and predicted that Africa would be of the same magnitude of importance, but we didn't have anybody who knew anything about it. I thought well maybe I should look into it, and so I did.

Q: It's interesting because this is the period when African decolonization was just starting.

YATES: That's correct.

Q: And there were those who were internationally minded and all were entranced with Africa.

YATES: That's precisely right. It was exactly that time when Ghana became independent.

Q: Nkrumah was the shining light and all that.

YATES: That's right. And Sekou Toure defying de Gaulle. It was an exciting time.

Q: What about while you were on the campus, how did the Kennedy phenomenon hit Stanford? I'm talking about the election of 1960.

YATES: Well, I'm not exactly sure.

Q: A lot of people got engaged in this election and a lot of the young people were particularly attracted to the Kennedy camp. I was just wondering whether—

YATES: For myself I'd say that's true, but it's also the first election that I was of age, and it wasn't too hard to make a choice between Kennedy and Nixon for me. I think the campus was somewhat engaged, but also being a campus where there were a lot of, first

of all, Californians, and second having a certain amount of wealth in the student body. I would say there was a split, but a lot of Kennedy supporters.

A string of people came through to speak. I remember Sophie Williams also on Africa later on. I suppose I just thought it was my first election, and I knew I wanted to be well informed against defying the Stanford kind of wealthy.

Q: What about with your studies, did you find any professors who were knowledgeable about Africa or did you have to stick to Sudan and the Middle East?

YATES: Pretty much that. There was almost nobody on Africa per se. As I said, I took a couple of political geography courses and learned about the rivers and mountains, and the Great Rift Valley but not politics per se.

Q: During this time, how about the rest of the world? Did the Cold War intrude at all?

YATES: We were aware of the Cold War, obviously. Intrude? There was certainly a theme in political science, modern political science courses and things like that, but the Cold War in the sense of making a real impact on me, I suppose, was not until the Cuban crisis which was a couple of years later.

Q: Did the faculty in international relations look towards the we call it the East but actually the West and Asia?

YATES: Stanford had a very strong Asian program bias in some regards, both in history and political science, which I didn't really take very much of. But there were people that I remember, Professor Claud Buss, was very well regarded on Japan and the Philippines.

Back to the Cold War, one of the things I was interested in was that Stanford has the Hoover Institute of war, revolution, peace. Of course, Herbert Hoover's collection is there, but one of the people who was there when I was as a fellow or something was Alexander Kerensky. He had very strong feelings about what was going on in his former country, Russia.

Q: Had he been, what was it, prime minister?

YATES: He was the last prime minister before the Revolution.

Q: Revolution, yes. Did you have any idea what you wanted to do?

YATES: I knew I wanted to be in the Foreign Service. I can't remember exactly when that happened.

Q: In a way it's interesting; a lot of people didn't have any idea what the Foreign Service was. Do you remember, did you run across anybody from the Foreign Service?

YATES: I think that being an international relations major I'm sure that people did come from the State Department and told us about the Foreign Service. But I knew that was why I majored in IR and that's what I wanted to do by the end of my first year at Stanford.

Q: You graduated in '61?

YATES: Yes.

Q: What did you do?

YATES: I went to the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and continued the international relations studies for the next two years. I took the Foreign Service exam every chance I had, a couple times. When I passed the exam, I had finished my second year at Fletcher and then I came into the Foreign Service immediately. It's the only job I've ever had. I mean, the only profession I had. Though I had a lot of other jobs.

Q: What was Fletcher like? You were there '61 to '63 then?

YATES: That's right, and February '64. Fletcher was a small school on the Tufts campus but jointly administered by Harvard. We thought it was always emphasized as Harvard rather than Tufts in those days, but Fletcher is now fully integrated in Tufts – a small school, maybe 60 or so first year students of whom probably two-thirds were U.S. and one-third were foreign and a small faculty with a- a core faculty of four or five. Everybody took public diplomacy, international law, international economics and one elective. I stayed two years. The second year, you could branch out and that's when I started to take some African studies courses.

Q: Where were the African studies people coming from?

YATES: There were two professors at Fletcher, one had been invited, Haile Salassie, and one had worked for the League of Nations commission dealing with Mandated Colonies. I can't remember the name of it, but he had done some things in Africa. And there were professors from MIT and Harvard. That was one of the nice things about the Fletcher School was that you could cross register work with professors from all the universities around there.

Q: In your class, were there any others pointed towards the Foreign Service?

YATES: At the Fletcher School?

Q: Yes.

YATES: I think that in those years probably 20 percent or so of the class went to the Foreign Service and another 10 percent to USAID (United States Agency for

International Development) or other government services. Over half went to government services in those days and Foreign Service was the biggest number of those.

Q: Have you run across any of them since?

YATES: Oh sure.

Q: Who are some of the people?

YATES: Some of the people, well there was Dick Ogden, Todd Stewart. Those two were at Fletcher with me. Fritz Gilbert who went to USAID; Fred Bergsten, who went to the Treasury Department. That's all I can think of. Steve Buck was there.

Q: I'm working to get Steve Buck under my thumb. I've done Todd Stewart.

YATES: You've done Todd, yes.

Q: During this time, had you picked up a significant other or not?

YATES: I got married my senior year at Stanford. I married my high school sweetheart. She graduated from Washington State in Spring one semester early and then we got married. I got married my last quarter at Stanford.

Q: How did you survive coming from a relatively modest family in the wilds of the Boston area?

YATES: That was good primarily because my wife worked as a teacher. But if you had asked me about Stanford all I did at Stanford was study and work. When I went to Boston, Peggy, who was my wife, late wife now, taught school in North Hampton, which is just up the road in Massachusetts. In addition, I taught undergraduate sections at Tufts myself.

Q: When you say at Stanford, what sort of jobs were you doing?

YATES: I hashed for all my meals; hashed, we called it, worked in the cafeteria serving meals, washing up, that sort of thing. That was for my board. And I worked four hours a day at a dry-cleaning company delivering clothes. After my first year I worked at the apartment house I lived in and the woman had me clean the bathrooms and that sort of thing.

Q: You took the oral exam when?

YATES: I took the Foreign Service exam three times. I passed the written part when I was a college senior, when I was 20, and took the oral exam and they said, "Sonny, you're too young." So, I took it the next year, my first year at Fletcher and passed it again. There was a guy named Kennedy, actually, who indicated that I was an effete East Coaster, so I

needed to go out and get "some manure on my feet." I remember him saying that. I thought this guy doesn't know anything about me. Then the third year I took the exam again and passed it, and the oral too.

Q: Do you recall any of the questions that were asked on the oral?

YATES: I can't off the top of my head, though I remember things like what is the OAS? And that was the time when I think the OAS could have been the French/Algerian Secret Army Organization or the Organization of American States. I could probably come up with quite a few of them, but some of those may have been what I was asked and others may have been part of the lore.

Q: At Tufts, did you pick up much about the Foreign Service and what you wanted to do in the Foreign Service?

YATES: No. I already knew that that's what I was going to do or I thought I knew that's what I was going to do. I think we had a Washington trip from Boston, and there was more of an exchange between Tuft's Fletcher School and Washington than between Stanford. People were coming up as speakers. I didn't really know what one was going to do in the Foreign Service; I probably had some misconceptions.

Q: Then you came in in what year?

YATES: In 1964.

Q: What was your entry class like, your A-100 course?

YATES: I think around 30 of us, whom I think maybe one, two, three, five or fewer were women, all white, mostly directly out of graduate school, one or two directly out of undergraduate and a couple that had some outside experience doing good things. In those days you had to join before you were 31. I think most of us were 24, 25.

Q: How about the military? Had that played much of a role at that point or not?

YATES: For me?

Q: Yes.

YATES: Yes. President Kennedy had a policy of not drafting people who were married, and I'd been married since I was 21. Although I took my draft physical and thought that I would probably go into the military, in fact I didn't. I was taking ROTC at Stanford, and then my junior year I had the chance to go to Fort Lewis, Washington for summer camp. I also had the chance to go to Germany, so I resigned my military commission. It was never really an issue.

Q: When you were in the A-100 course, were you still pointing yourself towards Africa?

YATES: Oh absolutely, to the extent that we could express a choice, and I definitely wanted to go to Africa.

Q: What happened?

YATES: They sent me to Algiers, which at that time Algeria was part of the African Bureau.

Q; And you learned what the OAS was? I can't remember, but it was essentially the French military resistance to the decolonization of Algiers.

YATES: Precisely, yes.

Q: You were in Algiers from '64 to when?

YATES: Yes, I got there at the end of '64; I went to start the A-100 class in February of '64 and I got to Algiers October/November of that year. I was there from '64 to '66.

Q: What was Algiers like in those days?

YATES: Everyone thinks their first assignment is the best; Algiers was a lovely place. It was immediately after independence, and I thought the Algerians were quite conflicted. They didn't know if they were French or Arabic, Arabs or Africans, but the infrastructure of the colonial power was still very much there. It was a prosperous place, quite revolutionary. These were the early years of the Vietnam War and there was a strong protest movement against our involvement in Vietnam.

Q: What type of work were you doing?

YATES: In those years in the Foreign Service, they first did a rotation assignment. The idea was that on your first assignment you'd spend six months in the political section, six months in economic, admin and consular. In fact, I started out in the GSO and went on to do a traditional rotation even ending with the 5th USIS working in the American Center in downtown Algiers.

Q: Who was the ambassador there?

YATES: The first ambassador was William J. Porter and then the next one was John Jernegan.

Q: Two really seasoned veterans.

YATES: Definitely.

Q: On the consular side, what sort of work were you doing?

YATES: When I was in, the rotation officer was the consular officer and he was the only one, so we did everything from American services protection, visas, non-immigrant and immigration. Fortunately, there was a Foreign Service national, a Swiss woman who'd been there for long before Algeria was independent. She knew a lot about the business. As I look back now, today, at what goes on in the consular sections in Africa there was relatively little work compared to what goes on now.

Q: How about on the political side. This must have been a fascinating time politically. What was happening.

YATES: It was. I got there at the end of '64. Then midway through the tour in July of 1965, there was a coup d'état against Algeria's first President Ben Bella. The defense minister Hourai Boumédiene led the coup and then took over, so that was a big event. And then, as I mentioned, there was a strong, strong resistance to United States policy in Vietnam and in the Middle East as well. But in those years Algeria was run by the leaders of the Revolution. It's quite amazing to me how that changed in just a generation when the Islamists, Islamic fundamentalists replaced most of these people. Bouteflika is still present.

Q: How did the opposition to American policy in Vietnam and the Middle East manifest itself?

YATES: First of all, there were demonstrations, at least if not promoted by the government acquiesced by the government nearly, during Vietnam, almost weekly. Some of these were not violent against us, but they were violent in the sense of breaking the windows of the cultural center downtown. I was very junior, and I didn't get involved in making demarches to the government at that point, but the government was strongly in favor of the US getting out. In addition to the Vietnam protesting, the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) were doing training there, so we had our differences.

Q: Although you obviously were at the bottom of the pile, more or less at that point; there had been a real rift between the Europeans, particularly in Paris and in Algiers, at one time. This was known as the Battle of Algeria, which was fought between bureaus, at that time, the Middle East Bureau and the European Bureau. Had this died down by this point?

YATES: You mean within our own bureaucracy?

Q: Yes. Was this battle over by this time?

YATES: Must have been over. I would have to say that it didn't impress me at the time or I've forgotten it.

Q: Did you get out and meet any political figures?

YATES: Sure. We met several; it was always hard to know because it was hard for the Algerians to know us and for us to know them. There was the fellow who had been at the U.N. during the years leading up to independence who was married to an American, which gave us an insider view. We got to be friends with a few others, but I wouldn't say that I left Algeria with a lot of friends.

Q: The Algerians, unlike the Egyptians, have a reputation of being a rather dour people. I mean, they're not that open to strangers.

YATES: They didn't seem to be all that open, and they didn't know what their role was in the world. On the other hand, I have to say that John Kennedy's stance towards the French in the independence of Algeria, his speech in the Senate before he became President, did in fact still have some continuing favorable resonance with Americans. Actually, earlier during the periodic 'manifestations,' demonstrations at the American cultural center in downtown Algiers, when it was known marchers were in route, we'd put up a large photo of Kennedy in the window, maybe with Ben Bella or some other notoriety.

Q: Yes. He was the sole senator to get up and speak out that there should be an independent Algeria, which was anathema to the establishment, particularly because of the concern about keeping NATO together and keeping France in NATO.

YATES: That's right.

Q: Did you get out and travel much?

YATES: We traveled a lot in Algeria, yes. We traveled by car down into the desert to the principal oases and when I served as consul I visited Constantine, and also Oran. My wife went all the way down to Tamanrasset. In those years you could travel easily in Algeria by car.

Q: Today it's too dangerous.

YATES: It's too dangerous. You can't travel out of the city. The past couple of years you haven't been able to travel out of the compound. But then it wasn't dangerous. I remember our eldest child was born while we were in Algiers, and when she was six weeks old, we put her in the back of the car, drove to Ghardaia and El Golea and didn't think all that much about it.

Q: Did you feel like you were in Africa at this point or no? When you say "Africa", were you thinking of Sub-Saharan Africa?

YATES: I was thinking of Sub-Saharan Africa, but at that time the State Department was officially treating Algeria as part of Africa and the Africans were very appalled.

Q: Also, because it was newly independent, was that also part of the attraction?

YATES: Yes. I was in Africa but I also thought I'd rather go to Sub-Saharan Africa. I never had any great desire to become an Arabist. Steve Buck, who replaced me there, you can talk to him about that.

Q: While you were there what did you ask for? Where did you want to go?

YATES: I don't remember exactly how the process worked but I asked to go to Sub-Sahara Africa and my next assignment was to Malawi. I can't remember if that was a personal choice. We didn't have the open bidding system in those days.

Q: Yes, they had what they called an April Fools report, I think. It was due on the first of April and you listed three or four places you wanted to go.

YATES: Yes.

Q: You got to go to Malawi.

YATES: Yes.

Q: What had Malawi been called during colonial times.

YATES: Nyasaland.

Q: Nyasaland.

YATES: That's right.

Q: Could you expand on Malawi.

YATES: Sure. Malawi was part of the Federation of Rhodesia, Nyasaland. So, we have southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, northern Rhodesia, now Zambia, and Mozambique in the eastern part of Africa.

Q: You were there from '66 to '68?

YATES: That's correct. Actually, we arrived early in '67, '67 and '68.

Q: What were you doing?

YATES: My official job was as consular and economic officer.

Q: Talk about Malawi at the time. What kept Malawi going?

YATES: Hastings Kamuzu Banda was the President, then hero of independence. When Banda got to be President, he immediately turned on all the people who had helped him

in his struggle of revolution, and most of the intelligentsia had gone into exile in Zambia or Zimbabwe.

Malawi is a small country, although fairly rich because it's also among one of the most heavily populated countries in Africa. At the time, the principal money crop was tobacco. One of the things that Banda did very early on was to resist Nkrumah/African socialism. He invited in private enterprise. Tea was the biggest cash crop, which was an estate crop, some small holders but mostly large, foreign-owned estates.

Q: Who was our ambassador when you were in Malawi?

YATES: The ambassador Marshall P. Jones.

Q: How big was the embassy?

YATES: The embassy at that time was an ambassador, DCM, political officer, economic/consular officer, myself, and two people in the admin section. We had an AID mission of equal size (U.S. Agency for International Development). We had both a station chief (CIA) and a military attaché at the time, which was a full staff. They probably don't have that many people working at the post now.

Q: What were American interests then?

YATES: American interests were to keep Malawi in our camp for Cold War considerations, and to an extent counter hostile posturing against us from the non-aligned block. Not that Malawi played any significant role in those groupings, but they had a vote if not a very loud and respected voice.

In those years, the Cold War was very much a primary determinate of our foreign policy and preventing things like having recognition of the North Koreans regime or the East Germans, and preventing things like having recognition of the North Korean or the East Germans, or even recognizing Taiwan. But it was mostly guided, driven by the Cold War and even less. We had a sizable AID program and a significant Peace Corps program. But I think that we were probably really there because President Kennedy had made a decision that we'd have embassies all over Africa, which I think was a very good decision, as the African colonies became independent. I guess we were in a way Cold War warriors.

Q: What were relations from the embassy's perspective? Was southern Rhodesia the middle of UDI (unilateral declaration of independence)?

YATES: That's correct.

Q: And how was that going?

YATES: Well for us it was UDI-

Q: UDI is a unilateral declaration of independence by Ian Smith's white government.

YATES: That's right, which meant that for us Rhodesia was essentially closed. We couldn't go there; we didn't have any representation there. We had sanctions on Rhodesia, which resulted in such things as Rhodesian tobacco, which was the mainstay of their economy and had been sold through in Blantyre's tobacco auction. And you had small business people who had come to Malawi from Rhodesia.

Q: Because there was a war going on?

YATES: There wasn't really much of a war. There was some resistance, but not really much of war; that came later.

Q: Any relations with the other countries around there or were they important?

YATES: South Africa was the interesting aspect of Malawi for an African country in that Banda maintained relations with the South Africans and was one of the only, if not the only one of one or two black African, Sub-Saharan African countries to do so. Most of the nations that had issues of recognition and things like that, Israel, China, Taiwan, West Germany, were all active in Africa in those years and were there. But Malawi's relations with other African countries, other than Zambia, many of the people who were in opposition to Banda were in Zambia, so the relationship was not all that good. This was before independence in Mozambique where there was a hot civil war and that was enormously impacted.

Q: Were there political groups in Malawi from outside, the ones that were part of the Portuguese resistance groups or the African national movement, or anything like that?

YATES: At that time, it was a single party state, the Malawi Congress Party. If you wanted to be in politics, you were in the Malawi Congress Party, otherwise, you went to Zambia. But if you were thinking about opposition groups to neighboring regimes such as ANC or FRELIMO, they certainly were not overt and probably not tolerated by the GOM. That doesn't mean FRELIMO fighters didn't at times take refuge inside Malawi's borders, or be pursued by the Portuguese who were there.

Q: How was Banda viewed by our embassy?

YATES: As a strongman but one that we had good relations with, good access and could count on Banda for support on things that we couldn't get anywhere else in Africa. I mean I remember in those years some of the U.N. votes would be 95 to 3; it would be the United States, Malawi and Israel on some of those votes. We got along well with Banda, and he supported us in things that we wanted support on.

Q: As an economic officer what were you looking at?

YATES: We were looking at the trade and the main cash crops, tobacco and tea. The subsistence farming aspects were more closely monitored by the USAID mission. An interesting aspect for Malawi, as a black African nation, was that it had good relations with some economic ties with Saudi Arabia which was boycotted by nearly everyone.

Q: What was AID doing there?

YATES: AID was doing a lot of everything. They built roads, including the Great North Road. The country had almost no paved roads and some areas would be impassable during the rainy season. But we worked with Malawi cooperatives. They were into education with teachers provided by the Peace Corps and curriculum development funded by USAID. Malawi was a poor country, a backwater within the Central Africa Federation. Our programs were supported by small radio stations. They were into training in medical basics, so they were across the board in those early years of AID.

Q: You left Malawi in '68?

YATES: Yes.

Q: What did you think would be the future of this small state?

YATES: I thought it was a very interesting state with a real chance because they didn't get hard over on this African socialism that was failing and destroying other promising states. The fact that they were willing to keep a relationship with Portugal and with South Africa was realistic in their point of view. It also gave them some opportunities of survival that they probably wouldn't have had if they hadn't done so.

Q: Did they have a large white planter class there?

YATES: Large, but not large like Southern Rhodesia. Significant, several thousand. That's because the largest merchant class in Malawi would have been South Asian Indians who had been residents for several generations. They were not beloved by native African Malawians.

Q: Was there a threat of a white takeover?

YATES: No, not at all I don't think it was even thought about and nor was the white class worried about being expropriated and driven out of the country.

Q: How did the Indians, the mercantile class fit in?

YATES: Some of them became part of the power structure. I remember the speaker of Parliament at that time was a man named I.K. Surtee who was an Indian. They mostly provided services in small towns where nobody else would, running the stores and things like that.

Q: Pretty country?

YATES: Pretty country, beautiful country, yes.

Q: Did you have the Peace Corps there?

YATES: We had the Peace Corps; I don't know how many there were at the time, but it was a big program. There must have been more than 100 with two doctors and staff of four or five. I don't know if you've ever read Paul Theroux but Paul Theroux was a Peace Corps volunteer in that group.

Q: Yes, I have. The travel books are wonderful.

YATES: Yes.

Q: Then where did you go?

YATES: Just to show that I was driven to be an Africanist, that year they were sending State Department officers on training assignments in African studies. I was one of those five and I went back to Boston. And since we had a policy in those years of not sending people back to where they had been before, the Fletcher School in my case, and not to wanting them to work on a degree, I went to Boston University where I could cross register to Fletcher and Harvard and all those places that I knew, and I wrote my PhD thesis.

Q: Boston University at that time had one of the major African studies.

YATES: That's right, one of a small handful: Boston, Indiana and UCLA.

Q: Having had your experience in Algeria, particularly in Malawi, how did you find Boston U, which is where I got my Masters.

YATES: At BU?

Q: Yes, in history. How did you find it as far as its outlook on Africa? Was it idealistic or practical? How did you see it?

YATES: It was fair. Aspirational might not be a bad description. BU did not have a significant African studies program. It was very small and it had really one or two people and there was more of a cultural/anthropological bent rather than political or economic. Dr. William Brown, who started the program, was, I believe, an anthropologist. BU was not particularly a place oriented toward global African studies. One or two faculty were sort of interested in their geographic areas, one being the Horn of Africa and another being West Africa, but it was not that significant of a program. In fact, I used my time in what we call directed studies where I stretched my commitment to the State Department to writing chapters of my PhD thesis.

Q: You say you went for your PhD?

YATES: I had taken my comps and my orals before I went into the Foreign Service. I had completed my masters thesis in 1963 on Anglo-French Relations with Liberia.

Q: This was at Tufts?

YATES: Yes, the Fletcher School, and I wrote chapters while I was there at BU.

Q: What was your dissertation about?

YATES: My dissertation was the Foreign Economic Policy of Malawi: An Assessment of the Reasons for and Results of Cooperation with the Republic of South Africa, 1964-1968.

Q: Had this been a subject that you were prepared for or was it because of your involvement with Malawi?

YATES: It was primarily that. I was seizing the opportunity. When I was in Malawi, I compiled documents. And the nice thing about Malawi was that they did have statistics and publications that were pretty good, left over from the Federation.

Q: Did you get your PhD?

YATES: I did eventually, in ’68. I finished and was awarded the PhD in ’72 so I had some polishing to make it acceptable.

Q: That’s always the case. It’s interesting how one can work within the system as long as you’re getting it. By the time you came back, did you feel there was a significant core of Africanists?

YATES: Not quite that soon. This was after my second assignment. They were just really starting to have some people who had more than one or two assignments or people who were interested in continuing them, so I would say that came later.

Q: You found yourself within the first wave of Africanists?

YATES: I think that’s fair to say, yes, very much so.

Q: What happened in’69?

YATES: In ‘69 I went to Bamako in Mali.

Q: Okay, we’ll put at the end of the tape here in ’69 when you’re off to Bamako, Mali.

YATES: That's right. Off to Timbuktu.

Q: Timbuktu. Okay, great.

YATES: How about that.

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Q: Today is the 12th of November, 2003. 1968, Bamako, Mali, how did the assignment come about?

YATES: As I recall I was sitting up in Boston University doing my year of African studies. Someone called me up and said how about going to Bamako? And I said let me check on that with my wife, but I think that sounds like a good thing to do. And we did.

Q: You were in Bamako from '69 to when?

YATES: Seventy-one; '69 to '71, yes.

Q: Talk about Bamako in '69 when you got there; what sort of a country was it?

YATES: Mali had been part of the Ghana/Guinea/Mali union immediately after independence with three radical leaders of West Africa with Sékou Touré, Kwame Nkrumah and Modibo Keita in Mali. I got there months after the coup d'état that overturned Modibo Keita and they had a military coup from a bunch of young lieutenants and captains, so they were in a period of transition from these radical, progressive African policies that they had been consolidating with the military coup. Mali was an extremely poor country on the southern part of the Sahara and with not much going on in the way of economics, some cotton and peanuts. I'm proud to say for the Malians, in the years since then they have come a long way in democratization, economic liberalism and prosperity.

Q: At the time, was this one of the first coups in post-colonial Africa?

YATES: By then there had been a few other coups. I'd have to search my memory, but I'm sure there had been a coup in what was then Dahomey, where I went later on, Benin now. There had been a significant number. Nkrumah had been turned over in Ghana by then as well. It wasn't exceptional. In fact, I think the policy on coups now is more forthright and spelled out today than it was then.

Q: How did the coup go? Was it a bloody coup?

YATES: It occurred before I got there, but not at all bloody. I think Modibo had gone up to the central part of the country. When he got back, he found out that the military committee had taken over and he was incarcerated, but not killed. As far as I know I think there was nothing---not any firing.

Q: Yes. Who was the ambassador at that time?

YATES: The first ambassador I had there was G. Edward Clark and then during my time he was replaced by Robert O. Blake.

Q: What were American interests at that time with Mali as you saw it?

YATES: I think we talked about this earlier but since President Kennedy made the decision of universal representation in Africa, we did have embassies every place in Africa. But they were Cold War oriented. The same issues that we had in other countries, the representation of East Germany versus West Germany, Israel, and in Mali, as I recall, was in the height of some of the worst parts of the Vietnam War that the Malians were adamant and opposed, but if you talk about economic interests, few.

Q: What was your job?

YATES: I was a political officer and that's the first time.

Q: What does a political officer do in a small country like Mali when the military has taken over?

YATES: You report the best you can; you try to tell Washington what's going on in the sense there's not very many people in Washington who know what's going on in Mali, and you have a pretty blank slate to write on. Your main job is to advise the ambassador on what's going on and on the country's stability and changes. In those days, shortly after a change of regimes, there's a lot of biographic work, finding out about these new guys.

Q: How did you talk to the military people?

YATES: There was a 12-person national committee or whatever they called it and at least half of them or maybe even more had some training through our foreign military program in the United States. They were pilots and they had been to the United States. At that time, I was 30 years old and they were about my age.

Q: How were they running the country, in your perception?

YATES: They were doing okay. They inherited a very centralized regime. Modibo had pretty much centralized all authority, so it wasn't hard to transfer a new sort of head onto the organism there. They did put military people in what would be the ministries and mayors of large cities. I think they did a reasonable job; it was not an impressive regime, but they did reasonably well.

Q: What about the French influence there?

YATES: It was a former French colony. The French had assets that we didn't have, but they had, since Mali was closely aligned with Guinea, which had turned on de Gaulle. Mali had this anti-French feeling and at that time had not joined the West African-French and West African monetary union. They had their own Malian franc. So most educated Malians still thought of Paris as the place that they wanted to go, but the French influence per se wasn't all that significant.

Q: Tribal groups.

YATES: Tribal groups. The main part of the power was in the southern part. Political power was lodged in the southern part of the country with the Bambara people, which is the largest ethnic group. In the north there are the Tuaregs and other nomadic groups, but the main part of the economic structure were the people who lived in the southern, more fertile areas, and it was the largest group.

Q: Did we have much contact with the Tuaregs and getting up into the more desert areas?

YATES: Yes, Timbuktu. I personally made a series of visits to Timbuktu and Gao in the north. I made five visits to Timbuktu because there had been an American explorer who had walked across or came across in a camel caravan from Morocco in the 19th century. He had followed or been at the same time as some French and German explorers, all who had houses dedicated to their exploration in Timbuktu. The descendants of this American family wanted to have this person's name on a place and have him memorialized in Timbuktu, so I made a series of visits up there to negotiate a house for them.

Q: What was Timbuktu like?

YATES: A desert town like hundreds of others on the end of the northern Sahil and the desert, a muddy mud village and a lot of towns in northern Mali had significant mosques. Timbuktu, in centuries before, had a university and there were still some traces of some of these old buildings. But mostly it looked like a desert oasis, not too far from the bend of the Mali River.

Q: Was there a strict division between the Muslim and the Christian and Animist worlds?

YATES: Mali was essentially a Muslim country, even the people in the south. There were some Christians, but there didn't seem to be any religious schism that I was aware of. It is essentially a Muslim country.

Q: Was the Cold War intruding much? Were we and others trying to outbid the Soviets, the East Germans, etc.?

YATES: Yes, definitely. There were Soviet and East German embassies, and there was a certain competition going on. Although by the time I got there, we had regionalized USAID. We gave our AID mission so we didn't have a threat. We didn't have an AID

presence per se; we had an office in Dakar with some programs in agricultural and other areas.

Q: How was life there?

YATES: Life was pretty good for a young guy with three little kids. We had a good house with a small swimming pool, air conditioning and reasonable access to good food: fish in the river and beef from the nomads. You might eat the same vegetable for four months, but it was okay. Not cultural; we didn't go to the opera but there were other things.

Q: How about contact with the Malians?

YATES: Fairly easy. Social and business contacts were frequent. We had contacts with some Malians, even some friends. I think it might be the first place that I really had, in my Foreign Service career, some local friends, some of whom I kept in touch with.

Q: Were women excluded from the social life?

YATES: No, not in Mali. Mali women were a strong group. It's a Muslim country and they weren't in the senior power structure, but they were quite prominent.

Q: Did we have any concerns about further coups or anything of that nature?

YATES: I think that was always a concern about coups. Not that there was anything that we could see that was germinating, but I think it was trying to figure out if there was something going on, especially within the military. During the end of my time, there was some fallout between the original members of the military committee where two or three of them were sent off to the salt mines up in the northern part of Mali, which is a death sentence of death because if you work in the salt mine you can die.

Q: Literally to the salt mines.

YATES: To the salt mines, yes. Once you nick or prick yourself the salt gets in the wound.

Q: How about relations with its neighbors?

YATES: After the coup they had better relations with Senegal, for example, with Senghor, than they did before the coup. Senghor was very French and Senegal was Mali's main access to the sea through the railway; it went to Dakar. Trade was north-south toward Ghana; the produce would come up from Ghana and the Malians would sell south toward Accra, and those relations were good. Most of the African countries in those years seemed to be open to trade regionally, unless they had a significant dispute with their immediate neighbors. Their regional grouping of the Organization of African Union or the Organization of French African States was where they interacted.

Q: Had the Tuaregs spilled over into Algeria too?

YATES: Algeria, Niger, Mauritania.

Q: Did they have any sort of nationalistic or tribal aspirations?

YATES: They might have some grievance with the central government but they didn't appear to. I think there actually had been grievances over 35 years later. They're more radicalized than they were at the time but it wasn't a big concern. The people in Gao and Timbuktu would say they didn't get enough money for schools, but I think that happens in a lot of countries.

Q: I assume you got the usual shopping list each year of our mission at the United Nations. Did that get anywhere as far as getting the Malian vote?

YATES: I would say if the U.N. puts out this list of how they voted with the United States, I guess Mali was somewhere in the 90th percentile against us. We would go in and talk about things. I can remember Zionism as racist. The way our mission at the United Nations seemed to run in those years, and maybe still does, the vote is going to be on Thursday and on Tuesday night. They send something out from New York and expect you to turn around the country in 24 or 48 hours. In those years I doubt if the Malian foreign ministry could communicate with its mission in New York in 48 hours. So, yes we made demarches on political things. We didn't do very well on some of the economic and law of the sea initiatives; on other perennial issues we probably did okay.

Q: Were the French calling the shots particularly then?

YATES: No, definitely not. The French were at a better place because of their colonial history and because there were more French people in the country. I'm sure that the Malians would not consider that they were close like Senghor or African leaders were.

Q: Then in '71, before you left, were there any unusual occurrences or developments?

YATES: I can't remember anything more than what we've talked about.

Q: Then in '71, whither?

YATES: In '71, I came back for my first Washington assignment to be the first desk officer for Mali, Senegal and New Gambia, then to be the desk officer for Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Q: This was from '71 to?

YATES: Seventy-three.

Q: How did you find the African bureau?

YATES: A lot of fun, but that's a good thing. It was my first service in the State Department. I thought that was an interesting place with competent people, and it was a pretty easy assignment for a junior desk officer. I think a desk officer in those years was the best job in the Foreign Service because it was easy for a desk officer to make policy, to persuade his Country Director of something, and the Country Director had easy access to the Assistant Secretary. The first one I remember was David Newsome, who was an outstanding diplomat. It was a good place with good people.

Q: During this time, you had two sets, two jobs, didn't you?

YATES: Successively, yes.

Q: The first set was Francophone.

YATES: That's correct.

Q: And the second set was the Anglophone?

YATES: Liberia and Sierra Leone, yes.

Q: How about Mali?

YATES: Senegal and Gambia, which is actually Anglophone, but it was put in this unit.

Q: What were the issues that you had to deal with?

YATES: The issues were much the same as we've talked about as they were in the field. I remember one of the interesting things for me was that Gambia, being a tiny country with no foreign representation to speak of. But at the time that Alex Haley was writing "Roots," I was the Gambian desk officer. I was almost the Gambian embassy, so I had a lot to do with him. Of course, "Roots" wasn't written then, and I didn't know what was going to come of it, but that was subsequently more interesting.
The issues were again votes in the U.N., votes on China, and some AID issues.

Q: How were we doing in Senegal? Was Senegal a problem?

YATES: No, Senegal wasn't a problem. We were certainly asked about the French influence in Senegal, which was much greater than in Mali in the sense of close ties. But our relationship with Senghor was good. We could rely on good communication with him.

Q: Were there any State visits that you got involved in?

YATES: No, not for any of those countries. The prime minister of Senegal came, but not Senghor himself, and that was always an issue in Africa. For instance, leaders would go

to the United Nations and hope to be invited down to Washington. In those years, as now, if you have five Africans get into the White House a year, you're lucky, so out of 50 countries mine didn't ever seem to get in.

Q: When you moved over to Liberia, how was it in those days?

YATES: In a sense Liberia was a promotion because it was a place where we had a lot of interests, historic, and at that time economic, which seems fairly insignificant now. I think we had about $500 million worth of investment in Liberia. Firestone had been there since World War I, and Bethlehem Steel, and then this Liberian ship registry, and there were some American ties in that. We had a huge Voice of America transmitter complex there.

You asked how Liberia was. This was before the first coup in Liberia. It was still run by the Americo-Liberians, the descendants of the slave families, free slaves, who had come from the United States when Liberia was set up in the early 19th century. This small really colonial group of black Americans was running the country, but it was stable and it had good relations. It was a place unlike any other parts of Africa where we didn't have any real colonial ties. We had ties that we could exploit to do the Voice of America and other things.

Q: Any particular problems during this time?

YATES: No, but you asked me earlier about State visits. We did have a State visit from President Tolbert. He had dinner at the White House and traveled around the United States for 30 days.

Q: My goodness.

YATES: I got to travel with him. We divided up the duties and I traveled with him for about 10 days to Howard University where he received an honorary Doctor of Laws degree, and up to New York and around the country.

Q: Thirty days is a long time.

YATES: It's a long time, yes.

Q: How did you find escorting the Liberian delegation around?

YATES: There was not a problem with that. The Liberians have a strong presence in the United States, certainly in Washington and in New York. There are a lot of Liberians and people were interested. They all wanted access to both their president, but most of the arrangements were made by someone else. Other than the official part in Washington, the two or three days he was there he might have gone down to Texas, but I didn't go on that part of the trip. They made the arrangements and they hired a plane, and I was just there

to make sure that when we got off the plane there was someone to tell the local people that guy is the president.

I remember one issue on that trip we went to Chicago and there were a lot of African-American industries, and there were some reasons for the Liberians to go there. Reverend Jackson was there. He invited the Liberian president and delegation to his church. They were having a program and Mayor Daley, Sr. was the mayor of the city at that time, and he had been invited.

Q: Richard Daley, yes.

YATES: He had invited President Tolbert and his delegation for an Illinois State dinner. And this being Chicago, the State dinner was at 5:30. At 5:10, the Reverend Jackson and his people were singing "We Shall Overcome" in the basement of this church. Mayor Daley's protocol people were saying that if the President isn't at dinner at 5:30, the mayor will not be there at 6:00. So, we ended up driving with Mayor Daley's finest outriders back down the freeways of Chicago in the middle of rush hour. Interesting to recall, but probably not a very significant moment.

Q: Did Sierra Leone cause any particular problems in those days?

YATES: No. I don't think there had been any significant coup but if there was an attempt, it didn't succeed. Anyway, not politically, no. We had some economic interests. Leon Tempelsman had a diamond polishing mining operation and Bethlehem Steel had some interest there. That seemed to be the principal thing that preoccupied me in my time at that desk.

Q: Were we concerned about the Liberian Americans? What did they call them?

YATES: Americo Liberians.

Q: And the fact that they dominated and were we thinking this isn't going to last and we ought to make sure that we have feelers out to the rest of them?

YATES: Definitely there was an awareness that this was not a good situation, and I think the main thing was whether to encourage the Liberian power structure was to bring more of the local ethnic groups and let them be educated. That had started, but it was small, but it was not very long. Later, it turned out badly for President Tolbert and his group, and Samuel Doe.

Q: Many were executed right on the beach.

YATES: That's right, all the guys I traveled around with for 30 days.

Q: In '73, where did you go?

YATES: I went to New Delhi. Henry Kissinger was the Secretary of State at that time and he had what he called his global outlook policy.

Q: GLOP.

YATES: GLOP, exactly. He thought that we shouldn't be too regionalized in our assignments. I had three African assignments, four, counting Washington. One was encouraged to look around, and at that time they were looking for someone to be the special assistant to the ambassador in Turkey, who was William Macomber, and I think they were having difficulty in filling that position.

Q: He was a difficult man.

YATES: He had that reputation. Ambassador Macomber was looking for someone who spoke Turkish, so that didn't work. But once I got myself on the list of people who would take difficult assignments, they asked me if I would consider interviewing for the job to be Special Assistant to Daniel Patrick Moynihan in New Delhi, who had then fired his first two special assistants, and I said sure. I got the job, and so we packed up and went off to New Delhi, which was quite a different experience from all my African time.

Q: You were in New Delhi from '73 to when?

YATES: Seventy-three to '75.

Q: How were relations at this particular time between the United States and India?

YATES: The relationship with India was always a difficult one, not so bad but not good either. With Pakistan, it had been a number of years since there had been an Indo-Pak war. By then there was a feeling that India was the world's biggest democracy and that we needed to have a better relationship, so I'd say, prickly, but okay.

Q: How did you find Ambassador Moynihan?

YATES: He was a great man who could do a lot of things at the same time. He had a wonderful strategic outlook and was also pretty difficult to work for. But I had more fun in those two years in India than I had in the rest of my Foreign Service career.

Q: How was he difficult to work for?

YATES: He was brilliant and thinking so far ahead of you that nobody else could quite keep up with him. He got impatient with people in that regard, impatient with people.

Q: How did he work? Did you see him working with the Indians?

YATES: Yes. He could be as smooth as butter and as tough as anybody else. He had a very good rapport with the senior Indian leadership; people who counted, especially the

Private Secretary and the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister himself, I couldn't characterize him about that but certainly it would be the Chief of Staff.

Q: Who was the Prime Minister?

YATES: It was Mrs. Gandhi.

Q: She was very difficult, wasn't she?

YATES: She could be difficult, yes.

Q: I understand that Nixon and Kissinger hated to deal with her.

YATES: Nixon, that's an interesting thing. When I was there the biggest issue before they had their nuclear test and became a nuclear power were the negotiations for returning to India the rupees. In all the years when there were droughts and famine in India, we had given India wheat, grains and food stuffs under PL480 for which they paid in local currency and rupees. And by the time that I got there we owned, but don't quote me the figure, a third or a fourth of the Indian national currency. So, we were in the process of negotiating an agreement that would keep enough rupees for ourselves to run the embassy and the mission for the rest of the century, but then give the rest back to the Indians to help repair our relationship.

The reason I put that connection with Nixon was this was the beginning of the Watergate time and Nixon's demise. Ambassador Moynihan had gotten a tentative agreement with the Indians and went back to talk to President Nixon. He saw Nixon on the Friday before the Monday that John Dean began testifying. He said that if he hadn't seen him that Friday afternoon, he never would have.

In the end we succeeded with them, and signed the Rupee Agreement. For a number of years for those people who read the "Guinness Book of World Records," the largest check that had ever been written in the world was our check to the Indian government giving them back billions of dollars' worth of Rupees.

Q: Did you find yourself acting as an intermediary or a special assistant, having to run around telling people to produce things? It's not always an enviable position. How'd you find it?

YATES: That's right. I sat right outside the ambassador's office. He had a little buzzer on his desk. He rang and I showed up at his desk and he'd say, John, go and do this. The political counselor and economic counselor, and the other people in the embassy knew that when I spoke that I was speaking for the Ambassador, and as long as I was accurate in conveying his thinking, they responded well. Sometimes they would vent to me when they thought that some requests were unreasonable or untenable, but mostly it worked out quite well for me.

I had wonderful support from the DCM, David Schneider, subsequently an ambassador. The trickiest part was the relationship between Ambassador and Mrs. Moynihan. I remember one time when the Ambassador rang me and said, "John, will you tell Liz, Mrs. Moynihan, that I'm bringing two journalists over to Roosevelt House (the residence)," which was right next to the chancery, "for drinks at 6:00." And she said, "The hell he is. I've got the North Indian Cultural Society and he can't come over here." And I said, "Mr. Ambassador, Mrs. Moynihan would like to speak to you." I know that one of my predecessors, who didn't last very long in that job, didn't survive this back and forth. He tried in that situation like that to go in and say to the Ambassador "Mrs. Moynihan says you can't do this." And then he'd say, "Tell Mrs. Moynihan…" I felt like I had a relationship with Ambassador and Mrs. Moynihan, as did my family. They were supportive of me, and I was immensely saddened when he died earlier this year.

Q: Died rather suddenly.

YATES: Died suddenly with a burst appendix, something that we should be able to handle in this day and age.

Q: How did you find the embassy working? Did you find it well functioning?

YATES: Yes. It was a huge embassy and they had very good people from my perspective. I had never served in that bureau before, but they had very good people. They had real issues, so they said, and I think that Ambassador Moynihan focused on certain things and the rest of it was managed by the Deputy Chief of Mission. He was an area specialist and it worked very well.

Q: Ambassadors usually speak a lot and we were going through the end game of Vietnam. Did you see the ambassador dealing with articulate Indians? They don't hide their light under a bushel. How'd you find this?

YATES: When you talk about ambassadors speaking a lot there's a little sidebar here. Ambassador Moynihan came to India a number of years after John Kenneth Galbraith had been there. They were both Harvard professors, and I think there was a certain rivalry between them. I think Galbraith, as I understand it, had given a speech a week when there and had written a good amount. On the other hand, Moynihan did not give speeches in India and there was something about this Galbraith practice that he was determined not to do, so he wasn't out on the circuit. Other people gave speeches but not him.

Communicating with the Indians, they were a well-educated large group, was important. There were always issues with the Indians, but you could engage in a dialogue with them. They might irritate you sometimes, and we probably irritated them with policies on certain things, but it was the end of Vietnam while we were there, which probably muted one irritant.

Q: Was the Bangladesh war occurring at that time?

YATES: No, that had already occurred. I can't quite put the timeline on it, but it had taken place before that because Bangladesh and Pakistan were separate.

Q: I was just wondering whether you were hit all the time with the Kissinger so-called tilt towards Pakistan. Did you have much contact with the Indians?

YATES: Quite a bit, I would say. My job with Moynihan was such that when he was there at the embassy, my job was to be there. 16-hour days, so I didn't have all that much contact myself to be in a substantive position in that regard. The Indians I had contact with were social contacts because there were so many educated Indians and people our age. We had friends, but not necessarily in the power structure, and mostly a good feeling with the common Indian populace.

Q: Were you tempted to move away from Africa, having been 'glopped' over to India?

YATES: I can't quite remember my sentiments at that time. India was not going to be in my future. We had people in the Foreign Service who were Indian specialists, many of whom were Hindi speakers, but I was never sorry to have done it.

Q: Then in '75, whither?

YATES: In '75, I went to Ankara as a political/military officer, and I ended up working for Ambassador Macomber.

Q: You were in Ankara from '75 to when?

YATES: To '77.

Q: Seventy-seven.

YATES: Yes.

Q: How were relations between the United States and Turkey at that particular time?

YATES: Well at that particular time, Turkey, despite traditional wisdom, had been our most faithful, reliable NATO ally with the second biggest army in NATO, but relationships were very poor at that time. It was after they attempted what they call the colonels' coup in Cyprus.

Q: July of '74.

YATES: You were there.

Q: I had just left Athens.

YATES: I see, okay.

Q: The first of July.

YATES: I got there in early ’75. And after the Turks reversed the coup using the NATO-American provided equipment which had been designated for NATO purposes only, our relationship broke. We then put sanctions on them for having used this equipment in a way that they weren’t supposed to. They retaliated by closing every one of our military installations or at least putting Turkish officers in all the ones we had, something like 33. When I was there my job as a political/military officer was to be involved in the negotiation of an agreement to reestablish our military relationship with Turkey.

Q: The problem was essentially congressional, wasn’t it? The Greek lobby in the United States really roused itself over Cyprus.

YATES: Yes.

Q: And laid down all sorts of strictures to control this, which meant that normal diplomacy couldn’t really be effective with many of these requirements.

YATES: You probably know more about that than I do, but from the Turkish perspective, they were fighting this huge losing battle in their image with a public political opinion of the United States, and in fact it was true.

Q: Who was your boss?

YATES: My original boss was a man named Paul Gardner, who subsequently became ambassador, and my second one was, I’ll think of him in a minute. I had two Chiefs of Section, political/military; I can’t think of this other man’s name.

Q: Did you have any relations with Ambassador Macomber?

YATES: Yes, some, some. Macomber was very good about inviting staff members to dinners at his house and could be quite gracious. During the negotiations, my job being the junior man in the negotiating team, was to write the cables. In those days we used the old green sets of cables. We would finish negotiating at 5:00, sometimes 6:00, then I would write a cable until 10:00. I would then take it over to Ambassador Macomber, and he would approve or disapprove it, and I saw some of the reasons for his reputation of being a hard man to work for.

Q: What happened?

YATES: Say you take a 20-page cable to Ambassador Bill Macomber. He would read it, put page one here and put page two there. Then he’d put page three to the other side and page four up here. He would read all 20 pages then put them all together, and he’d say “Well let me read this again.” Then he’d find that he had page two, seven, nine and say,

"God damn it, why'd you give me a cable that's all out of order?" And I'd say, "Well Mr. Ambassador…" He could be quite unreasonable but because of the negotiations I did have a lot of interface with him.

Q: How did the negotiations come out?

YATES: The negotiations themselves came out with an agreement either before or after my departure from Ankara. It was then sent back to Washington, but it was never ratified as a treaty by the U.S. Senate so subsequently there was another agreement. But in the end, we negotiated an agreement where the command and control of all these bases that we wanted to keep open with a Turkish colonel or someone with power, but not someone who would interfere with our own command and control.

Q: I realize you were the low man on the negotiating totem pole, but how did you find the Turks as negotiators?

YATES: Tough, but very good and knowledgeable, sometimes inflexible. They also knew how to negotiate. They knew there was a negotiation, so they could be rigid. But in the end, after rattling language and adopting an odd referendum we usually would come to something mutually acceptable. It was an interesting, enjoyable time, except that I was taking a lot of notes.

Q: Who was in charge of the government at that time? Was it a military government?

YATES: No. It was Demirel Suleyman then Bülent Ecevit- I think it was changed. Demirel was a bit to the right and Ecevit left of center. Most of the time it was Demirel. They had elections while I was there, but I'd have to search my memory.

Q: Did you get out and around much in Turkey?

YATES: I did. I loved Turkey, a great place. Istanbul is one of the great cities of the world. Went down to Ephesus and all the places down the coast there. We went pretty far east in Diyarbakur and some of the Kurdish areas. We traveled a lot in Turkey.

Q: In Turkey in those days was there a problem with the extreme left or anything?

YATES: There were some assassinations of American military; a couple of staff sergeants on street corners in Istanbul, although we didn't have security issues like we had in Greece.

Q: Yes, the November 17th group, which was within about a year or two, had been doing things since the early '70s.

YATES: Yes. Security was not a principal preoccupation of us at that time. We didn't get out in the morning and look under our cars to see if there was a bomb or anything like that. The main problem was traffic accidents.

Q: It wouldn't be in your bailiwick but were we having trouble with Americans getting arrested on drug charges and that sort of thing?

YATES: Yes and no. What is this "Midnight something movie about Bill Hayes"?

Q: "Midnight Express.".

YATES: "Midnight Express" was a big issue; his arrest, incarceration, life sentence. He then escaped while we were there. It wasn't in my bailiwick, but I would go to country team meetings and things like that and they'd talk about negotiations to try to get his sentence reduced or commuted. Also, the girls from Oregon were arrested on drug charges, but, somehow we negotiated an agreement so that they could finish their sentences in Oregon.

Q: Did you get any feel for how Turkey felt about the NATO and military establishment?

YATES: Turkey felt like they were on the front lines with the Soviet Union. They said they have the second biggest army and they felt like they were badly mistreated by the Greeks within NATO, but they were respected as a tough, no nonsense and reliable military force. That was my impression in spite of all the upset over the breaking of the defense agreement.

Q: Was there concern at that time about a possible Soviet attack?

YATES: Not particularly. I can't recall anything like that. Do you remember if there was?

Q: No, I don't think so. That whole southern flank wasn't the place where wars might start; it was more likely to start over Berlin or something like that.

YATES: No, I don't remember there being any. The troops were out there on the border, but it wasn't a principal preoccupation.

Q: Then you left there in '75 after your having a whole series of two-year assignments.

YATES: If I said '75, I was wrong; it should be '77.

Q: Seventy-seven, yes.

YATES: I left there in '77.

Q: You were working the whole time in the political/military?

YATES: That's correct, yes. In '77, I finally got a job that I asked for and went to be the Deputy Chief of Mission in Gabon.

Q: You were there from '77 to?

YATES: To 1980.

Q: Who was the ambassador in Gabon?

YATES: The ambassador who chose me was Andrew Steigman. I think that I got there on August 10th and he left on August 15th. It was about six or eight months before his successor came, so I was chargé for a long time.

Q: Who was his successor?

YATES: Arthur Tienken.

Q: Let's talk about Gabon. What sort of government and economy did Gabon have?

YATES: First, let's go back to a theme that you've asked a couple of times. If there was a former French colony that was close to the French it was Gabon and Omar Bongo. In fact, it was Omar Bongo who had taken over from Léon M'ba, the first president. Gabon had been the richest part of what was called French Equatorial Africa: the countries of Gabon, Chad, Central African Republic and Cameroon, though Cameroon was a little different. They had always been the richest part of the French empire in Africa with timber, manganese and uranium. By the time I got there they were well into their oil economy and all these other things that had been so important; they were minor compared to the oil. It was rich by worldwide standards of the per capita income, which was a high level and a small population.

Q: What were American interests then?

YATES: American interests in this case were more economic because of the size and amount of money that was there. They were building what was called the Trans Gabon Railway, for which Caterpillar had its largest order of equipment ever for bulldozers and earth moving equipment to build this railway in the middle of the tropical rain forest. Other than that, they had money to spend on huge development projects and mining equipment in which we were significantly involved in the economy, even though it was very much a French preserve as well.

Q: How did we view Bongo as the president?

YATES: We viewed Bongo as a slightly autocratic guy providing stability in a country that had some potential importance in that part of Africa. We got along well. Bongo always spoke then, as he does now, about diversifying his foreign relationships. He always talked to us about doing more with the United States when in fact, Gabon still remained a French colony. The first year I was there, he became the Chairman of the Organization of African Unity. He had an extra role to play as spokesperson for the OAU. In those times, the city had just been rebuilt to host the OAU summit, which occurred

before I got there. They had tremendous infrastructure projects that had been going with labor from the Philippines and Yugoslavia. There was a lot of money to be made in Gabon in those days.

Q: Had inflation hit the country?

YATES: Not particularly. The Central African franc (CFA) was tied to the French franc, so it fluctuated with that. Prices were immensely high in Gabon because the Gabonese produced nothing that they used, from tomatoes to champagne, to Mercedes. Everything was imported at a high price. So, if you're talking about inflated prices they certainly were inflated, but the currency was stable in the sense that it was tied directly to the French franc.

Q: How did you find dealing with the Gabonese government officials?

YATES: First of all, there was little sense in dealing with anybody except the presidency. The president was relatively accessible, but nobody else, as far as I can recall, made any decisions. We talked earlier about U.N. demarches. I did all those things at the Foreign Ministry and we'd have a good dialogue with people. There were some talented people there, but real decisions were made at the presidency.

Q: I would think this would be awkward. If you have a sort of nuts-and-bolts issue or something not of the highest priority, but it had to be done and you felt that only the president could make the decision. I would think one would be a little reluctant to go to his chief of staff.

YATES: You had to make a call on all those things. If you got pressure from Washington, they said they needed this or that, and you knew that the only way you could deliver it, you had to make a choice of whether or not you would go to the president. The nice thing about being in a place like Gabon was that Washington would let the ambassador generally make that call. Washington always would tell you if it's something that you had to do but generally speaking you could decide whether it would be a pro forma demarche at the Foreign Ministry or Trade Ministry or whoever it was, or you could assure yourself of getting the answer by going to the presidency.

With Gabon there's always a cost to be paid because Bongo desperately wanted to be invited for a State visit to Washington. So. while he would do things for you, the next thing he would say was, "When am I getting my invitation?" And then when he didn't get his invitation, he would say, "Well, you know, you don't do anything for me. I don't think you think I'm very important." This is still going on today with Bongo.

Q: Was there any particular reason he couldn't get a state visit or was it just a low priority, or were we trying to stay aloof from him?

YATES: I think a little bit of all those. Getting a Chief of State into the White House on a State visit or even an unofficial visit has always been difficult. They usually made a list a

year in advance, so for that year, Bongo was not a high priority. Everybody knew he was closely aligned with the French. It was different when he was Chairman of the OAU because he was the spokesperson for the OAU.

At that time, I was chargé for six or eight months and he wanted to go to the White House. So, he called me, and I went and saw him, and he said, "The Chairman of the OAU always gets received at the White House." And I said, "Mr. President, I'll send it off again, though I'm told the calendar is full, but I'll send it off." So, I sent it off and the White House came back from the State Department saying no; it's not going to be possible at this time, we regret. He came back to me two weeks later and said, "I'm going on such and such a date to New York; I very much want to be received at the White House." And I said, "I'll send the request in again, Mr. President," which I did, and it came back negative. We did this a third time and he said, "Okay, Monsieur Le Chargé, I understand." He then called up Leon Tempelsman, who had diamond interests and other interests in Gabon. So next Tempelsman called up Walter Mondale, who was the Vice President at the time, and lo and behold, Omar Bongo had at least an office visit at the White House.

Q: Tempelsman was also a close friend of Jackie Onassis.

YATES: That's right.

Q: But he had very good connections.

YATES: A man who's very interested in Africa but also had a lot of interests in these three countries that I served: Sierra Leone, Gabon and Zaire.

Q: You were there during the Carter Administration. Did the human rights emphasis have any impact on you all?

YATES: That's the beginning of the whole preoccupation of Foreign Service reporting about trends and yearly reports like human rights. This is probably one of the reasons that Omar Bongo was not invited amongst the leaders to Washington. Like some of the other people in Africa, Bongo wasn't a nasty leader; he was autocratic and ran the country. Generally speaking, he had so much money that he could buy off everybody he needed to buy off and he had no real opposition.

Q: There wasn't a group on the outs that was just waiting to take over?

YATES: Probably in Gabon there wasn't. But there certainly was a disaffected group because Bongo was from a minority tribe up in the north. The biggest tribal ethnic grouping in Gabon is the Fong from which the first president came and there was always a concern of Bongo that the Fong one day would rise up, but he was able to co-op the leaders of those folks.

Q: How old was he at that time?

YATES: He was pretty young when he took over in ’65, at the age of about 30, so I’m in there in ’77, in my early 40s.

Q: Was he going in for grandiosity, building up these palaces and even starting a new capital city as Houphouet-Boigny?

YATES: He has an immense palace in Libreville, which is part of that big OAU complex that he built. He didn’t go in for a new capital like Boigny built, but he himself is from an internal city called Franceville, which has far in excess of the investment that you would expect of this smaller city which is his hometown. “Grandiosity” that was your word; he’s very much into that. He wanted a 747 and during the time I was there in Gabon, he got one. That was early for an African airline to have a 747.

Q: What about oil? Was it Elf, the French oil?

YATES: Yes, Elf, BP and there were some American companies there. But the main parts were French. American companies were actually in exploration and they subsequently found some more, but most of it was French.

Q: Did you get any feel about there being any corruption? Was that an issue?

YATES: Corruption in the sense that you have the richest per capita income country in Sub-Saharan Africa and you have no roads, no functioning medical system, not much going on in schools. Yes, it was an issue. The “gaspillage” (French word meaning waste, squandering) was enormous.

Q: Were we doing anything on this, trying to advise?

YATES: We tried to advise on good stewardship of wealth, realities of resource depletion, optics of a rich country with meager services. The financial problems began to start building up. The Gabonese wanted our support with the International Monetary Fund on standby agreements and we insisted on reforms, but precious few of those actually took place.

Q: In ’80, you were off again.

YATES: Yes, in ’80 I’m off again.

Q: Where did you go in 1980?

YATES: I came back to Washington to the Office of Population Affairs.

Q: We’ll see what you did in Population Affairs at that time next.

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Q: Today is the 16th of July, 2012, with John Yates. This is some 10 years later and we're picking up where we left you in 1980 when you came to Washington.

YATES: I came to Washington?

Q: Yes. Was that a surprise?

YATES: No, I had a feeling I had come to Washington from Gabon.

Q: Gabon.

YATES: Yes, exactly.

Q: What job did you get in 1980?

YATES: I was a Deputy to Ambassador Richard Benedict in the Office of Population here in Washington.

Q: In 1980, how did we look upon the population situation in the world? I think that this is what you were doing.

YATES: It was very much so. It had changed dramatically while I was there because we had an election. When the Reagan Administration came in the whole focus and effort changed. Before that, we were very active.

Q: I interviewed Marshall Green.

YATES: Marshall Green was Dick Benedict's predecessor. I think he may have been the first ambassador to hold the job.

Q: He took it very seriously.

YATES: He took it very seriously, as did we.

Q: Before we move to the Reagan Administration, when you got there, why were we concerned about the population situation? What were we thinking of doing?

YATES: I think we were concerned by numbers, environment, poverty and development, and all the things that come with that. At that time, as I recall, the average fertility rate for a Kenyan woman was to produce eight children where maybe five might survive. That was the real issue as far as I can remember now. Remember this was 32 years ago. The main focus was on family planning and helping to improve infant mortality rates, to increase maternal-child health care and reduce the rate of population growth especially in underdeveloped countries where fertility was high.

Q: The real sticking point was family planning; in other words, contraception.

YATES: Yes, contraception.

Q: And this went against the teachings of the Catholic Church and the right-wing Republican credo, of which Ronald Reagan was a proponent.

YATES: That's correct. It's easier to say what happened when Reagan came in, when we suspended our contributions to the United Nations fund for Operation UNPA. We took a whole bunch of other measures, reversed our policies and funding. I don't remember the specifics over the years, though we stopped giving money to supporting any organization that permitted abortion.

Q: What about contraception?

YATES: Under the new policies we were giving some support but not to the UNPA. We could use it through USAID, but it was under the guise of health rather than limiting something.

Q: Who was your boss at that point when the Reagan Administration came in?

YATES: Richard Benedict; it was still Benedict. He was a Deputy in the Bureau of OES at that time.

Q: Did you all feel like you were under a sword of Damocles, that population was not going to be an issue under Reagan?

YATES: At the time of the administration changeover, his study called 20/20 had come out, which was drafted under the Carter Administration. It was a liberal document that was almost put on the shelf as far as family planning was concerned, and not referred to again. And yes, we did feel that there was going to be a coup de grace. The mere fact of cutting off the contribution to the United Nations central population activities was a huge blow worldwide.

Q: What was your piece in the action when you arrived there?

YATES: I was a Deputy Director, though more the office manager. Each of us in the office handled some countries. I had two or three members of the office that I supervised. remember going to Rwanda, Bangladesh and a few other spots around the world, primarily to monitor our programs. We liaised with USAID, U.N. and other organizations such as Planned Parenthood, some of which we funded.

Q: You just named a couple of places that were getting swamped. With Rwanda, there's the traditional Hutu-Tutsi conflict, but beyond that is a lush area, not very big, where the people were moving into the jungle to make food.

YATES: There's a high population density in Rwanda and Burundi. Rwanda is about the same size as Rhode Island, but a very small country, about six million people at that time and a rapidly growing population. There is also the opposition of the Catholic Church to family planning, artificial family planning, as they call it, rather than natural methods. Though the Catholic sisters in Rwanda would permit the use of Depo-Provera, which was an injectable over the first two years after an infant's birth to control or to prevent another pregnancy.

Q: Did you have any concern about China-India-Indonesia?

YATES: Yes, because the numbers in those countries were large. That was one of the problems. China had already come to its one child/one family policy and abortion was a primary component of enforcing that policy, and that was one of the things that the new administration objected to strenuously and immediately.

Q: In your group, were there any believers that abortion was evil or did you feel that you had an instrument taken away from you?

YATES: This was just after Roe v. Wade in 1973, and we were not purporting abortion. But if women sought it as an option, we believed our policies considered it a way of saving lives instead of having illegal abortions by witch doctors or whatever else you might have in Africa, and it was a way of helping these women.

Q: Did you find yourself more starved for money or was the program dying while you were there?

YATES: It didn't die, though there were certain elements that were reduced and didn't have the prominence. There wasn't another Marshall Green there who was active and prominent because of his other job.

Q: I refer people to an oral history that was done with Marshall Green, who was one of our top diplomats and who took this cause of population to heart. He brought a lot of clout with him and that died away after.

YATES: It certainly had some lowering of focus.

Q: How long were you working with this?

YATES: I didn't stay in Washington too long. I believe it was the summer of 1981, which would have been after I had been here about a year and a half, I was named Chargé d'affaires in Praia, Cape Verde. So, I left population planning, and started taking lessons to learn Portuguese to go to Cape Verde Islands.

Q: How long were you in Cape Verde?

YATES: I was there from 1982 to 1986.

Q: Can you describe a thumbnail history of Cape Verde then and what it was like when you got there?

YATES: Cape Verde is essentially nine small islands in the Atlantic off the coast of Senegal. It's populated primarily by a mix of all those people from Portuguese and African descent, many mulattos, some people very black African and some nearly white, café au lait colored. Cape Verde was the first stop of the Portuguese fleet in the early centuries of exploration, around the 16th century where the ships took on water and fuel to continue their voyages.

Q: Vasco da Gama was proceeding down the African coast.

YATES: That's right. Cape Verde was his first stop where a lot of Cape Verdeans were picked up by the Portuguese ships and taken down to the next place, which might have been around South Africa, then all the way up to East Timor. So, you find Cape Verdeans all over.

The Cape Verdeans were the first group of blacks or Africans to come to the United States as free people. This happened because of the whale trade. The whalers from New Bedford would go out to where the whales migrated around the Cape Verde Islands. When the Yankee whalers would get out there to throw the harpoon into Moby Dick, they found out that it was a lot easier to sit onboard the ship and let some Cape Verdeans go out in the longboats and throw the harpoons. So very early even before American independence in the US, there were Cape Verdeans who had come to America on whaling ships. Later on, the early settlers sent for their families to work in the cranberry bogs around Cape Cod. Apparently, the bogs were such hell holes that the owners couldn't find American workers, but the Cape Verdeans would work there. As a result, ultimately a large Cape Verdean population grew in what is now Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

Q: I did an interview with Ed Rowell and he talked about the Cape Verdeans and their importance in US politics there with the Portuguese being an important immigrant group.

YATES: Yes. In the whaling museum in Hawaii there is a Cape Verdean room dedicated to their whalers.

Q: When you were there, who was the ambassador?

YATES: At that time Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau, the Portuguese colony on the mainland, had one ambassador for the two countries. They had to have a common independence party or movement to fight against the Portuguese, which was called the 'Partido Africano de Independencia da Guine e Cabo Verde,' Independence Party for Cape Verde and Guinea. The U.S. ambassador to Cape Verde was a resident in Bissau when they both became independent in 1975.

Q: This is part of the old Angola/Mozambique revolution that was going on.

YATES: The Portuguese had colonies much later than all the other colonial powers. They held on to theirs. French, Belgian or British all gave back in the 1960s.

Our first three or four ambassadors were based in Bissau with a chargé and small staff in Praia, Cape Verde, where I was. Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde had fought together for independence and gained it together, sharing a common political part which was headquartered in Bissau. The Cape Verdeans were more highly educated than the Bissaus were. I mean that's just a reality. And they controlled the leadership of the joint party. But after about ten years of independence for the two colonies, in 1983, there was a coup d'état against the Cape Verdeans in Guinea-Bissau. After that, the Cape Verdeans no longer wanted the United States to be representing them from Bissau. So, I was named the first resident U.S. ambassador Cape Verde to actually reside in the capital, Praia.

Q: What sort of government did this first group have in Cape Verde?

YATES: They had elections, but the government that was elected was essentially the leadership of the guerrillas of the party, the independence party against the Portuguese. The president was Aristides Pereira. He was recognized by everyone as the leader of not only the independence movement, but of the country. Then there was a collection of the people who had fought against the Portuguese, but they had had elections.

Q: Had there been much of a war on the islands? It was a pretty nasty one in Bissau.

YATES: It was pretty nasty in Bissau, but nothing like what went on in Angola. As far as I can recall there was almost no fighting per se on the Cape Verde Islands.

Q: What was our embassy doing there?

YATES: That's a good question that a lot of people ask. The country had about 350,000 people, but it was a group of arid islands. The African Sahel extended out into the Atlantic Ocean. When I arrived, it was the 13th straight year of drought. There wasn't enough moisture to grow any crops; close to famine.

We had a sizable U.S. assistance program there. But the real reason we were there was the policy that had been decreed by John Kennedy was to be represented in all Africa countries. In fact, Cape Verde came to have an important role in implementing African policies further down the continent. They were instrumental in the negotiations that went on leading in part to the independence of Angola and other changes in southern Africa. I used to say that Cape Verde had two resources, longitude and latitude.

The Cubans were active as we all remember in Angola. Their planes had to go through Cape Verde to refuel. The South Africans had to go through Cape Verde; Rwanda, European and U.S. flights to refuel, even though the rest of Africa denied permission for landing to South African Airways. For the Cape Verdeans, it was an important source of their revenue. Ultimately, Cape Verde became the center for the negotiations that

Assistant Secretary Crocker had with South Africa, Angola leadership and Namibia in southwest Africa at the time. Of all the time I was there, that would have been the most important thing that we did at the embassy.

Q: Were you given instructions or try and stop the Cubans in South Africa from using the airport?

YATES: No, on the contrary. We sought to have the Cubans' flights, who were equipping the Angolan factions that we opposed, halted, but the Cape Verdean international airport was too important for them, and also the philosophic bent of the GOCV was pro-MPLA.

Moreover, South African Airways was transiting to Sal International, coming to New York five times a week. We even used it for Air Force 2 and other flights as well, as did some European airlines that couldn't fly from Johannesburg to their capitals without refueling.

Sal Island was an important international airport and was a big, flat, sandy island without water. The Cubans were traveling to Angola and we were always trying to monitor what the Cubans did. There was a whole lot of traffic going down to South Africa, and we didn't want them to carry arms to fight against our clients in Angola.

Q: What sort of diplomatic representation was on the islands?

YATES: At that time there were five resident ambassadors: the United States, Russia or Soviet Union at the time, China, Portugal and Brazil. And there were a number of African countries, Senegal and others that had lower ranking than we had for representation. Altogether, a dozen or 14 embassies.

Q: Was there much of a political movement on the island?

YATES: You mean like an Arab Spring-type movement?

Q: Elections?

YATES: They had elections just after I left, actually. But there were always elections. Actually, a Cape Verde American from the United States was elected, elected in a free and fair two-party election to succeed Aristides Pereira after his second term. President Monteiro was from the opposition party.

Q: How did you find life there?

YATES: It was quite enjoyable. There were some deprivations and the fact that there's not very much to do. I did have the opportunity of going to all nine of the islands. The Embassy had a 42-foot sloop-rigged yacht (named Satchmo) that the United States government had bought for a bargain price. It had been paid off by the insurance

company to the owners of the stolen yacht after it was found in the Cape Verde Islands abandoned by the thieves. So, I was able to visit all those islands on this ship.

Q: That must have been rather adventurous.

YATES: A hardship, but I enjoyed almost all aspects of it.

Q: What were the people like?

YATES: The people were very friendly and very hard working, incredibly hard working and trying to eke out a living on land that was rocky and dry. Many would have liked to have gone to the United States or other overseas destinations like Lisbon, Dakar or Amsterdam. A lot of them had relatives in Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Chicago. Some did get to the U.S., but most couldn't get visas, and some just didn't want to.

Q: Was there anything like a special wine? I'm thinking of the Canary Islands where they have sherry.

YATES: Actually, there is. They made some local brew called grogue, spelled G-R-O-G-U-E, distilled from sugar cane. It's hard to turn it down when offered and hard to drink it down, at least for me. There are also some wonderful musical traditions, especially their "mornas" sung in local jargon by folksingers including some who became famous. Cesaria Evora was one who became popular in the United States.

Q: I'm also thinking, here I am vague. I've talked to Terry McNamara about our interest in chess, something of a cult.

YATES: I can't confirm that. Terry's memory may be better than mine.

Q: Did you get any attention from the senators like Senator Pell, and other people from Massachusetts, Rhode Island?

YATES: I got interest from Claiborne Pell when I had my ambassadorial hearing, and often monthly after that. I also recall the interest in Cape Verde from Representative Barney Frank and Senator Ted Kennedy. If something happened, like when we had a little tropical storm that took off a lot of roofs in some of those houses there, it wasn't hard for me to get a few hundred thousand dollars to do some emergency work.

My Capitol Hill support for this assignment started at my confirmation hearing for the Cape Verde nomination. Because I had worked for Senator Moynihan in India, he made an impromptu appearance at my hearing to introduce me to his colleagues. He spoke in full support of my nomination even quipping that any honor they could bestow upon me would not repay the debt he owed for my serving as "his personal aide" in India.

Q: What sort of an embassy did you have?

YATES: You mean numbers?

Q: Yes.

YATES: I think we were five State Department officers or staff and, three or four AID contractors, and one or two professionals. That's about it, but we also had two Portuguese Foreign Service Nationals who were immensely important in keeping us going.

Q: What were you all doing?

YATES: I think that the biggest preoccupations are the two I mentioned, which were humanitarian economic development assistance and hosting the negotiations. I wasn't running the negotiations. Chet Crocker and Frank Wisner came up from Washington to do that. But as a political thing that was the most important.

Q: Did you have any medical problems there such as malaria or AIDS?

YATES: At the time nothing in particular. I think we may have taken malaria prophylaxis but I don't think we needed to. Most of the islands were malaria-free.

Q: Did they take much of a position or did it make any difference in Pan-African affairs?

YATES: They were pretty far in the more radical camp across the board at that time. President Pereira was a person that we could deal with and reason with. I actually brought him to the United States for a trip when we met with President Reagan and senior department officials.

Q: How did that go?

YATES: The trip went well. He arrived the same day as our White House meeting, the day after Ninoy Aquino had been assassinated in the Philippines. We were out in the portico for the press conference; all the questions to President Reagan were about the Aquino killing. But it was a good week. We didn't have a state dinner, but we had lunch with Vice President George H.W. Bush. He was very well received everywhere he traveled around but especially in New England. He was a very important channel for us for communicating with the Angolan liberation, and we did some useful consulting.

Q: Did you have any problems, cases or anything of that nature while you were there?

YATES: I had a personal problem not to do with the Cape Verde mission. My wife was diagnosed with cancer when we began the assignment; she died just as our time in Cape Verde was ending.

If I think about it, it was clearly the most consuming thing of my life during those years.

Q: Was this climate induced?

YATES: No. It was diagnosed before we ever got there.

Q: It must have been very difficult for you.

YATES: It was very difficult.

Q: How did you work through this? Did you have to go back to the States?

YATES: Yes. We went back a few times for her therapy.

Q: Well, then you left there in '84?

YATES: No,'86.

Q: Where'd you go?

YATES: Peggy died in April of '86, and I came back to Washington shortly thereafter. I was here for a few months, working in a special office on Portuguese/African affairs that Secretary Crocker had set up. Then I was asked to go to the Philippines. They were looking for a senior officer who had some political military background. So, I went to Manila as a minister counselor political section chief.

Q: You were there from when to when?

YATES: Eighty-six to '89. I got there in '86.

Q: You mention the Aquino assassination had taken place while you were in Cape Verde. What was the situation when you arrived in the Philippines?

YATES: I arrived just after Marcos had gone into exile and Cory Aquino became President. For the three years that I was there, there were continued coup attempts, against her by ex-Marcos people trying to bring him back from Hawaii.

Q: For you in your position as political minister counselor, were there officers involved in these coups?

YATES: Yes, there were.

Q: How did you find dealing with the military, which was not a benign military? It was a military that had an awful lot of political clout.

YATES: There were rogue elements. The Marcos Minister of Defense Juan Ponce Enrile, and the Armed Forces Chief of Staff, Fidel Ramos, both had been in Marcos's armed forces and had defected to the Aquino people, and we worked well with them at leadership. There were some colonels and lieutenants who worked for special services

and interests, especially Marcos's whole line up. We already had a very strong military relationship with the Philippines when I got there including major real estate at a large airport base, the largest naval base we had overseas. (Clark and Subic bases)

Ramos remained loyal to Cory Aquino and ended up succeeding her. Enrile became disloyal and was involved in several coup attempts against Aquino.

Q: Clark Air Base and Subic Bay.

YATES: Yes.

Q: Like our embassy in Lisbon, they seem to always be negotiating the Azores. What about in Manila, did you have major negotiations underway?

YATES: We had major negotiations for the renewal of the bases because the leases were running out. The post-Marcos regime was trying to undo some of his policies aimed at our sovereign use of them, especially Clark and Subic Bay. The negotiations terminated with the return of both Clark and Subic Bay to the Philippines.

Q: Were you there with the eruption of Mount Pinatubo?

YATES: Pinatubo for a time made the Clark airfield unusable for our operations. The Philippines didn't play their cards very well because they thought we wanted the bases. Although the volcano didn't destroy the airport, it made it unusable for military means, so its price went way down.

Q: When you arrived there the atmosphere concerning our ongoing relations with the Philippines. Vietnam had fallen and things stabilized in Southeast Asia. Did we view the Philippines as being as important as it once was?

YATES: I wasn't involved in the Philippines in that part of Southeast Asia beforehand, but it was a time of change after the Vietnam War. Earlier we wouldn't have negotiated a turnover agreement of Subic Bay or Clark Field. There was definitely a change. In 2012, if I read the New York Times correctly, we're trying to get back into both of those pieces of real estate.

Q: The Philippines were very important to us for a long time, going back to 1898, and the Spanish-American War. Our major naval base was west of Pearl Harbor, or was it Subic Bay, and we had a very large airfield, Clark Field, thanks to the Australians and the Vietnam War. There had been a bone of contention that there was a split between the State Department those that said let's get rid of these things, but our military that said we have to have them?

YATES: Not particularly. The Filipinos were feeling like they were ready to assert their independence after Marcos. There's still resentment of our close ties with the Marcoses. But once a strategic decision was taken by them that they wanted them back, we were

willing to negotiate. And if we couldn't reach the right kind of agreement, we would be willing to leave. The military, the people I was working with and I think the uniformed military usually works, is they follow orders from the Pentagon. We didn't have any differences at all on our negotiating team.

Q: There was a real change before because negotiations were always done on the assumption that we had to have these bases. By the time you were there the assumption was, let's see what happens, which is quite an earth-shaking change.

YATES: Quite an earth-shaking change. But my military colleagues likened the phenomenon that when you start turning an aircraft carrier it's hard to stop turning it midstream. It takes some time. That turn had started, and we ended up with an agreement to hand back the bases.

Q: Did the Filipinos that you were negotiating with or the body politic think this was a good deal or was some of it the wrong posturing of trying to get as much money in concessions as they could out of this as they could? Would we keep paying for these bases, an idea that we would pull out once there was a desire on the part of the Philippines?

YATES: Some of it was just an assertion of independence. One victory whetted the appetite for more. With Subic Bay they were able to convert or pre-plan it to turn it into an important economic hub for ship repairs and an export free zone, which was doing quite well. I don't know how Clark is doing now, but after the volcano, Clark was no longer a prime piece of real estate.

Q: Was the volcano quiet when you arrived?

YATES: Yes, as far as I remember.

Q: Then later, were you looking over your shoulder at the volcano?

YATES: The pilots would come in and on landing and say, "She's bubbling out there," but it was a long way away. We were concerned, but it wasn't active in my time, nor predominant in daily life.

Q: What was your impression of the Philippine military, the leadership?

YATES: The leadership was good, professional and reliable at the very top. The U.S. provided considerable training and the overall result was a professional army with relatively good leadership. That is not to say that some of the richer autocrats didn't have their own militias.

Q: A number were West Point graduates, weren't they?

YATES: Most definitely.

Q: From the beginning we've always had Filipinos, young military men going to West Point, not the full array but a significant number.

YATES: Our close relationship with the Philippines probably began as soon as MacArthur went back at the end of the Second World War. I think that we had a very close relationship for the next five decades.

Q: Was Imelda Marcos a presence while you were there?

YATES: She was already gone. There were stories that they opened up the palace so it was possible to have a look and see the shoe collection.

Q: I never quite understood women's shoes but she had a hell of a lot of them.

YATES: Thousands of pairs, they say. My wife has a lot but she couldn't hold a candle to Imelda.

Q: How did you find Philippine society, society? I heard it's dominated by certain families.

YATES: It is definitely true that the leadership on every island and every different region were these large families: the Marcos's island, Imelda and Luzon. The political people who came in with Cory Aquino were not revolutionary peasants. They were families who had been in the opposition but they were from the same strata.

Q: The presidential palace is named after her family, what is the name of the palace?

YATES: Malacañang.

Q: Malacañang.

YATES: It could be. But I think it dated from the time of the Spanish, before the Marcos'.

Q: You had to know the family wiring diagram in the Philippines to conduct your business?

YATES: Yes, you certainly needed to know the major families and their connections. In the Aquino family, you needed to know who the brothers or nephews were and what they did.

Q: As we're talking today, the President of the Philippines is Cory Aquino's son.

YATES: Yes, Benigno Aquino, Jr, or "Noy-Noy", as we call him.

Q: Who was our ambassador while you were there?

YATES: I had two of them. The first one was Stephen Bosworth, who subsequently became our special representative for North Korea, now the Dean of the Fletcher School. He did the negotiations with Marcos and brought the plane in to get him to leave. Ambassador Bosworth was succeeded by Nicholas Platt who was there when we were doing the negotiations on the bases and directed exactly how we proceeded.

Q: Did the American community in the Philippines, which was sizable and well embedded businesswise, play a role or were they just onlookers?

YATES: Their economic presence was very important. All economic and commercial things, import/exports, tropical fruit plantations and the like, gained something from USG support. We had sizable Economic and Commercial sections at the embassy. For example, we negotiated debt relief to help everyone in a situation that needed it. I remember Cory Aquino being pleased with our partnership and the American Chamber, but I don't remember that it was the American business community that did that.

Q: What did we have in mind to replace Clark and Subic?

YATES: I think that it was a divided realignment, primarily decisions brought about with changes in the military technology and situation, things like not to have land-based planes or there were other places in the region. We've always had military installations in South Korea, and places in Southeast Asia but I can't tell you about the strategic planning of the military because I don't know much about it.

Q: When you were there, the Soviet Union was still a major power, was it not?

YATES: Yes. It was before the Berlin Wall came down, but the Soviet presence was less apparent in overall policy. The Chinese were occupying the little islets and pieces of real estate out there in the ocean and the Association of Southeastern Asian Nations was concerned about the Chinese.

Q: I read in the paper that the Chinese and the Filipinos were making noises about the Chinese landing some people on a couple of rocks.

YATES: They're very small pieces of dry land. We sent information to Washington, which was used at the U.N. for protesting the Chinese actions, but I knew we didn't have any on the ground information. We listened to the Filipinos and supported them in every instance, but we didn't have any strike forces engaged.

Q: Are we still keeping an active naval presence or patrol in the area?

YATES: Yes. The other thing that was going on in the Philippines, and still is going on, was the Islamic revolt in the southern islands. Mindanao islands are still an issue, fighting and taking hostages.

Q: How was that going when you were there?

YATES: It was a live war. A military attaché at our embassy was assassinated in Manila by these guys.

Q: Were we involved in the war at all?

YATES: Through the military assistance we had a presence there that was very significant, and we were assisting the Filipinos with equipment and information along with sharing intelligence. But I don't think we had an active role with any advisors on the ground.

Q: One always thinks the standard sidearm of the U.S. Army is the Colt .45, which was developed to be used against the Moros, the Islamic warriors of the Philippines at the turn of the century, in the Mindanao Island group.

YATES: It's still Islamic warriors.

Q: Some things don't change.

YATES: The other big issue in the Philippines is immigration, visas of any kind. I wasn't involved in their administration, but the immigration demand was overwhelming. It didn't matter whether an embassy official had any consular responsibilities or not. Pressure from local contacts was unending. Most of it was local, but if someone was denied the renewal of a visa to a nurse in Kansas City, Missouri, or anywhere supported by the churches, for example. And we would get heavy pressure for student visas from the Filipino contacts.

Q: Some of our consuls general got into serious trouble there because the pressure was unrelenting. I had a feel for that as consul general in Seoul, South Korea.

YATES: Yes. Everybody had the same name, Kim or Lee or something like that.

Q: You had the same society that would pay anything and you'd try to be nice. The next thing you know you'd be there without your pants on because they were unrelenting.

YATES: For example, the speaker of the House of the Philippines would call me up and say, "John, I need to talk to you." And I'd say, "What is it?" And he'd say, "I can only do it in the office. And I said I would listen, "But if the question is about a visa, don't even ask me. I have zero responsibility." The Speaker would reply, "No, I promise you." So, the next day or two he would come to the embassy and have two dependents or constituents with him and we'd talk. Fortunately, he had caught me because he didn't have an appointment with the Visa section, and made the same lame pitch.

One of our CGs, may have been arrested, don't quite remember but his career was ended. The pressure was unrelenting.

Q: I used to get in South Korea aides to the President. He had high school classmates whose rank was higher than family members in the hierarchy who had daughters who wanted visas. And you'd see the sweat popping out of these guys' faces because they were told to go get it and don't. I knew what I was doing. You'd have to say no and smile, and stand firm with these guys because the Koreans at the top wanted their visas.

YATES: The Koreans were probably more difficult. The guys working for their bosses in Korea had a hard time. The Filipinos were gentle, if relenting.

Q: It's a difficult world.

YATES: Yes, it is, and even more difficult now for visas.

Q: When you left there, how did you feel about leaving as the Filipinos were moving in a new direction? The U.S. military was no longer going to be there. It wasn't as though we were abandoning them but, once our interest is directed elsewhere, we don't pay as much attention to a country as we had before. Were you concerned about what political direction the Philippines might go?

YATES: The biggest hope and expectation was for them to become one of the Asian Tigers and have rapid economic growth. They were making good progress at that time. But I think certainly there was and still is some resentment against the United States' involvement in the Philippines, primarily among the political class. Most of the people that I knew were not hostile. There was the thought that they might become allied with nations that we would distrust. I don't think that would make a good story.

Q: I would imagine that someday they would be interested in being closer to us because the Chinese are not benign. They are plagues on the South China Sea and our…

YATES: It's certainly not like, the change in Egypt of something like that. Most people were pleased with the change--if we're talking about American politics. Pleased that the Marcos regime had ended and that they had a fledgling beginning of a democracy. The Senate and the House were elected in a transparent process. They have free press and were not overly concerned about the political process that had been freed up via People Power, as the Filipinos called it.

Q: Where'd you go in, was it '86?

YATES: No, that was '89. I went to Nigeria as DCM. A lot of people couldn't understand that I had been Ambassador in Cape Verde, then went to be a political-military consul, and then Deputy Chief of Mission in Nigeria. Our system permitted that and it worked for my family. I was the DCM in Lagos, an interesting country.

Q: When were you there?

YATES: Eighty-nine to ’91.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

YATES: The ambassador for most of the time that I was there was Lannon Walker. He asked me to come. When I first arrived it was Princeton Lyman, but he had already left his post, so I spent some time as Charge d’affaires. It was with Lannon for whom I worked most of the time I was there.

Q: What was the situation when you arrived in ’89?

YATES: There was a military government which had replaced the military government by the coup d’etat. Nigerian governments had a poor reputation as corrupt and dictatorial. General Babangida was President who promised a return to democratically elected civilian rule. Nigeria itself was and still is a rapidly growing, pulsating adventuresome country. One thing that was very much on our mind was the drug trade. The Nigerians were key in heroin trafficking worldwide.

Q: Nigerians are first class smugglers, swindlers, and finaglers.

YATES: I always said there’s more of everything in Nigeria – more doctors, lawyers, more drug pushers. For example, when I was there, shortly after I arrived, we had a medical trade show, and I invited some of the medical community in Lagos to a reception. I had 90 physicians and none of them had been trained in Nigerian universities when Nigerian universities were still good in the earlier years. Some had been trained at Harvard, the University of Washington, and some in Moscow, the U.K, in world class medical schools. I saw more physicians in my house in one night in Lagos than I saw all the rest of my years in Africa. They have a tremendous amount of talent for good and they have evolved. It’s not a place that you want to be on the wrong side.

Q: There was a military dictatorship for some time.

YATES: When I was there it was Babangida. He was the President and then he was succeeded by Minister of Defense. It was a military government for quite a number of years.

Q: How did you find dealing with it?

YATES: We had our issues but we were able to deal with the Nigerian leadership. In addition to the inner circle of the presidency, they had talented ministers. And even if we were not on the same page on many issues, we could have a fruitful relationship with them, whether it was on support for their peacekeeping in Liberia or a range of issues. We had a lot of dialogue on many levels on a range of issues.

Q: You had political-military experience in the Philippines. How did you find the Nigerian military?

YATES: I had less to do with the Nigerian military. We had military attaches and other officers. They had a professional military. Some of them were Sandhurst graduates. At the lower levels they're probably less well trained, but it was relatively good. On a scale of one to 10 for African armies, it might be by five or six.

Q: Were the Nigerians part of a monitoring or peacekeeping force in Liberia?

YATES: The ECOWAS, Economic Community of West African States, was monitoring, but the military that went in was approximately 96 percent Nigerian. The Nigerians had resources like tanks and ships that ECOWAS did not have.

Q: They weren't exactly a benign force, meaning they would pick up anything loose.

YATES: When the two ships came back from Monrovia, you saw a lot of refrigerators and Mercedes. They were taking their booty with them.

Q: Speaking of cars, did we get involved in the huge smuggling operations of cars coming from the States and elsewhere? I understand they were being stolen and put on ships and sent out to Africa.

YATES: It's not something that I recollect from Nigeria. When I was in Benin later, which is next to Nigeria, there would be a ship a week coming from Europe. With only four or five million Béninois, they couldn't be buying all these cars. But Benin was only 40 miles from Nigeria, and they would be sold in Nigeria. I was aware, but I was involved in the embassy.

Q: Did our embassy get involved in various schemes? I haven't seen one in some years, but like many Americans connected to the Internet, I was hit by widows of politicians who needed Nigerian money for nefarious schemes that put the case of helping me avoid taxes.

YATES: Yes, and that's still going on.

Q: I guess I'm off their list.

YATES: You didn't have that special dye that was going to make the Nigerian money into hundred dollar bills?

We were involved in the sense of knowing about the schemes while in country and then later schemes evolved through the internet in the United States. There were times when my brother or other friends would ask me if they should respond to Nigerian solicitations, and I'd say no. These scams were active and our involvement, to the best of my recollection, would primarily be when somebody would take the bait and come to Nigeria to try and 'pick up' whatever it was that they had bought. Frequently they were taken to a

hotel room and fleeced of all their money, and then they became cases for the Consular section.

There's a part of US Commerce law with a special section for Nigerians. It's regulation 212, or whatever, I forgot the precise numbers.

When I was in Nigeria, I only cashed my checks at the American embassy for security reasons. But one time several months after cashing one, I got a call from the State Department Federal Credit Union asking if I authorized a $50,000 transfer of my funds. Somehow between my cashing a check with the cashier of the American embassy, someone had my coordinates and enough info to try to take Yates money out of my account. Fortunately, I didn't have $50,000.

Q: That gives us a feel for the atmospherics in Nigeria. How about the military-government? Was there a political class there, too?

YATES: They had a political class, and they kept trying to create two parties. In fact, Nigeria had lots of parties but they were trying to force them all into two different parties in preparation for the next election. It wasn't a very successful endeavor, but there was a political class like in the Philippines or other countries: there were factions, people from the East, people in the North, people from Lagos and tribal. Most of them were not national parties.

Q: What about the Muslim North and the Christian Animist South? Were we concerned about Muslim fanatics?

YATES: Yes. It's the largest population of poor Muslims in one place in the world and they were very susceptible to being incited. At the time of the first Iraqi War, in Nigeria we had a consul general in Kadung. They didn't take it over, but they were inside the compound on the roof protesting against our action, though I was not there at the time. It's worse today with Boko Haram. There was this radical Islamic movement and then the repeated clashes between the Christians on the frontier line, between northern and southern Nigeria.

Q: Did you feel that Nigeria was one country or was it two countries?

YATES: I always thought it was one country, but a classical political situation, an ideal place for a Federalist. All the power is directed to the central government and that's been the issue for decades, and still today. It's been a trade-off that every five or 10 years it's the North's turn and then five or 10 years it's the South's turn.

One of the problems with Nigeria now is the current president, who had been vice president, then became President after the Muslim President Yar'Adua died and Goodluck became President. So, it was now supposed to be the North's turn and in five to 10 years it will be the South's turn. It never seemed to me like a political bomb, but it's a hot problem.

Q: Was Qadhafi messing around?

YATES: Nigeria was less susceptible to Qadhafi. Nigeria had money, so Qadhafi was more likely to be doing his business in Burkina Faso and Togo—places where a $20 million grant could go somewhere. I don't know if there was any evidence of Qadhafi himself. I think he came to town once.

Q: Had they moved the capital while you were there?

YATES: That's why I left. They were moving and the capital had already transferred officially to Abuja. We were in Lagos, which was the hub. Part of my job as DCM was to help move our embassy to Abuja. I bought land and negotiated visas. My last year there, the government made the decision that they would no longer receive any visitors in Lagos, even when they still had the Foreign Affairs office in Lagos. You had to go to Abuja to be received. So, I flew more frequently than I would like to Abuja for an appointment that was fixed for 10:00 on Tuesday even though the meeting didn't take place until 10:00 on Thursday, if I was lucky; then fly back on a plane you thought might crash. After about eight months of that I asked to transfer. I have been back to Abuja since on my Darfur rebel negotiations, and it's a growing capital now.

Q: What was Lagos like when you were there?

YATES: A huge city with lots of traffic jams, hot, dirty, lively and dangerous. It was a city built on eight islands with three bridges. You could be stuck in a traffic jam for five or six hours.

Q: Did you take your homework or anything with you?

YATES: You always wanted to be in an air-conditioned car with a full gas tank with lots to read. You could sit in a 'go-slow' forever, as they called them in Lagos. The hawkers would come by and you could buy everything from dried apricots to TV sets and refrigerators sitting in a 'go-slow.' I liked the spirit, the energy of Nigeria and still do.

Q: How did you find the social life there?

YATES: My social life was ok. The Nigerians of a certain class of people who lived on Victoria and Ikoyi Islands, where many diplomats lived, were quite easy to socialize with. I belonged to the golf club and socialized with the people at a certain level, maybe somewhat superficial, but it was okay. At that time, I had remarried and my wife was in Washington, D.C.

Q: What was your second wife's background?

YATES: She was an FSO whom I met in the Philippines when I was there when we were working together on the base negotiations. She was the Deputy Information Officer for

USIA and became the spokesperson for the base negotiations. We worked a lot of late nights and got to know each other.

Q: She's retired now too?

YATES: Yes.

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YATES: Next, I went from Lagos to Kinshasa.

Q: What were you doing there?

YATES: I was also the DCM, and I became the chargé for much of the four years.

Q: Let's pick this up in 1990?

YATES: 1991. We can go back and do some more on Nigeria if you'd like.

Q: Did you all feel the beginning of the breaking up of the Soviet Union? Did you see the US military in Africa?

YATES: That was just beginning at the time. What really happened was that we stopped fighting the Cold War in Africa and the real fighting began and started undoing everything. I never saw the American military in Africa until after the Berlin Wall came down. They had less to do elsewhere so they could show up in Africa.

You probably remember in the '60s,70s and '80s, during the UNGA (United Nations General Assembly) and other times, any time there was an international conference we were going in and asking for "oui." We were asking the government to not exclude Israel and not include North Korea. I don't know what the other issues were.

Q: I talked to one person who was ambassador, maybe Chad or Niger where they had to go in and make a presentation to support either the abolition of whaling or protecting the whales. And the guy said, "Yes, we'll be with you. Tell me Mr. Ambassador, what is a whale?"
A country in the middle of Africa, whales were not exactly high on their agenda.

YATES: That's the UN votes. We did demarches forever on UN issues and that changed some. We were trying to keep countries open to two Chinas before our recognition of China. We were trying to keep the Taiwanese from sailing the seas, and keeping the Mainland Chinese embassies out and all kinds of stuff.

Q: Were we doing anything in Nigeria on negotiations with Namibia?

YATES: No, not while I was there.

Q: They weren't playing?

YATES: No. That probably would take place at the U.N. in New York and Geneva or in Addis then subsequently in Brazzaville, Congo. I don't think the Nigerians were a big player.

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Q: Today is the 24th of July, 2012, with John Yates. You have just gone to Kinshasa as DCM. How did that appointment come about?

YATES: It came about because of a change in my personal life. After my late wife's death, I remarried a Foreign Service officer a couple years later. I was going to go back to Africa, and there weren't very many embassies in Africa that would take both of us as senior rank.

At that time Kinshasa was the biggest embassy from the point of view of numbers in Africa and it seemed a possibility. Although I had been in Africa for a half a dozen assignments before, and I had been asked to consider Kinshasa, but I always said no. I didn't want to go to Kinshasa because I didn't want to be responsible for convincing the Congress that Mobutu should have some more C-130s or whatever he was requesting. But in the end, I went there primarily because Mary could go with me, and I stayed there almost longer than I did any place else in my whole career, over four years.

Q: Have we talked about your new wife?

YATES: I'm not sure. We talked about my late wife's death when I was Ambassador to Cape Verde.

Q: Can you give me your second wife's background at the time you married her.

YATES: After my first wife, Peggy died in Cape Verde, my next assignment was in the Philippines. I went primarily for personal reasons. We had two kids at home plus three in college, and I didn't want to have latchkey kids at home in D.C. I didn't know very much about the Philippines. There was a vacancy for a political-military counselor. While I was there Mary, my current wife, was the Deputy Information Officer for USIA. She had just come out of her first assignment after having been in Kwangju, Korea. When she was there, Korea was a hot bed of student unrest-- Korean student activism --so she had her foreign service baptism.

I had seen Korea at the time with these Darth Vader guys protecting the embassy against the students.

I think in our last session we were discussing the bases' negotiations for either renewal of our departure from the bases' treaty with the Philippines over Clark Air Force Base and

Subic Bay Naval Base. I was the lead political-military officer on the team, although the ambassador chaired the meetings. Mary was the spokesperson, and we spent a lot of time together for a lot of weeks, fell in love and subsequently got married.

Q: When were you in Kinshasa?

YATES: From 1991, when I arrived until 1995.

Q: What was the situation when you arrived?

YATES: When I arrived, it was our biggest embassy in Africa from the point of view of the people. At the time this was just after the liberalization movement that was starting in Eastern Europe, coming after the fall of the Berlin Wall, so there was a lot of pressure for democracy or democratization in Africa and around the world. Mobutu had been there since the mid-60s, and most people considered him to be corrupt and thuggish, although he wasn't killing a lot of people. He spread his money around rather than kill, though he'd do that if he had to.

There was a lot of pressure throughout Africa, a good part of it multiplied by ourselves for regime changes and there had been some successful elections. I recall Kenneth Kaunda, who had been the leader of Zambia since independence was defeated in an election and he left and Chiluba came in. And Kérékou in Benin, who had been in there for 15 or 20 years then was defeated and he left. Then there were some other less successful attempts at democratization, like Eyadema in Togo; he resisted the movement and Paul Biya in Cameroon resisted and is still there.

At the time some of these leaders accepted a new wave, as we could call it. And when some didn't Mobutu saw that even though there was pressure on him that if people like Biya and Eyadema could resist the tide of change, he could succeed in doing that. Like so many other African countries at the time, they hosted a national constitutional conference or convention or whatever Mobutu called it to listen to the people, it was more or less in mid-session. I arrived at that point.

I was the DCM and the ambassador was Melissa Wells, a well-known pillar of our foreign service community. Our mandate was to work on changing things in Zaire. However, months after I got there, maybe weeks, before my wife got there, the military mutinied, whether or not it was provoked by Mobutu or against him, or just to win enough spoils to go around.

In Kinshasa, the military was marching through the streets while there was also looting going on in Katanga where we had our consul general in Lubumbashi. They were not under attack, but under threat. Over the next few days, we went from the largest embassy in Africa to a total of 28 people, which included the Marine security guard, and USAID had only 25 residents in Kinshasa, three of whom were across the river in Brazzaville. USAID needed more people than they were allotted because they had to close out a huge aid program.

That mutiny was in August or September of that year, and it happened as my wife was on her way to Kinshasa. She made it as far as Lisbon and was evacuated. That part of the formula didn't work out as well for me as I thought, because we were so few and all the families were gone from over 1,000 Americans in the official community.

Q: What were the troops doing?

YATES: They mutinied for four or five days. It didn't seem to be focused against any particular ethnic group. There were a few ex-patriots that may have been killed or injured, I'm not sure. No Americans in our official community were killed and then almost all of the ex-patriot community left. The Belgians, the businesspeople, the Lebanese, everybody left. There was a boat going across the Congo River to Brazzaville carrying people every day. I remember one of the biggest problems I had to handle as DCM was what to do with all the pets that got left behind, but that's a side story.

Q: What did you do?

YATES: I tried to get in touch with them. People wanted their pets but they didn't want to pay the hundreds of dollars to ship them from Kinshasa to Washington, D.C., where they might be evacuated. We did not put them to sleep, that's all I can say. Some people took them, but it was still a problem. The ones that might have gotten as far as Brazzaville and didn't get picked up again by their owners, that, too, was also a problem.

In August, that first mutiny took place and changed the tenor of everything. One of the things that happened was since we were down to this core of people without any dependents, Ambassador Wells, whose husband was there with her, also retired Foreign Service officer, was close to 80 years old, and the State Department Undersecretary for Management allowed us to make an exception so Al could stay in Kinshasa. But before long, Ambassador Wells decided that she would also leave. It didn't happen immediately, but over the next few months. After that I officially became the Chargé AI (ad interim) for the most of the next three and a half years.

On the personal side, since we were so few people at the embassy and all were unaccompanied without their families, the officers had family visitation privileges two or three times a year. When you have 25 people and five to eight are gone at any particular time, we needed to have TDYers. So, Mary came at Christmastime to be a political officer and was just coming for the holiday season. But she said if she got there, she wasn't going back. And that's what happened. But by the end, the situation had calmed down. Most of that time we didn't feel like we were in danger, though sometimes you could feel some tension in the city. She was able to stay and then subsequently go from the political section back to her field of public affairs. She became the Public Affairs Counsellor and remained for the rest of the tour.

Q: Was there a government to deal with?

YATES: There was a government to deal with of sorts, mainly Mobutu appointees. Mobutu himself from that point on isolated himself up in Gbadolite-- what they used to call Versailles in the jungle. It was in his home village where he built a retreat. But he was president and still pulling the strings. But he had permitted some liberalization or changes to take place, including appointing his number one rival Etienne Tshisekedi as prime minister, who's still there today. Mobutu himself was up in Gbadolite for three or four years. I had to fly from Kinshasa to Gbadolite to see him at least a dozen times.

Q: You wouldn't have presented credentials, but you were the American Chief of Mission.

YATES: Yes. I always tell my family and friends that I was the punishment we were inflicting on Mobutu. We were waiting for another ambassador while I was there, trying to put the pressure on him.

Q: Did you feel there was a sense of relief that while not quite severing our ties with Mobutu at the time in reality, we were?

YATES: For me, the mission was still to try to make it a better country to help the Congolese. I don't know about a sense of relief because the changes were not happening. None of the changes could come to these people, Zaire's people were not favorably treated. There were some political changes but not much. The economy was in shambles; there was a curfew in Kinshasa and most other major cities, although there was tension. "Relief" is not a word that would come to my vocabulary.

Anyway, we soldiered on. There were a lot of things still to clear up with Mobutu, including his desire to still get spare parts for the famous C-130s. He had friends and lobbyists in Washington that were trying to keep our assistance up to a reasonable level for him. But there was also some hangover left from the Angolan civil war where Mobutu had been one of our allies in the fight for Angola against Savimbi versus Santos. And there were some, let's just call it "loose ends" that had to be cleared up there.

In Zaire, things went on, but not without any great resolution, though they did convene a Constitutional Convention, which was supposed to meet for a short time. The successful ones in Africa had been five days. The one in Kinshasa was more than five months and the final results were nil. We then had a second military uprising. When we thought things were getting better and people (ex-pats) were starting to come back this second uprising occurred. That would have been in 1993.

Things in Zaire were sort of stumbling along but not making any progress, and Mobutu was largely unavailable. The country went through the motions of the Constitutional Convention, and everything was not quite in shambles. The military wasn't getting paid and they probably needed to be. The Americans were still functioning with fewer than 30 people, but the second uprising caused others in the international community to consider packing up again. And this was also when the French ambassador was actually shot and killed.

Q: By whom?

YATES: By military elements. Security personnel always warn not to go to the window if you hear gunshots. He went to the window when he heard gunshots. I've always thought it was random, but others think it was not random, but he was shot in his window in his office in downtown Kinshasa. I remember the new French DCM, who became a good friend and still is, called me and asked me for a body bag to transport his ambassador's remains, which we had.

By then it really deflated any hopes for immediate improvement in Zaire. We still labored on. Even the Zairian elite left to go live other places like even to South Africa, also to Ivory Coast where they could practice their professions like doctors. It was a tragedy in some ways. The U.S. CDC (Centers for Disease Control) had a very large and important AIDS research project.

Q: This is the Centers for Disease Control?

YATES: In Atlanta they had a huge project that was going on at that time on HIV-AIDS. During the second evacuation we had to help the CDC get out their samples/specimens. These were test samples to help work on a cure, but they had to be cautiously transported under ice to various laboratories around the country.

What really dominated the last year or more of my time in Kinshasa was the civil war in Rwanda. I recall receiving a call from Washington when out at dinner in July 1994 about the massive ongoing refugee crisis in the east of the country. Early estimates were that within a five-day period up to nearly one million Hutu Rwandan refugees had poured over the border into Eastern Congo to escape the horrors in Rwanda.

Rwanda for those who don't know the geography is almost a thousand miles from Zaire's capital Kinshasa, and no roads can get there. That is a long way away, and the embassy didn't have contacts or infrastructure there. Imagine coordinating major humanitarian relief efforts, say nothing of hosting the string of VIPs who wanted to visit as the crisis continued to worsen without any embassy base on the ground.

State requested that in the midst of this chaos, as Chargé, that I fly to Goma and meet the USAID Administrator Brian Atwood who was arriving through Kenya. I recall doing that in July of 1994 and our being the two most senior American officials to witness this tragedy firsthand. Friends and family watched with a bit of trepidation on CNN as our official car was surrounded by a sea of humanity as we made our way to the refugee camps. Then soon the cholera epidemic began surging. In the following months, we would send officers two at a time out to Goma for 10 days TDY to assist HA efforts, monitor the political situation and liaise between the French/U.S. military and the press. President Clinton was getting more up-to-date reporting from CNN than from my Embassy miles away in Kinshasa.

The United States did a tremendous humanitarian assistance job. One of the things that happened was that all this was happening very near to Lake Kivu. The refugees used it not only for drinking, but as cleaning water and a toilet, so they had a huge cholera epidemic. I remember some days they estimated 200 to 400 people died in one day. A Naval reserve unit from California came out with water purification trucks and within days the death toll went down from over 200 to single digits by providing pure water to the refugees.

Q: There was also an issue on ways to distribute MREs (Meals Ready to Eat).

YATES: I know that we brought in planeloads full of supplies and water they were able to purify locally. I don't remember the MREs being an issue.

Q: Maybe it wasn't at that time.

YATES: It was such a spectacular refugee flow. Everybody was coming there. We had a Secretary of Defense coming out. Most of the traffic into that part of Zaire was not coming through Kinshasa; it was coming into the eastern part, which was about 1,500 miles away from where we were. Mrs. Gore came out. She stayed for two days, holding babies in her arms and nursing them. I sent my wife out to be our sub-team leader for a couple weeks to coordinate with the military and media. She didn't talk to me for several more weeks, but it was one of the things that really made her career. She can tell you about that when you talk to her.

The problem with the Rwandan refugees was their relocation? And figuring out who amongst them were part of those committing the genocide, or whether or not they were a threat to the Kagame's newly established regime. That was the focus of our last year.

Q: What had happened to Mobutu?

YATES: Mobutu was still in Gbadolite. He was not being an obstacle or problem to our giving assistance out there, but also not offering any help. And there were ethnic tensions between the Tutsi people who had been living in eastern Congo for decades from earlier refugee inundations and the newly arrived. And it was probably true that Mobutu was not happy with the new regime in Rwanda.

But again, we had one to two million refugees out there and something had to be done, not only to keep them alive but to help them relocate. After I left post ultimately because of Mobutu's other policies, the Rwandans invaded Zaire and dealt a humiliating defeat. They routed the Zaire army and were capable of going all the way. They had military operations that came far west, and that could have been up to Kinshasa, but they were not into a conquering mode.

Q: When you arrived, what was the Congolese army like?

YATES: They had a lot of money and a lot of training from us and poor leadership, poor officer corps. The officers were especially good and ought to have been Mobutu's support group, whether as an ethnic group or otherwise. They were somehow pushed out. They were well-armed and undisciplined, and that's why they mutinied twice.

Q: Were our attachés able to make any headway in this mess?

YATES: No, not much. One of the attachés, Tom Odum, wrote a book entitled, "Journey into Darkness: Genocide in Rwanda: 2005," about his perceptions of what was going on out there. What we were trying to do was to make whatever sense we could about the military leadership role, but also to try to prevent them from using arms and ammunition, and weapons that we had provided.

Q: I take it all our AID programs and all this ceased?

YATES: The short answer is yes. But earlier one of the first things I had to do in 1991-1992 was to close down the Peace Corps operation, which had a couple hundred volunteers there. It was a big program at the start and the Peace Corps had a training center in eastern Congo since Sargent Shriver's days. I'm sure thousands of PCVs (Peace Corps Volunteers) were trained there. We had to move the whole school that was their training school where they were teaching several African languages, and we had to move it all to Burundi.

But, yes all USAID programs were suspended, not just because of what had happened during the mutinies, but because the Zairois (French for Zairians) had not met their obligations on repayment of certain loans. The CDC essentially closed down its program. The main part of the USAID role that I played was in closing programs.

Q: What about the missionaries? Were these a citizenship problem or a protection and welfare?

YATES: Yes. There were a lot of missionaries in Zaire (Congo), some who had been there for at least two generations. A number of them left following the first mutiny, but they came back almost as soon as they could. The ones that were in the interior generally did not leave. The embassy faced the same problems that you would have in any large-scale evacuation. Providing security to evacuate US citizens in remote places is very tricky, but I don't remember anything specifically with the missionaries.

Q: During this time, were there any sort of centrifugal forces in Zaire, in Katanga? or tribal groups?

YATES: Yes. But Mobutu had done a pretty good job of re-establishing his presence all over. But Etienne Tshisekedi was from the Kasai country and was always the number one opposition leader. These ethnic tensions were always there. In that sense the Constitution Conference was useful because the ethnic tensions could be vetted there rather than become tribal conflict. The politics were going on, though not successfully for anybody.

The change that finally came didn't come because of a Constitutional Conference, but because of Mobutu's death and a coup d'état.

There was one other major event that took place during these times by the end of the third or fourth year, 1995, and that was the outbreak of Ebola.

Q: Explain what that was.

YATES: Ebola is a disease, a hemorrhagic fever that originated or is found primarily in Africa. It is usually fatal within several days, and in Africa it's especially difficult to treat because most of the hospitals, at least in Kinshasa and other places I've been in Africa, rely on the family to take care of feeding and the non-medical parts of patient care.

I remember when the missionaries came back to Kinshasa and told us about this disease breaking out in Kikwit Hospital. And the way they explained it made it to me, they thought it could well be Ebola. I alerted Washington immediately that it likely was Ebola. At that time there was such fear, the fact that it runs through some people when an unknown disease breaks out. There were planeloads of journalists who came out from the United States, Europe, Japan and other places. There was fear that they would walk in the germs of Ebola in the hospitals and bring the disease back to the European or Western capitals, which did happen. There was a strong sense of concern because of Ebola, and only greater stimulated because of the 1995 Dustin Hoffman film "Outbreak" about the Ebola outbreak.

Q: It has cropped up from time to time.

YATES: Yes. I'm not a medical person, but one of the things I understand is that unlike HIV, which might take a long time to develop into a fatal illness, Ebola goes from contracting to either being cured, which not many people were, to dying, in a matter of several days. Through isolation and other medical practices, which were to keep the families away it was contained rather successfully and quickly. The cholera epidemic in the refugee camps in the east killed more people than Ebola did. But it was a big event.

Q: Had HIV/AIDS appeared on the scene?

YATES: Yes. The CDC had a large AIDS projects countrywide. It was quite prevalent. In Zaire and Kinshasa, there were double digit infection rates and among the endangered segments of the population, prostitutes, for example, the rate was up 30 to 40 percent or higher. These are the early years of AIDS and it was a priority. It was a big loss when the political unrest forced the closing of the program. There were hundreds of thousands living with HIV/AIDS at that time in Zaire. By 2001, UNAIDS estimated 1.3 million Congolese were living with it, a 4.9% overall prevalence rate.

Q: How did your officers operate? This must have been a chaotic situation.

YATES: One of the nice things when you have a small embassy, you divide up the work. It doesn't matter if you're a consular officer or a budget and fiscal officer, whatever has to be done, you just divide it to get it done.

One of the things I found during my years is that the State Department does not do well was their treatment of their embassies in crises, like demanding quarterly hour ops SIT reps. We spent a lot of time during various crises, whether it was Ebola or the mutinies, sending these SIT reps. I didn't like it because whoever was writing the Secretary's morning briefing, would pick up the phone and call us in the middle of the night to ask us what was going on. So, we would refer to our SIT reps, which nobody had ever read.

At that time, we were 28 people, five of those Marines. Five to eight more were USAID closing down programs, so we were 15 people. Five or six of those are communicators and administrative support people, so you really had two political officers, one economic officer, one public affairs officer, and one consular officer who were doing most of what you would call the substantive work, whatever that might be.

Q: Did they go out into the field?

YATES: Not much. We did have regular visits. If the airport was open, which wasn't always the case, we did have regular shuttles going out to eastern Congo or eastern Zaire, but you couldn't go anywhere from Kinshasa because the roads were so bad. The whole time we were there, I think the whole time we were there, there might have been a few weeks when there wasn't a Zairian curfew or one our own embassy imposed. So, there wasn't much time in the field.

Q: What about our consulates? We had at least two?

YATES: At the beginning of my time there, we just had one in Lubumbashi, but it was essentially closed. That was one of the other things that we had to do, was to officially close it, which included all the communications and removing other classified materials. We had no Americans down there. Most of the time, I was in Zaire, and after the second mutiny we had no Americans. We had our local staff staying there, but that was the only one in operation for a while. But in the end, it was completely closed. It may be reopened now.

Q: Were there any intrusions from neighboring states, Angola, Zambia, Tanzania, Sudan, and elsewhere?

YATES: There was the big one from Rwanda. I think there was some movement of people in the southwest toward Angola. But since Angola was in its own civil war this was more local populations trying to escape perceived danger rather than an actual invasion.

One thing I wanted to mention concerning invasions. Earlier we spoke of AIDS/HIV. In French, HIV is SIDA. During the second mutiny when the troops were going around

looking for places to loot, they came to this pretty elaborate research center. One of the American nurses who was working there as a research assistant, used some blood samples and wrote "SIDA" on the door. When troops came in and saw the bloody sign, they took an immediate detour away from there.

We were talking about neighbors and of course, Congo B or Brazzaville is just across the river. But Congo B had their own problems. Ironically, most of the time that was supposed to be our embassy's safe haven just across the river, but I don't remember incursions from there.

Q: How about oil? Was anything happening in the oilfields?

YATES: Zaire does not have oil. Chevron Zaire Gulf operations were particularly in Cabinda, although there was some offshore production. I recall flying down and visiting the tanker to observe. They pumped the oil and had a tanker sitting out there and when they filled it up, it would take off. As far as I can recall, there was no disruption in the oil production done by American Zaire Gulf, which was the American company that was doing it. It's next to Cabinda, the Angolan part, north of the Congo River, which is still a huge oil producing area today.

For Zaire and Congo today more important than oil, the rare earth minerals are significant. I didn't know it then. They are now being used in cell phones among other things. There are names I don't know, but there was copper, diamonds, and rare earth minerals.

Q: Wasn't the copper mine shut down?

YATES: The copper mines were shut down in Lubumbashi. The diamond mining, which goes on daily, is largely uncontrolled. I think they call them conflict diamonds, and a good part of those conflict diamonds probably came unauthorized from various places outside of Kinshasa.

Q: What was life like for you there? Did you have any contact with anybody?

YATES: Life was pretty much isolated. We were fewer than 30 Americans, most without families. Other embassies tended to be even smaller. Whatever social life there was, was within this group, whether it was playing tennis or occasionally going out for dinner.

One of the other things about Zaire is part of Mobutu's economic "successes" was to have created the worst inflation since Germany during World War II, in the 1930s and Zimbabwe today. We used to go out for dinner and sometimes dinner would cost 125 million Zaires and you'd have to take two or three shopping bags of money to pay for it. But there were a few good French cuisine restaurants that kept going.

We had a tennis court at the American embassy, which was adjacent to the British embassy. Our interactions with the Zairians were more official rather than social, so it

was pretty much an enclave-type of life. You could drive around the city during the daytime but not at night. You could go down to the river for picnics and boating, but it was rather spartan. I remember we had a Marine birthday party one year with the Marines in combat gear cutting a cake with their real bayonets instead of their ceremonial sword then going back to their watch post. We had a couple of real Marine balls during my tenure as well. It fluctuated because of these mutinies and because of insecurity, but mostly it was enclave living.

Q: It must have been difficult for you when you had people coming out, visitors from Washington, to see what was going on.

YATES: Quite difficult. There were visitors from Washington who would not come to Kinshasa, but would require me to go across the river and meet them in Brazzaville. But it was alright for me and others in the embassy to be living there! Yes, at various times we had a lot of high-level attention. The Deputy Secretary of State came for some issue with Rwandan refugees. The Secretary of Defense was in eastern Zaire.

Nobody wanted to fly in on any airline that flew in Zaire. During that period of time having to fly back and forth from Kinshasa to Gbadolite to see Mobutu, I think there were several foreign delegations whose plane didn't make it both ways.

This might be a good place to break on Zaire.

Q: What happened next?

YATES: Two things. My next assignment, I was named as ambassador to Benin. Almost all the staff that was there for any duration was rewarded by the State Department with what were perceived to be very nice ongoing assignments. My wife became the press attaché in Paris, which is probably the most difficult job in the Foreign Service. My political officer went to be the Consul General in Bordeaux. At least four other people subsequently became ambassadors in their own rights.

Q: When did you leave Zaire?

YATES: August/September of 1995.

Q: Was Mobutu still sitting in his "Versailles" in the jungle ?

YATES: Mobutu was still alive, yes. Subsequent to my departure, we named an ambassador there.

Q: Who was that?

YATES: I think it was Dan Simpson and then Bill Swing.

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Q: Today is the 31st of July, 2012, with John Yates. We're now off to Benin. How and when did that come about?

YATES: It was in 1995. I was still the chargé in Zaire when I was nominated as Ambassador to Benin. I got out of there at the end of the year in November 1995.

Q: You were there from when to when?

YATES: I was there for three years, 1995 to '98.

Q: How did this come about?

YATES: Most of the people who spent some time in those tough years in Zaire were rewarded and they tried to give them good onward assignments. My wife went to Paris, another friend went to Bordeaux, and three years of being chargé in Zaire to be Ambassador again.

Q: Benin 1995, what was the situation there?

YATES: Benin is one of my favorite stories. In 1991, they held a constitutional conference. They had 17 years of military rule from a guy named Mathieu Kérékou and they had very close relations with the North Koreans and with the Cubans. Their government ran like it was being run from Pyongyang and Havana, and it didn't run very well at all.

But then something got into Kérékou's head. Benin was among the first of the African countries that had been under military dictatorship for a long time, and the first to have a constitutional convention and make a successful, peaceful transition to an elected presidency. The convention was short and effective. They elected a prime minister and then Kérékou. Kérékou was not planning to lose the election, but he did, so he went 'back to his barracks' and he supported Soglo, who took over. By the time I got there, Soglo had instituted many reforms, and it made me a real believer in all of our push for democratization and economic liberalism in Africa.

Q: Can you geographically bind Benin?

YATES: On one side you have Togo. On the other side you have Nigeria, and on the North you have Niger and Burkina Faso.

Q: What was your embassy like?

YATES: During most of the 19 years that Kérékou or at least for the last decade of his rule, we had a limited embassy. We had a very poor relationship with this quasi-communist dictatorship. I was the second ambassador after we re-established a relationship. I had a political officer, DCM and a consular officer. By that time, there was

a good-sized AID program because we were rewarding Benin for their transition. The AID mission was the same size as the embassy, five or six people, two USAID officers, two to three admin officers; a normal size for a small African country.

Q: What were American relations with Benin at the time you got there?

YATES: They were very good. They were the first country to make this transition. We had known Soglo when he was at the World Bank or International Monetary Fund, and we had confidence in him. The new administration wanted to make a good example of a country that had made a transition, so we had very good relations. Soglo got to visit the United States. Vice President Gore was a fan of his, as was the head of the National Security Council, so I could do a lot with Washington at that time. It wasn't always the case in Africa.

Q: What about the North Korean, Cuban, and Iranian embassies?

YATES: I'm not sure that there was an Iranian embassy. The Cubans were still there. I can remember the Cuban became the doyen or Dean of the Diplomatic Corps while I was there, but the relationship was completely changed for them. We weren't interacting with the North Koreans, although they still had some people there, but most of them left.

Q: What was going on internally in the country? Was it cut up into tribes?

YATES: There is a division like in most African countries, specifically most West African. There's a north-south division, the biggest with the north being essentially Muslim and the south being essentially Christian. Many had at least three major ethnic groups. His group was the FON group around Cotonou, about 2/5 of the population, and Kérékou is really a northerner. The north-south divide was a similar divide that you get in all over Africa with Sahelian groups, with the cattle herders clashing with the farmers.

Q: Were you too far south to be affected by the Sahel winds?

YATES: Cotonou the capital was not affected, but the northern part of the country was dry and dusty. I wasn't there during the worst Sahelian droughts. There was some embassy involvement, but not great.

Q: I imagine Nigeria was the colossus to the east.

YATES: Nigeria was hugely important. When I served in Nigeria almost a decade before, there was nothing going on in Benin. When I came back after this democratization and liberalization, the Nigerians were hungry for French cheeses and good bread. It was less than a two-hour drive to Lagos, and it was a big part of the Beninese market for anything that they imported. Some of the things they imported were used clothing and used cars from Europe that were illegal in Nigeria. It was a very important relationship for the survival of Benin.

Q: Benin had been French?

YATES: Yes. They gained independence as Dahomey.

Q: And how important was the French influence?

YATES: The French influence was always important. The Beninese (Beninois) had achieved unusually high, relatively speaking, educational levels under the French. Many doctors and lawyers left during the 19 years of the Kérékou administration; they had gone to France, to Gabon, and to Cote d'Ivoire. One of the things that made the country's recovery work was the diaspora came back and they worked. The relationship with France was strong, and they had a close relationship with the French because of the strength of our desire to show that this transition was good for African countries. Plus, I think our own assistance program was matched or maybe even exceeded the French. But culturally, the allegiance was more French.

Q: Did we have the Peace Corps there?

YATES: The Peace Corps was there. They never left even when the embassy nearly closed or reduced to a skeletal staff during some of the worst years. The Peace Corps was proud of that, and I was proud of what the Peace Corps was doing. By the time I got there, we might have had at least a couple hundred PCVs, which is a lot for a country that size.

Q: How did you find the Peace Corps?

YATES: I have great respect for the men and women, and the leadership they demonstrated in the country and for the programs they ran. They were very effective. You could go into the countryside, even in the north where you would find Peace Corps volunteers. It was a wonderful program.

Q: What were you doing as ambassador there?

YATES: I was helping to promote Benin's continued transition. I would say probably the continued transition from an autocratic regime to an open, democratic regime. Probably our biggest tool and effort was in foreign assistance. We were doing a complete reform of the education system much to the French dismay because what was being instituted was not the lycée ecole French. It was a more U.S.-based education system. We had a good if limited military relationship with Benin. This was a real time of transition of helping Benin to be an example for the rest of our overall African policy.

Q: We must have been watching the military there because once in power, it's hard to get them out of power when they have a taste of it.

YATES: That's true. In this case, to Kérékou's credit, he went back to his barracks, to his home town. There was no glimmering of any military coup activities that I can recall.

The new president appointed the leadership of the military, but it was not a looming threat, in all honesty.

Q: How about with Ghana? Ghana had a troubled history of governance. What was going on there?

YATES: Ghana had made a semi transition to democracy. J.J. Rawlings had been elected President. The thing that I can recall most about Ghana was that they had their huge Volta River Dam, which supplied electricity to Benin. You asked earlier about the Sahel. During the time I was there, there was three years of drought in the Akosombo Dam levels, so much so that they cut off the power to Benin and Togo and to the other West African purchasers, which was a crisis for Benin. We helped in solving the problem with generators. Overall, I would say Ghana was a good neighbor, probably more inward looking than outward. There wasn't the feeling of a threat from Ghana.

Q: Was Qadhafi messing around?

YATES: Qadhafi liked Togo next door. He would spend his money to buy influence in Africa. Some of my diplomatic problems were trying to make sure that the Beninese weren't overly enthusiastic with Qadhafi's blandishments. I remember more than once making demarches, to the President, about not accepting a Qadhafi's invitation for something that we considered to be contrary to our interests.

In 1998 just before I was departing Benin, President Qadhafi invited President Kerekou to come to Tripoli for an anniversary celebration of his ascent to power, and the President wanted to go. I recall Assistant Secretary Susan Rice was pleased that I was able to convince Kerekou that such a trip would jeopardize our bilateral ties and US assistance, so he did not travel. Qadhafi's influence was not so much in Benin, but in the region, more so in Togo, where he had his good friend Eyadéma, which was now democratized.

Q: I always think of Benin Bronzes or the Benin sculptures.

YATES: Benin started in Nigeria. The Beninese changed their name from Dahomey to Benin to give it a West African name. There was a famous empire, and the Benin bronzes are actually from that empire in Nigeria. What you should remember culturally about Benin is for being known as the cradle of voodoo. Voodoo came to Haiti and Brazil from Benin. In the movie "The Comedian," the voodoo parts were filmed in Benin.

Q: Did voodoo play much of a role?

YATES: Yes. Voodoo played an important role for leaders. Every leader would have a good relationship with the heads of Benin voodoo worshipping groups.

Q: I know voodoo is usually played out on a local level. Was there an equivalent to a voodoo hierarchy, a voodoo pope or anything like that?

YATES: Yes. There is a leadership, but the most important one is the supreme priest from Ouidah. He definitely had a political influence on the government and throughout West Africa. There was no major Benin festival that didn't include voodoo dancing, dancing haystacks and things like that.

Q: When I served in Vietnam, we would try to make sure that we could have an agreement with Buddhists.

YATES: Yes, principles.

Q: Did you have a voodoo consultant?

YATES: No, not to that extent. We might have been one degree removed from that, which is to say we had Beninese ministers that we worked with who had ties with the voodoo leadership, but I didn't necessarily cultivate any voodoo-based relationships. Although I made courtesy calls when I first arrived and I wouldn't probably go through the town like Ouidah without calling on someone.

Q: You didn't drink chicken blood, did you?

YATES: No, but it was alright to go to voodoo temples and have pythons around my neck, but that was more for tourist photographs.

Q: What about being a former French colony and the Catholic Church?

YATES: The Catholic Church was very important, especially in the south. The Catholic churches in Africa have adapted to some local customs and religions. Their Christianity and Catholicism is more prevalent in the coastal regions where the missionaries came.

Q: Were there political parties there?

YATES: Yes. There were three main political parties: the President's and Kérékou's in the north, and a third one, Porto-Novo, which was the capital of Benin, although the biggest city is Cotonou; and two in the south, and one in the north. During the two presidential elections that I was aware of, elections were based on a coalition between two of these three parties.

Q: Was there a political system that you could report on and use?

YATES: The National Assembly with about 48 parliamentarians or assemblymen. There were definitely politicians with whom to interact. They enacted legislation, and had a constitutional court, and a supreme court. All these things worked very well with the people who had come back. The transition was remarkable, and it's still going on.

Every five years they've had an election and every five years the election has been peaceful, and the losers have accepted the results as determined by Jimmy Carter's or the

African Union monitoring. But they had elections, and we monitored them. It was really amazing. If I went there and they had an election, that's at least four elections now for President, which, in '91 and '96 had been contested openly, and the results have been accepted.

Q: Did we have any issues with the government there?

YATES: The government's main issue with us had to do with cotton, which was their principal foreign exchange. We had policies to support our own cotton production that was not favorable to the Beninese. The Beninois thought it was discriminatory against their exports to us. That was an issue, one that we could talk about and work with, and in the end, we probably would have been helpful.

Q: Did any Americans have problems there, such as consular cases?

YATES: I don't recall any particularly difficult issues with the government. You had things that sometimes happen with tourists getting injured or even dying, but that happens in every embassy. I do not recall any issues that any Americans who were in prison required us to do anything.

Q: Anybody looking for oil?

YATES: No, not really. They were searching offshore in Ghana and there was oil in Nigeria. There was a big plan for a West African pipeline that would have gone through Benin. Enron Company was out there, but there was no Benin oil nearby. Geologists would probably tell you that the pool runs nearby, you know, but Benin didn't have oil.

Q: Was there much interest in Benin back in Washington?

YATES: This period was referred to as a transition in Africa with the first African country to make that democratic transition. I accompanied President Soglo and he had already been to the White House; but Soglo and Vice President Gore had a telephone relationship. I also accompanied the Minister of Defense to the Pentagon for full military honors. We had a strong relationship with Benin after a long time of not having one, and it was easy to get attention. It was a small country. We weren't talking about major initiatives, but we could get attention when we needed it.

Q: Were there exchange students?

YATES: No, not really. There was a more cultured exchange between the Peace Corps. The tendency for Benin was to still go to France for their cultural exchange. But tourism became big when Benin opened again, especially for things like voodoo and for African American tourism, it became relatively important.

Q: By this time the Soviet Union had gone.

YATES: Yes. The Berlin Wall had come down, but we still had a Russian embassy there.

Q: Had the Russians pulled in their horns?

YATES: Yes. I spent a lot of years in Africa before that, countering Russian, North Korean or even Chinese initiatives, but by that time it was ridiculously benign.

Q: How did you find life there?

YATES: I liked it. It was small, but of all my African posts, I may have made more lasting friends in that country than in any others that I can recall, except maybe in Cape Verde. Benin's nightlife starts at 1:00 in the morning. I'm usually in bed at 11:00 at night, so I didn't totally participate in that. But we had a little golf course, good food, good restaurants and a good but simple life.

Q: Did you ever feel under threat from terrorists or anything while they were wandering around?

YATES: No. That might have been true in other places I had been. But I have to say that of all the African countries I ever served in, by the time I got to Benin, it was the safest. I could give a reception at my house and pay the 10 or 15 people who were working for me, when they finished up at midnight or 2:00 in the morning, they would go out with their 5,000 CFA francs, which was the equivalent of $5, get on what they call a zemidjan, a two-wheeled taxi and get home safely. I never felt a threat. Going from there to Cameroon, was completely the contrary. But no, I did not feel threatened in Benin at all.

Q: How were your relations with the president?

YATES: Good. I had two presidents because we had to cut our close relationship with Soglo while we were there because they had an election. Soglo lost and the new, actually old president was Kérékou, the returned dictator, who came back in in a fair election. Soglo didn't like it, and he appealed to us to say that it was unfair. I remember that I was in close touch with Washington on this. I had spent a lot of time on this relationship with Soglo. I called him up and said, "You know, Nicephore (his first name), politics is politics and sometimes you win and sometimes you lose. It seems that you've lost this time and we'd like you to do the correct thing." And he did. It took me a while to have a good relationship with the new/old president, Kérékou. He was suspicious of us, but in the end we were able to work well together.

Q: Your wife was out there from Paris?

YATES: Yes.

Q: How did that work out?

YATES: The nice thing about being in Paris is that there were regular air connections, so she came down often. I went up to Paris or to Europe a lot and it worked out okay. Not an ideal situation, but better than when she was Ambassador in Burundi and I was Ambassador in Cameroon. You could go north and south in Africa in those days, but you couldn't go east and west or across the continent.

Q: When did you leave there?

YATES: It would have been 1998.

Q: Then what?

YATES: Then I went to be Ambassador to Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea.

Q: You were still in the neighborhood?

YATES: Yes. Cameroon was part of the French community in Central Africa rather than West Africa, but not far away. Cameroon was a complex country. The political changes in Benin and Cameroon were under pressure to do the same thing but Paul Biya wasn't ready to be replaced. Even though he lost an election before I got there, he was still in power.

Q: Could you bound Cameroon?

YATES: Yes. Nigeria, Chad at this time, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea.

Q: It's a much bigger country.

YATES: A big, rich and wonderful country which suffered under very poor leadership. Cameroon could have been really good. It was the gem of the French Central African grouping and with rich culture, wonderful hardwoods, and lots of other agricultural resources. They could have someone as a leader like Benin. They even have some oil, but they also had poor leadership.

Q: You were there in '90?

YATES: Ninety-eight to 2001.

Q: What was the government like when you got there?

YATES: The government was the same government that had been there for almost 20 years, aging autocrats and Paul Biya, who had taken over when the first president died. He had been President ever since and is still president today. There were one or two competent ministers, but at the time I was there according to Transparency International's ranking of corruption in countries worldwide, rated Cameroon at the bottom on the list, even more corrupt than Nigeria.

Q: How does corruption manifest itself?

YATES: In every part of society, from policemen to the big stuff, like what's stolen by the ministers, whether or not it was the minister of education who would have a $140 million budget for textbooks and would buy $4 million worth of textbooks and pocket the rest. The policemen, every time you're stopped by the police you were expected to pay. Kids going to school would have to pay for textbooks because the minister of education had essentially stolen the money for textbooks. The only way you could learn in school was by the blackboard, as we used to call them. The kids who sat up close were favored because the parents would pay the teacher so their kids could sit up close. It didn't matter. You had to pay for every service.

Q: It must have been one extremely ineffective government.

YATES: Very ineffective. Biya or his people would use money to pay off the opposition politicians. Cameroon had been Francophone and Anglophone, and part of it had been German territory. After the First World War it was taken away from Germany and put under a trusteeship. So roughly half the country was under French administration and half under British, English. The president was French from the Francophone part. He always appointed the prime minister from the Anglophone side, so they spread the money around, which there was a lot of, and politically they didn't have any problems. They had some before during the elections that Biya should have lost, but that was before I got there.

Q: It must have been discouraging to be there.

YATES: It was discouraging because it's such a wonderful country with good people and poor leadership. That's one of my themes about all of Africa is that so often the problem is leadership.

Q: Why did they have such lousy leadership?

YATES: I have to think a bit more deeply on that before I answer on the record. I think it's true that power corrupts and absolute power that corrupts absolutely. It's the same elsewhere we've seen in other places, not just in Africa. Often when the transition from colonialism to independence came, the leaders wanted to have everything that they thought the Europeans had or whoever was having it before. They would build big houses and big mansions, possess a lot of cars, take a lot of trips, stash a lot of money away in Europe, suppress the press, do whatever they could, and nobody could control them.

Q: I would think in a situation like this you would have a restive military which would say "screw this" and take over.

YATES: The military was taken care of by the president. The average age of what I used to call the flag officers was probably over 60, maybe older than that. Early in Biya's

tenure, long before I got there, they had had an attempted coup against him, but enough of the military had supported him. And even though that had happened 15 years ago, these people were all still in place. so the military did not seem to be a threat.

Q: Did other countries like Niger or Chad play any particular role?

YATES: Nigeria was the big one in the region, Nigeria and Cameroon had a dispute over an area dividing the two countries, called the Bakassi Peninsula, which was actually in Nigeria's oil rich area, and by most maps should have belonged to Cameroon. That was a big issue between them during the whole time I was there. The relationship was poor, suspicious. But eventually since I left, it has been resolved largely in Cameroon's favor.

Q: Was there any American interest in the place other than wringing of hands?

YATES: There was a huge economic project which was a Trans Cameroon pipeline. They discovered oil in Chad. The American company Exxon discovered oil in Chad, which is land locked, so they built a pipeline from Chad to the Cameroon coast, built by Americans.

When I presented my letters to Paul Biya, his only issue with me was when are we going to get the Trans Cameroon pipeline. Cameroon wasn't really the issue in holding up the pipeline. It was the fact that Chad, with new oil money, had an even worse government than Cameroon, so the World Bank tried to make an arrangement under which Déby wouldn't steal all the oil revenues.

Anyway, we built it and it was a huge project, still going on and still exporting Chadian oil through Cameroon. That was a big one. Oil also was an issue in the Bakassi Peninsula area. Hardwoods were of interest, especially to Asian countries. But for U.S. projects, the U.S. projects, America was country for the trans government pipeline.

Q: Was the Peace Corps there?

YATES: Yes. The Peace Corps was a big and active program – a lot of it in education, village health, child care centers and agriculture in those days, also doing environmental projects.

Q: With the corruption, did this cause a clash of cultures?

YATES: You know how the Peace Corps works. If the villages would support their PCV (Peace Corps Volunteer), the minister would sign an agreement on protection and rights, the fact that Peace Corps volunteers would be provided housing and whatever. Usually that was up to the local entities and it was okay.

Q: Did you have any issues outside of living in this difficult environment?

YATES: As I mentioned earlier, criminality was a problem in Cameroon compared to Benin. As the American ambassador, I was carjacked there. I still have a scar on my head where I was whacked with some sort of revolver butt.

Q: Was this just a local entrepreneur?

YATES: Yes. I was driving an embassy owned Toyota four-wheel drive, which was the car of choice for the carjackers, and I was coming back from the Marine House to my own house around 7:30 at night and I was carjacked in my own driveway.

Q: What happened?

YATES: I was driving into the driveway and the front door of my car was unlocked and somebody jumped in the car and held a gun to my head, and said, "Give me the keys." Any security officer will tell you you're supposed to give them the keys, but I was not wise enough to do that. I was10 feet from my own embassy guard, who didn't do a thing. In Cameroon, like in other African countries, they have very deep ditches because of torrential rains. The water runoff is very rapid, and I let the car roll into this ditch, which was probably six feet deep, just two wheels went in but the carjacker couldn't get it out. So he pulled me out of the car and whacked me with his pistol then fired his gun, and I collapsed into the middle of the road. He left unhappy while I was lying in the middle of the road, but then I realized that I would be run over if I didn't move so I moved myself. It was part of the overall insecurity in Cameroon.
We had many incidents of Americans and Europeans or expatriates being attacked, robbed and injured, as I was.

Q: Was there any consideration about pulling them out?

YATES: The Peace Corps volunteers, no. We did talk about pulling them out in that area of Cameroon where we had an incident but not as a result of my experience. I did have their Minister of National Interior, whatever they called it, their head policeman, fired by Paul Biya. It was a pretty big scandal for Cameroon to have the American ambassador carjacked and an even bigger scandal back in the United States. It was on NPR (National Public Radio) that morning when somebody told my daughter that her father had been shot and killed in Cameroon. But she was a smart young lady, and she called the operations center and they said I was hurt but not killed.

Q: What about the Cameroonians? What kind of people were they?

YATES: I liked the Cameroonians. The common people were good people, and they were also frustrated by the system. There were some areas, parts of the country that had disturbances and demonstrations, but mostly they were fairly quiescent and took all of this as if it's the norm. I always talk about the criminality. I had people who worked at my house and they would not work after 8:00 p.m. if they didn't have to or if I didn't provide an embassy car to drive them home. One of my people was robbed at least four times in

his own neighborhood. Most of the insecurity was not aimed at expatriates, but amongst the Cameroonians themselves.

Q: Was the government hand so weak or corrupt? What caused this criminality?

YATES: It was the corruption, which was everywhere. The policemen weren't paid or they had to be paid extra to do their duty. As far as I could see, the government made little or no attempt to control it. Sometimes local officials did in the north, but in the central government, nowhere. One of the things the French left behind was a very centralized system including the police, Gendarmerie Nationale, but they were corrupt, and there wasn't much hope.

Q: How about tribalism?

YATES: Like in other countries, there are three or four large ethnic groups that had to be balanced. The largest one was the group around Douala, where the Germans first came. It's the biggest city in Cameroon. The people were pretty much excluded from power by the coalition between the north and Paul Biya's forest group. And there was a certain amount of turmoil especially in Douala, after the election that Biya stole.

Q: What role did the Cameroonian military play in this?

YATES: The Cameroonian military was essentially co-opted by the presidency. They did what the president wanted them to do or not do. As far as I know, other than 10 years or more before I got there, there hadn't been any military activity, nothing that you would consider to be coup threatening.

Q: Were the French playing any role there?

YATES: Yes, the French were playing more a traditional role than a bad actor. Thirty, 40 years after the independence of their colonies the French attention turned elsewhere and their empire was suddenly gone.

Q: Did we have any interest there?

YATES: More or less the same interest that we have in other important African countries. We had an economic interest to a certain extent, but it was primarily stability and cooperation on regional issues in international forums.

Q: How about getting votes from them for the UN?

YATES: Not only from them, but in every country I ever served in, a part of your portfolio was U.N. votes, whether it be on the Law of the Sea Treaty or Zionism as racism. There was an Israeli ambassador there, which is not the case in many African countries.

Q: Was there much activity along the coast, such as fishing?

YATES: Fishing was relatively important, but it was more important to the Chinese or Spanish fishermen than to the Cameroonians who sold the fishing licenses and everything else. It's an important industry, but Cameroon was an agricultural paradise. A large percentage of the bananas that are sold in Europe come from Cameroon, as well as hardwoods and cotton from the north. We had a modest amount of trade, but not huge, but more important than the amount of trade we had in Benin, even though the relationship was completely different.

Q: Did you get any high-level visits?

YATES: Not particularly. There certainly wasn't a high cabinet level visit to Cameroon. The military started coming to Africa in the '90s and we would have an occasional military visit. We had a reasonable military-to-military relationship with the Cameroon units. We had exchange training programs and what we called medical programs in the north and Cameroonians going to West Point. The Cameroonians are very good football players and were in a couple of World Cups. We had a military relationship with them and a relatively good one. But because of the political situation, I had virtually no aid, no foreign assistance.

Q: What about oil?

YATES: Oil off coast, not offshore, not in big amounts, but significant amounts. And as I mentioned, the oil in Chad is coming down.

Q: What about Qadhafi?

YATES: Qadhafi was less evident than he was in Benin.

Q: What about extreme Muslims?

YATES: No, the north is largely Islamic, I think somewhere at 40 percent. Cameroon is Muslim. There was this division, but Biya, who was a Southerner and a Christian had his coalition with the north, but it was nothing like northern Nigeria or what's going on in the Sahel.

Q: Did you have any personal contact with the President or important members of the cabinet?

YATES: Members of the cabinet, yes. I found two or three that were reliable that we could work closely with. The President, not very often. I must have seen him three or four times in three years, one-on-one. One of those times was right after I had been carjacked. I took a three-star general in to see him. I had a huge dressing on my head, and I was happy to go out and stand on the presidential palace and answer the questions of the press corps.

Biya and I communicated when we had to, but normally there were a couple of good ministers who may have been trained at the University of Illinois that we could rely on. The prime minister was usually amenable to talking.

Q: Did any other country have undue influence or more influence or was it pretty much on its own?

YATES: No, I don't think there was anybody. The French probably had as much as anybody, but the French and ourselves and Nigeria not so much influence as less favorable relationships. Cameroon had money, a good base and they weren't poverty stricken. They didn't have to be poverty stricken. There was some competition between Biya and Bongo in Gabon next door.

Q: When did you leave there?

YATES: I left at the end of 2001, early 2002 and retired from the Foreign Service.

Q: You didn't really retire, though, did you?

YATES: I didn't retire at all, no. I had a whole bunch of other things that weren't done. I worked at the State Department in Intelligence and Research. I also worked at United Nations, as a special envoy for Somalia and I worked on Darfur.

Q: Do you want to talk about those now or another time?

YATES: No, I think another time, probably not until September. We're supposed to be back around the 28th of August.

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Q: Today is the 31st of May, 2013, interview with John Yates. We left off in 2001, when you retired.

YATES: I see, okay.

Q: That was the end of your career except for the fact that you kept going. What happened then?

YATES: After 2001, I was asked by the African Bureau to go to New York to assist at the United Nations mission there. This was after the Gulf War, in 2002, and there was some ill will in New York towards the US trying to push through the- a resolution on Iraq. Since 50 of the countries up in New York are African countries, I was there to help the full time UN staff, seeing African delegations.

Q: Why was there ill will and what kind of things were you doing?

YATES: There were the UN resolutions that we tried to get passed in New York to get a coalition or a consensus to take military action.

Q: This was after 9/11?

YATES: Yes, but it was really the decision to go into Iraq or that we shouldn't go into Iraq. We had pushed very hard in New York to get a resolution of which there was not a great deal of enthusiasm, or acceptance. In the end we offended a number of countries. Many in Africa did not accept our reasoning, I should say. The U.S. invaded Iraq in March, 2003.

Q: Looking back on this, were these offenses winnable? Did you see that we were heavy handed or was this just in the nature of things?

YATES: If I can be totally candid, I think some of the same reservations that were found in our own country were found much deeper in the international community. They probably could have been avoided if we had decided that we didn't need U.N. sanctions to do what we were going to do. On the issue itself, probably not.

Q: What did you do?

YATES: I set about seeing as many of the chiefs of the African missions in New York as I could to explain our policies for going ahead after the defeat of Saddam Hussein. In many cases there was some acceptance and receptivity to this and some cases there was continued skepticism. The main thing was to re-establish to the extent that we could many countries' confidence in the United States position in the United Nations, i.e., that we were not going to go unilaterally because we had not succeeded in convincing the United Nations of what our policy decision was.

Q: How did the vote come out?

YATES: This was well after the vote.

Q: This is smoothing.

YATES: That's correct. I don't have my notes with me, but this was several months after the vote.

Q: How did you personally feel about our intervention into Iraq?

YATES: I studied international law and I had not seen a casus belli or provocation justifying going to war. We don't declare war these days, and I thought it didn't justify intervention. It was a thinly veiled intervention for political reasons.

Q: Did you find your colleagues had the same reservations?

YATES: I think the main objection was a heavy-handed attempt to get a resolution that was not well received by the majority of citizens of African countries. I don't recall who was on the other end of the resolution at the time, but I do know there was awful criticism of our attempts to justify action.

Q: What were you up to after this pacifying attempt?

YATES: I went back to the State Department after the United Nations to the African Bureau where I worked for a few months as the Chief of the Intelligence and Research Office, INR.

Q: Were you floated to bureaus in any particular area?

YATES: No. I was in the African Bureau. There's an office there, the Bureau of INR, a Bureau which covers all of Africa. It had a stable of like six or seven regional experts. My job was to coordinate their work within the bureau under the State Department.

Q. Then what?

I was then asked to head up our delegation to the Darfur negotiation talk, though I was not in Darfur. This was at a time when the Sudanese attempted to form a breakaway state of Fur, a province of Darfur. They were in negotiations trying to reach a modus vivendi so that the Darfurians would have enough assurances that they would continue to be part of Sudan and that the Sudanese would have enough assurances that the attempts at breakaway civil war would be ended.

Q: Darfur had been in our headlines then disappeared the last couple of years. What was the situation and why?

YATES: I just want to go ahead and make it clear that these were negotiations between the delegation from Darfur and the Sudanese government. We were observers. We and the United Nations and the-half a dozen other nations had had connections to Sudan were observers trying to be facilitators. The issue was that Sudan is a country that's ruled by a clique Arabic ethnic group, and it's a huge country. I'm talking about Sudan before it separated which was the largest country geographically in Africa. It had many tribes and ethnicities, and the Darfuris felt like they had for years been subjugated by the central regime. They had begun military action, though it started out limited, attacking police stations and government troops. But it became nearly a full-fledged civil war, and they had a lot of sympathy in the world.

I remember driving around northern Maryland and seeing signs on churches about the Darfur coalition and saving the people of Darfur. It was really a racial clash. The Darfuris tended to be black Africans, and the cities and Sudanese government tended to be more or less dominated by light skinned Arabic and Muslim. What eventually happened was that the government of the Central Sudan military began bombing Darfur villages. At that

time we declared, we made the policy declaration that this is a case of genocide. The military of the Central Sudanese government actually got the Darfuris.

Q: As I recall, they were the armed gangs, militia, the Janjaweed.

YATES: Yes, Janjaweed, another ethnic group, a nomadic people who had had a traditional conflict with the Darfuris. They were more pastoral and settled. They would come when the heat became excessive, when the waters got low. Anybody in a drought that fought in certain seasons and would bring their camels in and destroy the farms of the Darfuris. The government knew that, given this traditional animosity, so they armed them and let them do whatever they wanted to with government sanctions, some without government approval. Some of the things the Janjaweed were doing were also actions they had done before without Central government approval. But additionally, the Central Sudanese army was burning villages.

Q: What were you doing in this regard?

YATES: I was trying, along with the U.K. and Norwegians, this is the same coalition that had just finished the North-South negotiations in Sudan to address the situation.

This dispute within Sudan was during much of the last part of those negotiations, but it hadn't been treated specifically in the negotiations, and Darfur was to remain part of the north. This was another reason for the Darfuri action.

They thought that if Southern Sudan should have the right to break off, then they should. The United States, U.K. and Norway, plus the African Union would essentially try to get the two sides to talk to each other with some reasonable terms. And that was it.

Q: How did you find the Sudanese side?

YATES: My experience with the Sudanese is that they have a tremendously skilled diplomatic contingent. We were doing this in Abuja in Nigeria. They were good lawyers and diplomats, and had a very hard line. Our relationship with Sudan had been, as a nation with a government had been terrible for a number of years. Osama bin Laden once lived in Sudan, and during President Clinton's time we had launched a couple of Tomahawk missiles into Khartoum as punishment for some actions that bin Laden's group had taken, so our relationship with Sudan was not very good, to be honest. We had diplomatic relations but then we didn't have, and we still don't have an ambassador in Sudan.

They were hard line, but very good at their jobs. You asked me about our relationship. There were a lot of diplomatic niceties in these discussions. They would listen to our positions, and we would hear their counter American positions and then the Darfuris would attempt to try to tell us why we were both wrong. But they were not nearly as sophisticated in this sort of thing as the Sudanese.

Q: The Sudanese have had this reputation for years of being a very sophisticated group sitting in the middle of Africa and the Darfurians. Were they Christian or animus?

YATES: No, they were all Muslims.

Q: Why would this group want separation?

YATES: They started out by wanting education, health, and social services from the central government that they weren't getting. The separation issue came as a result primarily of the North-South negotiations which had outlined all the problems and real issues between central government and subjugated groups. Darfur is a relatively poor area but not destitute. They had provided a large number of common soldiers in the Sudanese army for decades.

Q: What was our attitude towards the formation of another state?

YATES: A real issue for us was to stop the genocide. We were not negotiating at that time for Darfuris' independence. They were negotiating for a say in the government. In fact, when we finally reached an agreement quite a bit later, one of the things that was decided was that someone of Darfur ethnicity would be a second vice president in Khartoum as part of the government. They were negotiating for a voice in the government.

The North-South agreement was for a 10-year period in which the South was supposed to be given more say in the central government in the hopes that Sudan could stay as one state, one nation with one government.

Q: Do you see any hope for that?

YATES: If John Garang was the leader of Southern Sudan, had not died in a helicopter crash within a year after signing the agreement, and he had become the first Vice President in Khartoum, and if they had had fair elections, I think that Garang could have won an election with votes from the North as well as from the South and at least given it a try. I think without his leadership the southern coalition pretty much evolved on their own. The South is not at all a unified group. So, I think there was some hope even for Darfur staying within the Sudan and reaching their modus vivendi with the government.

Q: How about oil? Was this a major factor?

YATES: Darfur at that time wasn't even in discussion. The major thing with oil is the North-South dialogue. The oil is in the South and the pipeline goes through the North. In Darfur it was more to the extent that the oil revenues were not evenly distributed in Darfur. It wasn't a question of that's our oil.

Q: You say you were working with the British and Norwegians. The British ran the Sudan for years. At that time, would you say that Sudanese expertise had run out and were not as naïve, but as unlearned about the Sudan as you and the Norwegians?

YATES: I think that we all brought different strengths to these negotiations. Given our place in the world and the British place, not only in the world but former history in Sudan and in Africa, and the Norwegians were more or less neutral. Nobody was questioning the coalition. We brought different sets of skills. I never was quite sure why the Norwegians got so involved in Sudan; they did in other places in Africa, but especially Sudan.

Q: By this time, were you no longer concerned with negotiations with the Soviet Union, actually Russia at that time?

YATES: Yes and no. The Chinese were on the horizon because they were doing well, but to my recollection the Chinese were not really involved. But their coalition who were negotiating or observing the negotiations continually grew over the years. Canada became important, then the Arab League did at the end of negotiations in my time. There was an observer group of 30, but there were four of us closely attached: the African Union and the three I mentioned.

Q: How long were you doing this?

YATES: Overall, on and off for two years. The first several months we built a framework, building ongoing talks with them, the second time around for the talks themselves. I just want to say a footnote. One of the problems in the negotiations for us and for everybody was the fact that the Darfur leadership was not united. There were three different groups; one that had most of the military success and one that was more like Central Sudanese. They were intellectuals, but they didn't have presence militarily, a third one that was an offshoot of the original coalition.

Q: Did you feel that there really was genocide going on?

YATES: I think there was little doubt there was genocide. I did not spend more than a few days anywhere in Darfur. We were doing this in Germany and in France, assistant secretaries and other people from the embassy in Khartoum who flew over the area in helicopters and could see them burning villages. By the time I got there the villages that I could see had been burnt at the rate of two million displaced Darfuris in camps. I didn't actually see what was going on as genocide

Q: Was there a relief operation going on at the same time as the negotiations?

YATES: Yes, the international refugee organizations like Oxfam were there. I think there were about two million refugees. Some refugees in Chad and many IDPs, a great number of internally displaced people who would have been burnt out of their homes and were brought into camps. The Sudanese government essentially left the refugee problem to humanitarian organizations to treat these people.

Q: How did it come out after that?

YATES: After getting this framework for negotiations, the negotiations actually took place, and we spent a good part of a year, maybe for two or three months at a time, working out an agreement that would essentially give the Darfuris more say in Sudan, in the central administration, compensation for some of the things that they had suffered and guarantees that harming the people who had been subjugated wouldn't continue.

In the end there was an agreement, although it wasn't the agreement that it should have been, because only one of the three Darfuri groups in Abuja actually signed. And I think that was partly our fault. The United States international community wanted an agreement and were very close to getting everybody involved, or at least two out of the three, and instead settled for one of the three. There are still Darfur negotiations going on today with different actors, somewhere in the Middle East. We didn't solve the problem, and I think it was in part a failing of our own diplomacy.

Q: It's often said that if the Americans want to get into something, we don't take enough time. Was this part of the problem?

YATES: Yes, this is part of the problem. In my case it was a big part of the problem. For reasons that are still not totally comprehensible to me, the Darfur genocide issue became a major significant concern for the government because it had been labeled "genocide", which in the end it brought in a wider more diverse group of sympathizers like Holocaust victims. They had marches in Washington and people came from synagogues in Ohio to march. You could go onto the Darfur sites on the Internet and it was an issue that got to a lot of people involved. Part of it was our disdain and dislike of the government of Sudan. Washington has since been indicted by their national criminal court. Our relationship was very bad.

Q: Was this in the States? Did you see this as being organized by black churches and black organizations?

YATES: No. In fact, I watched one of the marches on the Washington Mall downtown, and I would say that the crowds were two-thirds non-black people. The churches had been active in Sudan, not so much in Darfur, but in the South, essentially Christian. We always say that foreign policy should be based upon the expression of the constituency and this was definitely the case. For most of these churches there was only one point of view. Darfur was right and Central Sudan was wrong.

Q: After an agreement was reached, what did you do?

YATES: After that I was asked to work in Somalia.

Q: And now, after your handiwork, Somalia is a paradise.

YATES: Somalia now has a central government with the aid of the African Union, United States and the European Union, and the terrorists have been driven out of Mogadishu. We

have people on the ground all over Somalia so there has been progress there. Paradise, no.

Q: What were you doing?

YATES: Well. I became the special representative for Somalia when Secretary Rice appointed me in May 2007. We hadn't had a Somalia embassy for a number of years. What Americans know about Somalia goes back to Blackhawk Down and that tragedy when we pulled out. For a while we had a Somalia mission in Nairobi, but by 2006, we had a mission they called Somali Watcher in Nairobi then much later an ambassador to Somalia.

The USG decided to make a bigger effort, so I was asked to go out there. We eventually built a quasi-embassy located in Nairobi while dealing with Somalia, and that was my mission. We were trying to get the Somalis to move forward on their agreement. The Somali parties had reached an agreement on how to transition to a federal government in which they were to have a central government within five years. They didn't make it within five years, but they made it within eight (2004-2012). They have a government now and they are making some progress, and we are back.

Q: Back in 1960, at one point I was an INR officer for the Horn of Africa. But it was quite a different situation for following Somalia. It broke down into warlords, kids running around, machine guns mounted on the back of pickups and all, and it was tribal as all hell. What were you doing, and what were your impressions of trying to put this place back together again?

YATES: While you were out there doing that in 1960, I was still in graduate school. I wanted to do Africa stuff. This was when all of Africa was more or less becoming independent. I remember writing a paper saying that of all the states just recently coming independent, Somalia had the best chance of hanging together and then we talked about Africa being chopped up. I wrote that it was one language, one religion, one culture. You would have thought that they could have worked it all out. But in fact, Somalia's clans had been carved up by the international community. There was a British part and an Italian part of Somalia. Most of the larger part of Somalia was dying. The French had Djibouti. In the northern frontier, there's Somaliland and Kenyans' five points to the Somalis' Star Somalis. They had different 20th century experiences, but they were still Somalis.

After they gained independence, they panicked and joined Somalia, a small game republic, days later. After about a decade they were behaving like they had Darfuris syndrome. They felt they were being discriminated against by the central government. They tried to reassert their independence, but the Central Somali government attacked them and some of the major cities and by 1990 they had broken off.

All the problems in Somalia were exacerbated because it was a basket case of periodic, severe droughts. When the central government fell, it was carved up by warlords with lots

of guns. Going on into the Sahelian drought at the end of the George H. W. Bush Administration and the United Nations's massive humanitarian program and our attempts to remove the warlords resulted in Blackhawk Down with dastardly pictures of Americans being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu. So, we left for a decade.

Q: Did you find that there was a feeling that we're never going to get involved in this country again?

YATES: At the beginning, yes. But after having only a humanitarian outlook or an anti-terrorist program, and this was during the second Bush Administration, the realization came that Somalia wasn't going to be governable unless they had this essential government. Unlike Sudan, where there was intense domestic tension to what was going on in Sudan, Somalia, the only attention for Somalia seemed to be piracy and the horrible drought pictures.

I give the second Bush Administration a lot of credit for actually reversing a policy that had been really austere. Our foreign policy in Somalia had been run by the CIA for a number of years, arming these warlords to fight terrorism. After the embassies in Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam were bombed by Al Qaeda groups, the perpetrators went to Somalia, as Somalia had become an ungoverned state.

Q: Where were you located and what were you doing?

YATES: I was located in Nairobi working with the larger group to help the Somalis establish a central government that would govern.

Q: How do you do that?

YATES: You try to persuade them that it's in everybody's interest.

Q: How do you get these people to form a government?

YATES: Not easily. When we finished the agreement, we started out with a transition looking for new leadership. The document provided for the election of a congress and a president. When we finished with the document, there were 76 candidates for president. They had two presidential elections during that five-year period. There were never more than two dozen candidates, some of whom would come from Minnesota or Seattle. They hadn't been in Somalia for 20 years, but they all seemed to think that they could be president of Somalia.

Q: We're within five miles of a significant Somali immigrant settlement here in Arlington, Virginia where there are a significant number of Somalis.

YATES: I'm aware of that because when the President of Somalia came on a working visit, I accompanied him. We had a meeting of Somalis at the Willard Hotel and there were a couple thousand that came to represent him. This is peanuts compared to

Minnesota. They are the largest population with close to 100,000. Seattle and Portland also have big communities.

Q: Were you able to tap into this expatriate community for help?

YATES: Yes, to an extent. We certainly tried. I used to participate in conference calls and teleconferences that were open to people all over the world from Somalia, but in the United States. I would get the same issues being expressed by the same clans as we were getting in Mogadishu. We did in fact tap some to help out, and the last two governments that were before the permanent government included a few Somalis from the United States.

Q: How did this play out in your dealings with Somalia?

YATES: The clan rivalries were still very evident. What had happened in Somalia when it was more or less one country was that they had separated out different positions. The president was from the Darod class; the vice president would be another clan; and the prime minister would be from the upper class. That was really the only way to make it work was to have sharing amongst the clans. In fact, the rivalries were such that even that became very difficult.

It wasn't just five major clans. Each major clan had a subset of sub-clans and sub-sub-clans and sometimes the rivalries were just as big in the sub-sub-clans as they were in the major ones. In fact, it was easier to deal in a sense with the acknowledged or self-proclaimed leaders of major clan leaders than those of sub-sub clans.

Going back to the last five years, we were working with the transitional federal government in Somalia. We recognized the president and the prime minister both and worked with the parliament. It was different from Darfur where we were still trying to build a permanent one. There was one in place in Somalia and it worked, and I'm not going to say even very well. What really messed up Somalia was the fact that this transitional federal government never took hold outside of the capitol. They were Mogadishu-based and a lot of the rest of the country stayed ungoverned and became a bigger haven for terrorists. Then they had the Islamic Courts Union in Somalia and they became a major political movement, and, in 2006, when they began to challenge the government, the president called in help from the Ethiopians. After that the animosity toward the government was total.

Q: How did the Ethiopians operate in Somalia?

YATES: They were brutal. They had their own Somali problem and they knew a big part of it was from Somalia. I think no expert in this kind of warfare would recommend leveling the whole quarter, sector by sector. You need to reach out to build your own base and get the few individuals that are already there. And since we were seen as being close allies of the Ethiopians by this time impacted upon our own ability to work with certain people.

Q: How did things work out or had they?

YATES: I think the most important thing was that the Somali army was rebuilt from the ground up with the African Union, European Union support and the United States' huge support. Also, the neighbors of Somalia, particularly Uganda and Burundi, answered the African Union request for troops and they were quite effective, more so than the Ethiopians.

Q: They didn't have an agenda like the Ethiopians had.

YATES: They did not have the same agenda. And they came in under African Union auspices. The Ethiopians had come at the invitation of the President of Somalia.

Q: What about terrorism? How did you see it at that time? What did it constitute and what was happening then?

YATES: The youth had an organization called Al-Shabaab, which in Arabic means in "youth". It became an Al Qaeda affiliate and they were intent on taking over the country and on using it to attack Ethiopia and Kenya. They had a fairly open range of operations. They didn't have much to challenge them, and like good rebels anyplace, they would kill leaders with bombs or whatever.

Q: How did this affect your work?

YATES: It affected our work in two different ways. As an affiliate of Al Qaeda, we considered it to be a threat against us, which it was. The second part was that more than a handful of American Somalis went to fight in Somalia with Al Qaeda with the jihadist elements, and that became a domestic issue. But we were helping the Somalis to fight what we considered to be a designated terrorist organization. Between international help and African help, it was certainly tamped down. I won't say it's gone; we still have them including suicide bombers.

Q: Did that keep us from having any permanent establishment in Somalia?

YATES: Yes. In four years, on and off, we had a special envoy for so long and I never went to Mogadishu. I went into Baidoa, which was the capital, when I first got there, and I went to Somalia twice. We now have permanent representation in Somalia. We don't have an ambassador there, but we have a mission.

Q: Were we using drones at that time?

YATES: There were drone attacks that were used primarily for intelligence purposes, reconnaissance. There were at least two drone strikes against individuals during the time that I was there, though I'm not sure they were actually drones. I think one of them came from offshore.

Q: Where we had an aircraft carrier?

YATES: Yes, from there.

Q: When did you leave that?

YATES: I left in the fall of 2011.

Q: How'd you feel when you left?

YATES: I always thought that there was a chance that by the time I left we were not going to be able to stay in Somalia, but at least members of my staff were regularly going into Somalia. I thought there was a real chance, for the country in this case the person who had become the President of Somalia of the transitional government. In fact, when he was voted out of office to his credit he did leave. He didn't do much else to his credit but that one he did.

Q: What was going on with the banana business?

YATES: There are still people around the world who say that there's nothing better than Somali bananas and I think they still sell them in Italy, the other being livestock, which is sold to the Gulf countries. Camels are the preferred livestock for the haj.

Q: Was any slave trade going on?

YATES: Not that I know of. But the other resources in Somalia are the remittances.

Q: I believe an awful lot have gone to Italy.

YATES: More Somalis are in the United States than in Italy.

Q: Where do they get their visas?

YATES: A lot of them were refugees and came to the U.S. legally.

Q: Were there refugee programs?

YATES: Yes. The biggest refugee camp in the world is Dadaab Somalis in Kenya, which is a tremendous burden on Kenyans. There are close to a half-million refugees there now.

Q: What was your impression of Kenya's outlook toward Somalia?

YATES: I thought that it cut two ways. Some of Kenya, approximately eight percent are Somalis and they are an important constituent in Kenya. The elections which have turned out to be very close were heavily contested, so there was that aspect of it. And then there

was the fact that Somalis were occasionally attacking Kenya. Kenyans wanted to be unleashed to go against them with our assistance. We didn't rebuff them, but we told them that it would be an African Union type of operation. In fact, they did go across but not until most of the hard work had already been done.

Q: One of the problems that we had in Somalia was they would have these periodic droughts and the operators from clans would hijack their relief supplies and all. Was that still going on?

YATES: During the last bad drought in 2011, there was some of that going on. But the main issue was that the areas that were Al-Shabaab controlled wouldn't let humanitarian assistance in or would levy taxes on them. There were other people who levied taxes on movement of trucks through their areas, as well.

Q: How did you find direction from the State Department during the time you were there?

YATES: The direction was good. I never had any problems with it. It was hard to keep Somalia on the top of the agenda with all the other things that were going on in Africa when something press worthy would happen, like a hijack story, or piracy. I resented that because hijacking and piracy wasn't the issue. Governance was the issue.

Q: I haven't heard much about piracy for several years. Small boats were going out and grabbing these large oil ships and other things that must be important then taking them for ransom. What was happening there?

YATES: Since there was no effective government on land, these people could have their way with what you would call a pirate den. They would go out with zodiacs with some of these arms that had been flooded into the country for 30 years and take over a ship, which was relatively easy. Eventually there was a NATO and other task force in the Red Sea area. But it's such a vast area that they weren't able to go without very much countering. The number of successful hijackings or piracy were 50 times the successful rebuffs.

Q: Has it stopped?

YATES: It hasn't stopped completely. It's lessened mostly because of cooperation on the ground within Somalia and going after the bases on the ground.

Q: Was there any talk of putting Marines and international force Marines going into some of these pirate dens?

YATES: No. There were no American boots on the ground. To the best of our knowledge and analysis the piracy and the terrorists didn't marry up. So going after the pirates would have been a different kind of picture. Some of us thought that maybe we should do what we did to the Barbary pirates, which was to sit offshore and then do it, but there was never any talk of Americans on the ground.

Q: Are you saying it's pretty much died out now?

YATES: Not like it was in 2010, and 2011, yes. But I can't honestly say it's over. There are certain times of the year when the Indian Ocean or the Dead Sea waters are rougher and it drops down then. But I'm not aware of the number of cases that we used to get. I'm not watching it as closely as I was.

Q: In Kenya, did you have a naval office either attached to you or cooperated with your office?

YATES: I had a military person, somebody from the African Command active duty and a retired military colonel. In the end, there were four of them, one active duty and three retired military doing most of the military cases. As I say, when I started, there was a Somali watcher and me, and an AID person. When I left there were about 14 people.

Q: Who was your Somali watcher?

YATES: The last one that was there was named Mitch Benedict. They were a couple others before that.

Q: Yes. Was Lange Schermerhorn there?

YATES: No, Lange had already been there. She was in Djibouti. By that time, she had already retired. In fact, I still see and talk to her.

Q: What about in Kenya, were you working with an international group?

YATES: Yes definitely.

Q: What were some of the other major countries?

YATES: The most important one was run by the United Nations Special Representative for Somalia, Mahiga. There were maybe 40 countries in that group: the United States, U.K., France, Italy, Spain, Canada, and all of the Africans; too many. I don't believe in having groups of 40.

Q: What did you all do? Did you find yourself with a certain amount of coordination? I would think it would be like herding kittens.

YATES: There was a little bit of that. It broke down to a core group of us and the European Union and usually Ethiopians. Surprisingly it's the case that a few countries did most of the work. To have a special representative would have allowed me to have once every month off.

Q: Were the Ethiopians grabbing and wanting control?

YATES: The Ethiopians were working on their side of the border to reach out to the Somalis one way or the other. Their own Somalis had quite a bit of success in co-opting a lot of the leadership. But they were active and helpful in Somalia after we negotiated their withdrawal, but that was early on after that they were very helpful. A lot of our high-level meetings took place with Somalis in Addis.

Q: Are we not putting in an ambassador there because it's still not safe?

YATES: I don't know. It's not only a question of security. After Benghazi, I don't think that there's any chance of getting an ambassador in a place that we can't totally secure. I think that's just the world we live in. At the end of Secretary Clinton's tenure, we were close to naming someone and having a presence in Mogadishu, and we were going to raise the flag in Mogadishu.

Q: After our ambassador was assassinated in Benghazi, it became so political it will probably be years before we move forward.

YATES: Yes, it will be a while.

Q: When did you leave that job and what did you do after you left?

YATES: I left it at the end of 2011. It made sense.

Q: What have you been up to since?

YATES: I've been trying to figure out how to retire and do some traveling. That's my thing. We're getting ready to move to the West Coast, somewhere in the Portland-Seattle corridor.

Q: Where to?

YATES: Somewhere in the Portland/Seattle corridor. Do you know that area?

Q: Yes, my daughter is in Seattle.

John, I want to thank you for sharing your career and your many stories for this oral history project.

YATES: Thank you.

Q: We've brought this up to date and we can stop at this point.

YATES: That's a good idea.

End of interview

NOTE: After John moved to Vancouver, Washington, in 2014, the Department of State called him once again to serve as Chargé d'affaires to the Kingdom of Lesotho (formerly Basutoland). After completion of that temporary assignment, he remarked that having joined the Foreign Service in 1964, he felt that it was an appropriate time to finally retire after 50 years of service to the Department of State.