CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

COUNTRY READER
TABLE OF CONTENTS

John Howard Burns	1961-1963	Ambassador
John T. McCarthy	1962-1964	FSO General, Bangui
Claude G. Ross	1963-1967	Ambassador
Andrew F. Antippas	1964-1965	Vice Consul, Bangui
Robert E. Gribbin	1974-1976	FSO General, Bangui
Anthony Quainton	1976-1978	Ambassador
R. Grant Smith	1976-1978	Deputy Chief of Mission, Bangui
Albert E. Fairchild	1978-1981	Deputy Chief of Mission, Bangui
Robert E. Gribbin	1993-1995	Ambassador

JOHN HOWARD BURNS
Ambassador
(1961-1963)

Ambassador John H. Burns was born and raised in Pauls Valley, Oklahoma. He attended the University of Oklahoma and entered the Foreign Service in 1942. His career included positions in Mexico, France, Brazil, ambassadorships to the Central African Republic and Tanzania, and Director General of the Foreign Service. Ambassador Burns was interviewed on May 1, 1995 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.

BURNS: Whether it did or not I did succeed Bill and had been Political Counselor less than a year when I was appointed Ambassador to the Central African Republic. The Berlin Wall had just been built, the Adenauer government had been forced into one of coalition and Germany was, at least to me, the most fascinating place in the world. And--not without a lot of effort I might say--I had finally become fairly proficient in the use of German whereas the remains of my French had become rusty to the point of uselessness. All of which might explain, if not excuse, the ill grace with which I moved from Bonn to Bangui. Nevertheless, the longer I was at

Bangui the more I enjoyed it, something I can say, as a matter of fact, about every Foreign Service assignment I had except those in the Department of State.

Q: *You were there from 1961-'63 as Ambassador. This was early 1960s, Kennedy administration was just in, Africa was just opening up as an area which hadn't happened...*

(change of room due to noise)

Did you have any experience in Africa prior to this?

BURNS: No, not even during my inspection years. I had never been in Africa.

Q: *Were you the first Ambassador?*

BURNS: Actually Wendell Blancki had been named Ambassador to the four countries that had previously comprised French Equatorial Africa, which were the French Congo, Gabon, Chad and the Central African Republic. But he had resided in Brazzaville and only visited Bangui, which is the CAR capital. The other three posts had been filled. Arch Calhoun went to Chad, shortly before I was appointed to the CAR, and a political appointee, Charles Darlington, had gone to Gabon. Wendell Blancki was at Brazzaville, the French Congo.

Q: *It's sort of interesting that they turned to the European hands, the people with more European experience at the time, to fill a number of the posts.*

BURNS: I don't know what brought about the choices that were made. A number of my contemporaries were going to these new posts in Africa and it was perfectly appropriate, I suppose. There were not that many old African hands around and they had to find someone. These are not the sort of posts that are likely to appeal to political appointees, at least not the kind that make major contributions to campaigns. I guess the fact that I didn't have a family helped qualify me for a post like Bangui, which is certainly not much of a family post. To tell the truth, I greatly enjoyed service at small posts, out of the daily news etc. One feels a much greater sense of independence and individuality. There is much more of a personal "challenge".

Q: *Before you went out were there any confirmation problems?*

BURNS: No. Few people even knew where it was; or cared.

Q: *Did you go to Washington first to find out what the...*

BURNS: Yes, I came back to Washington for consultation in the Department and there were brief hearings on the Hill; so brief that I have hardly any recollection of them.

Q: *What was your impression of AF, the African Bureau?*

BURNS: We had a very energetic Assistant Secretary in G. Mennen Williams. Actually President Kennedy appointed him Assistant Secretary before he chose Dean Rusk to be

Secretary, if you recall. This tended to make Williams more of an individual operator than most Assistant Secretaries. He came to Bangui while I was there, a stop on a big tour. I believe that while Assistant Secretary he visited every country in Africa.

Q: *Well, what were you told when you went out to Bangui?*

BURNS: Almost nothing. We had very few interests there, none really that could not have been easily handled by a small consular establishment. There were a number of American missionaries around, as there are in most African countries, but there were no other American residents. The CAR had a small diamond production, which attracted the attention of some American buyers but our commercial interests were almost zero. We were continually receiving instructions to lobby the CAR about votes in the UN, which the local authorities found an irritating bore as, I must admit, did I. We finally reached an agreement for the establishment of a small AID mission, something which it seemed to me we wanted more than the CAR did. Without ever being so instructed, or without it being mentioned, one might say, "in so many words", I felt that there were elements in the US government which wished to see an increased "role" for the United States in Africa, just for the sake of playing such a role, with a necessarily consequent slight--or even more than slight--diminution in those of France and Britain. This was not a point of view with which I ever had any sympathy, always feeling that close cooperation with our European allies, but in a secondary role, in working with African problems was better for everyone concerned, most especially the Africans. This was not "in step" with much of the prevailing thought in Washington.

Q: *I think there's always, in any country, the United States in particular, especially during the Kennedy time, a feeling that the European powers are, it's our generation to take over...*

BURNS: I think you are noting the very thing that I felt. Not, as I have said, there was any specific statement to that effect but there are other ways of communicating.

Q: *But did you have any, sort of, go out there and settle this problem, or that problem?*

BURNS: No, it was largely just administration, getting the new Embassy started, establishing a presence etc. I was interested in the Peace Corps--very interested--and became even more so later, in Tanzania. I thought that there might be a real place for volunteers in the CAR and the then President of the CAR, David Dacko, was eager to obtain them. I had a long, and very sympathetic, hearing from Sargent Shriver on the subject but those were the early days of the Peace Corps and it was so heavily committed in so many places that the CAR was far down the list. Subsequently, after I had departed, there was a Peace Corps program in the CAR.

Q: *Describe a bit about the situation on the ground in Bangui, what the American Embassy consisted of, and how you worked there?*

BURNS: We had a very small staff but all we needed. Our offices were on the first floor of a downtown office building, with the USIA library and program rooms above. Housing was very modest, but entirely adequate. A new residence was being built while I was there but I never lived in it. About the only purpose that I can see in maintaining these establishments, and having

the individual in charge called Ambassador, is the feeling of distinction drawn therefrom by the host government. The actual importance of the work is minimal, as you know.

Q: *What was the role of the French?*

BURNS: It could be called paramount. The country was almost totally reliant financially upon France. That was thirty years ago but I would be surprised were the same not true today. The CAR had been independent only a few years and in every government ministry there was a French official, usually a veteran of colonial administrations. The French had what I might term an avuncular attitude toward their former colonies and they, in turn, enjoyed wide esteem and affection. Their approach to African colonization was quite different from that of the British. They were even indulgent toward the infamous Colonel Bokassa, who, while I was there, was head of the CAR army. Actually I found him a congenial enough sort of a man, as years earlier I had found the equally--or more--infamous Dr. Duvalier, in Haiti. Perhaps I am not a good judge of character--although I did not know either of them well--but they developed their horror personalities after the time I spent in their respective countries.

Q: *When you were there, from '61 to '63, was there any sort of spillover from the Congo? The great crises?*

BURNS: Not a great deal.

Q: *How about the Soviets? Because at that time we were very worried about the Soviet menace in Africa. Were you spending a great deal of time looking for Soviets under rocks?*

BURNS: Not very much. Not any in fact.

Q: *What about an aid program? What were we doing?*

BURNS: We had a very modest aid program, one which Washington seemed almost more interested in establishing than did Bangui. It was so modest that aside from a police training program I can't remember what it included. Hammering out administrative details was the principal problem in closing the agreement. In some instances we asked for privileges which were not even extended to the French.

Q: *What about the United Nations votes?*

BURNS: As I have already mentioned, that was something with which we were constantly belabored. I imagine that at least half of my calls on the Foreign Minister, probably more than half, were to solicit CAR votes for or against something in the United Nations, something about which they knew nothing and cared less. To be constantly coaching them in this area--something the French never did nor did other Embassies in Bangui--was an annoyance to them and troublesome on the whole. I came to feel pretty strongly about this, and later even more so in Tanzania where, in Julius Nyerere, the country had a highly intelligent and cultivated President. It became embarrassing continually to be approaching this man on subjects of little interest to anyone. It was an illustration of the observation of then Secretary Dean Rusk, that we conducted

"stadium diplomacy, where everyone either wins or loses every day". I think our UN hand was far overplayed in those days.

Q: *I take it there were no major events while you were there.*

BURNS: No.

Q: *I take it you left with, shall we say, enthusiasm.*

BURNS: Curiously enough, the longer I was there the fonder I became of it. I left short of two years and I would have been very pleased to stay longer. I didn't seek the next assignment.

Q: *How did you find the people there, as a people?*

BURNS: They were very simple people, with extremely limited education, even among government officials. They continued, as I have noted, to rely heavily upon the French in most every area. Altogether pleasant and agreeable, they had few common interests with Europeans or Americans.

Q: *Well, you left there and went to Paris from '63 to '65.*

JOHN T. McCARTHY
FSO General
Bangui (1962-1964)

John T. McCarthy was born in New York, New York in 1939. He received a bachelor's degree from Manhattan College in 1961 and entered the Foreign Service in 1962. His career included positions in Belgium, Thailand, Pakistan, Lebanon, and Washington, DC. Mr. McCarthy was interviewed in 1996 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Q: *Comes time for your first assignment. How did that come about?*

MCCARTHY: I got what I asked for. People often expressed some surprise but, in fact, probably again this is all missionary stuff, but I had had some French in college, I was interested in Africa, so I asked to be assigned to French-speaking Africa. All of these countries had just become independent, this was early 62 and most of them became independent some time in the middle of 1960. We knew they existed, we didn't know them very well, precisely which one was which.

In the A-100 course, somebody came and read out our names and our assignments. When they got to me, they told me that I was assigned to Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic, earlier somebody had been assigned to Ouagadougou, which was the class joke at the

time. Does anyone know where Ouagadougou was. Because we joked about it so much, we all knew where it was. But nobody had ever mentioned Bangui.

The man who was reading off the assignments asked me if I knew where that was. I said no. Then he asked the rest of the class, the 60-some odd bright young people, if they could tell me where it was. Nobody could. So he asked me to stand up and go to a large map. We had a map of the world on that side of the wall in this particular room. He helped me find it. There it was, smack in the middle of Africa.

That was the circumstance surrounding that particular assignment. But, as I said, I had asked for this so I was delighted. I thought it was great.

Q: *Also, too, it was the Kennedy era. Africa was exciting at that time. This is the new frontier, kind of, of the foreign service. We had great hopes for Africa. Africa was really going to be the place. We were going to do something.*

Did you take French before you went there?

MCCARTHY: After the A-100 course I must have taken French first. I took both the consular course, which was about 4 weeks long, and I took 4 months of French. I had some in high school and college but it was not particularly well taught so it didn't leave much of a residue. I'm not bad with languages and after the 4 months at FSI I got a 3/3. I was reasonably well prepared to go.

Q: *How did one in 1962 get to Bangui?*

MCCARTHY: It was really delightful. I told you earlier that I was going out with this woman who later became my wife. We were really courting feverishly during this A-100 course, during the French course. We were married in July of 62 and we left in August.

There were several ways to go. You could have flown to Europe and then flown down but that didn't seem very romantic. So what we did was to take a boat from New York through the Mediterranean, stopping in Gibraltar and Majorca, and debarking in Naples.

Q: *Constitution, Independence?*

MCCARTHY: It was a smaller one, it was called the Atlantic, but it was owned by the same line that owned the Constitution and the Independence.

We got off in Naples, took a train to Rome. Honeymooned in Rome for about 10 days then got on a plane in Rome, that originated in Paris, and went on to Bangui. So the last leg of the trip was by plane.

Q: *Can you describe the Central African Republic in Bangui, in 1962, when you arrived?*

MCCARTHY: ...and the embassy?

Q: *...and the embassy.*

MCCARTHY: Because when we got on this plane in Rome, there was this one woman who had spread herself out over several seats. She had an infant. The stewardess was trying to seat us together. There weren't any seats together except possibly where she had spread herself out. She said that she can't possibly disturb her arrangements because of the child. We thought: what a nasty lady.

Of course, she later turned out to be the wife of the PAO and became a very dear friend and wasn't nasty at all, she was just traveling with an infant. Later when I traveled myself with an infant I discovered how reasonable she was being.

At any rate, when we arrived at Bangui the following morning, everybody, except the ambassador, was at the airport to meet us. They announced that the ambassador was giving a dinner in our honor that night. I'm not sure I've ever been welcomed so royally again. But, that was very much the flavor of Bangui. It was a small place.

A lot of my friends have similar experiences I guess. It's a truism. First posts are often the warmest in terms of social life, and building friendships.

Anyway, within 24 hours we felt as though we'd landed among a really wonderful bunch of people. Bangui was very small, very enthusiastic because it was newly independent. From some points of view, I suppose, one should have seen it was going to be a basket case. But, it had a decent infrastructure. It was an agricultural country, enormous but the roads were not too bad. They grew some cotton, they grew some cocoa, they mined some diamonds.

The president was 29 years old. He was the youngest president of all of that group that emerged at that time. He was sort of hard working. The French had departed on good terms. They had given them independence in a good spirit. In exchange, I think this still went on for a long long time, the Central African Republic allowed them to retain several military bases. The French ambassador was really very much the power behind the throne. The place functioned well. I guess that's the point I'm trying to make.

Bangui was minuscule. It had a few paved roads. The pavement stopped 8 kms out of town and nothing else was paved except a couple of main streets in some of the bigger provincial capitals. A very pleasant place. We all had nice housing. The market was fun. You could safely go to what were called the "quartiers populaire," where people lived in not too unlike a tribal situation. It was urban but still arranged by tribe. There were nightclubs. People would always smile.

It was a very pleasant couple of years. There was very little tension, basically almost none. What there was induced from Congo Leopoldville. The old Belgian Congo right across the border which was at the same period of time very much in turmoil.

Q: *Who was the ambassador?*

MCCARTHY: A man named John Burns was my first ambassador, who went on to become Director General of the department. He was ambassador to Tanzania after that. He's still around.

Q: *I've interviewed him. He was my first boss too. He was consul general in Frankfurt, that was my first post, in the '50s. How did he operate? He was a bachelor.*

MCCARTHY: John gave me some great advice, which I more or less lived by ever since, obviously you can't do it all the time. John said that if you're not doing your job between the hours of 9 to 5, or whatever the office hours are, you're not doing your job well. That people who sit around working all the time, somehow aren't understanding the job and doing it properly.

As I said, he was exaggerating to make his point, but the point was the right one. Be suspicious of workaholics. They probably, half the time, are either so deeply into what they're doing or so exhausted that their decisions are maybe not the best ones available. Take time out to relax. Have a different perspective on what you're doing. That's probably turning in a better performance and doing your job better than another way to do it.

John was very competent. I think the Central African Republic was not particularly challenging. We had almost no bilateral issues to speak of. Their foreign ministry was a riot. There was one man who did Europe and there was one man who did everything else. Of course we got the guy who did everything else.

And, even in those days, the state department was inundating us with general instructions. Each year before the UN general assembly you'd have to go in and tell this poor guy, whose name I've now forgotten, what our position was on several dozen things. You'd try to elicit the Central African Republic's position. It usually didn't have one nor was it ever going to have one. So, as I said, we went over and made representations to this one very nice guy. We became sort of friends.

Q: *I would think, particularly in the Central African Republic, I'm just looking at the map here, it sits right smack dab in the middle, with no coast, that so many of the problems of the United States -- ports, seas...*

MCCARTHY: This was the height of the Cold War. A lot of the issues turned around, as I said, UN stuff. Would they be voting with us, or would they be voting with the Soviet Union. The diplomatic representation in Bangui was rather limited. There were maybe 8 or 10 embassies there. But in the days when I was there: the West Germans had an embassy; the Nationalist Chinese, Taiwan, had an embassy; the Russians were not there; there were no east Europeans there; the French, the Germans, us, the Belgians, Cameroon had an embassy there, and the Nationalist Chinese. The Koreans would come visiting every once in a while, both sides.

At any rate, a lot of our efforts and a lot of our gossiping, a lot of our listening was based on: are they going to recognize any communist countries or not; will they have diplomatic relations with them or not. Later, in fact, the tables turned several times. The communist Chinese were recognized at one stage, the Russians came -- this was after I was gone but I heard about it from

others. Israel had relations and there was an embassy there, a fairly large aid program when I was there.

A lot of the diplomatic life revolved around who's here and who isn't here. Since most of the ones who were there were our buddies, how do we keep them here and how do we keep the other guy out, kind of. As I said, there were no bilateral issues. There were a couple of New York companies which were interested in the diamonds and once in a while they would want a little help from us. Aside from that, there was nothing going on bilaterally.

Q: *What did you do during those 2 years?*

MCCARTHY: I was what was then called a central complement officer. In other words, I was not directly assigned to Bangui, I was assigned to Washington and was basically being farmed out to learn how to be a diplomat. Bangui was the learning place.

What I did for the first 4 or 5 months was to be the administrative officer's assistant and the consular officer. I was not too happy with that because I didn't really know much about administration and it seemed to me that what I was doing was typing up a lot of vouchers that were being sent off for processing and payment in Paris. I remember telling my wife that if this was what the foreign service was like then maybe we wouldn't need 5 years to make up our mind about it as a career.

But that didn't last very long. In the last 18 months, or so, I worked with the political officer. Two actually very interesting people held that job when I was there. It was first Peter Sebastian, who went on to become our ambassador in Tunisia, 2 people before me in fact. Whom I have kept in touch with over the years. The second person, Charlie Bray, who was very well known.

Q: *Spokesman.*

MCCARTHY: Spokesman here and, I guess, finished as ambassador in Senegal. Again, someone whom I've stayed in touch with over the years.

Each of these was political officer. I sort of sat along with them. We did a lot of traveling. The roads were good, as I mentioned. There were lots of American missionaries so you could put together kind of a visitation trip where we would go to see the missionaries. Stay in hotels that were okay, there were a couple of decent hotels in the country, and then there were places called "Case de passage" which had been setup by the French. They were already beginning to run down or to be taken over by local officials just after independence. But, you could still worm your way into some of those.

We'd see the missionaries, call on all the local officials, write a couple of reports when it was over. So that would consume a fair amount of time. And reporting on local developments.

A very very heavy round of socializing. I have never again in my life been as much of a social animal as I was in Bangui. When I got there, for some reason, it was a fairly elegant social life. The president gave a number of dinners which were all black-tie, formal. Other people gave

black-tie dinners. Lord knows why this was going on but it was. The French ambassador was very attracted I think both to me but more to my wife. He thought we were a nice young couple. So we were invited to dinner by the French ambassador, usually 2 or 3 times a week. We went out at least 5 times a week. Some weeks we would go out 6 or 7 nights a week. This was for long dinners that would start at 8:30 and go on until midnight or so. It was a very crazy way to live.

Q: *Did you have any ripples from the Congo which bordered on the southern borders of the Central African Republic? You were right on the Congo, I guess, weren't you?*

MCCARTHY: We were on the Ubangi. It was one of the major tributaries.

Q: *Was this the time of the Simba revolt? When Stanleyville was taken over. Could you talk about any reflections that had on you?*

MCCARTHY: I guess all of the time I was there, the whole 2 years I was there, I carried the consular portfolio so what that meant was trying to develop some way to stay in touch with those missionaries. Nobody really had much of a radio system then. Some of the Central African Republican missions had radio nets but still it was fairly primitive. We had no radio contact with the people in Congo Leopoldville, what has become Zaire.

But they would come out fairly often. They would always come by and they would give me and, generally, Charlie Bray, they would give us a political update on what was going on. We did have an emergency evacuation plan. This was about 125 people, men, women and children. Bangui was the easiest place for them to get to by road. It was the only place. You couldn't drive to Leopoldville and they couldn't really go anywhere else.

The E&E plan, the longer I was there the more we tried to refine this, was always based on coming to a place called Zango, which was directly across the river from Bangui in Zaire and coming across on a ferry. A couple of times some of them came out. It all worked very smoothly but it was never a mass evacuation.

Then, it was towards the end of the time that I was there, in 64, when Stanleyville was overrun by these rebels, that all of these people fled at the same time, about 125. They all got to Zango, on the other side, which was held by a Congolese military detachment. I suppose, I never knew, we never got the details, but I suppose in retrospect the guy who ran this place must have been wavering in his loyalties trying to figure out which way to go. But his first step was to let all of the missionaries go but to impound their vehicles, their radios, their cameras, pretty much anything of value. So about 125 very frightened people arrived in Bangui.

I must say we were able to settle them largely with the help of the other missionaries, who were resident in the CAR, very easily. But as consular officer my job came to be to negotiate for the release of their vehicles and their cameras and their radios from this military captain on the other side of the river. So several times I would get into a pirogue, a dugout canoe, motorized, with one or two of the missionary leaders, and go and talk to this guy. It was pretty clear that he was not rational. He was probably taking some sort of drug or something because, this I got courtesy of one of the missionaries, he kept looking at his eyes and the retina wasn't quite right.

What sticks in my mind very much is the first time I went. We got out of the pirogue, right on the shore line, and the place was deathly still. I'd been there. I'd been there with my wife and friends a number of times, just picnicking. It was a very pleasant place to go. It was never still. There were always women, there was always a market, there would always be lots of activity. So silence. When there were people they were all standing in the background and as we walked toward the center of the town, they would retreat. Again, very untypical behavior for Africans in a normal setting.

Eventually we got to the main building. The captain came out. His men sort of surrounded us. The air was menacing. He began by saying that, "When I saw you land I was going to have you killed, but I thought no, maybe I could speak to you first. Then I thought I would just have you beaten." It was never really explained why he was going to do any of these terrible things to us. Then he said that his ultimate decision was to talk to us.

We were taken into a room, not much larger than this one, and this is a small room. He sat at the desk, we sat at two chairs across the way from the desk. The room then filled up with about 20 people, all around, sort of squeezed around the walls. Then he proceeded to harangue us. It was a diatribe against colonialism, and all the terrible things that the white man had done to the black man.

It took a long time to get him around to my agenda which was to try to get the release of the vehicles, the radios. We actually succeeded toward the end of that time. I don't exactly know how because he didn't seem rational at any one moment. But at the end of that day, he told us that we could have the cars. So we got the vehicles out. The ferry was allowed to run and the cars were allowed to cross. But not the radios, and not the cameras, and not whatever kind of electronic equipment existed in 1962.

So we went back home feeling that we had a pretty good day. But not giving up. The hard part then was about 3 or 4 days later. I had to go back again. By now, this was the end of 64, this was probably the end of August or the beginning of September. I was due to leave in the middle of September. In the meantime, we had had a baby. My son was born in May of that year. I had my wife, I guess what I'm trying to say is that when I had to go back the second time and knew that I was going to see that guy again, didn't know what he had been drinking, smoking or imbibing or swallowing in the meantime -- it was scary. It took 10 or 15 minutes to get across the river so you had enough time to reflect on what was going on.

When we got there nothing in fact happened. Either the situation had settled down enough for him to figure out that he better not get in trouble with his bosses back in Leopoldville, or he'd had a couple of sober days, whatever. He was rather businesslike and whatever was still impounded, he let go. As I said, I think he must have gotten the word that the Americans were his friends, and they were the friends of the government in Leopoldville. He was not supposed to mess around with us.

So, after all of this preliminary fear and trepidation, in fact, the second meeting was much easier than the first. We emerged completely victorious, all the stuff was out. That was the end of my involvement. Within a week or so I left the country.

Q: *Sort of an immersion into real diplomacy.*

MCCARTHY: In retrospect that's true. That was perhaps the first serious diplomatic negotiation in which I had ever engaged. We had minor negotiations with Central African Republic officials before, but as I said, there were no real issues so the negotiations were not very vital. This one mattered. There were important valuable goods involved. And, it was not so clear that we were going to emerge with our skins.

Q: *I have a theory that in real diplomatic, or whatever you want to call it, negotiations, usually take place in the consular side because it's usually up against somebody. I mean other ones, it's a little bit of a dance, because it's not persuasion. You have a set of instructions, the central government has a set of instructions. But when you're up against a local official, that's where it really depends on our force of argument, personality, what have you and circumstance. So it can be quite scary.*

MCCARTHY: This guy was irrational. That was the most difficult to deal with. You didn't know whether you should say this or that because you had no way of really telling how he would react to anything you said. He wasn't going to be intimidated. And yet, sometimes you could also intimidate him. He was a very strange character. He was probably a man of no education, probably come out of the ranks, who after independence had suddenly become an officer. I think he was poorly trained for the responsibilities that had fallen on his shoulders.

I guess maybe a footnote. I saw this even in Tunis, at the end of my career. People more afraid to say yes than to say no. An awful lot of societies, an awful lot of cultures still don't give people much responsibility. It's always hard for an American to figure that one out. I think most Americans, at any level of whatever structure they work for, whether it's private or public, can take decisions. They may need to explain them later to their bosses but they can take them. But it's very rare in most parts, particularly in the developing world but I saw it in Europe as well. Where anybody lower than the rank of minister can really take a decision and defend it.

So people are wary, they're comfortable saying no and reluctant to say yes because they're not sure that they're not going to get in trouble for saying yes. It's kind of a truism of a large part of the rest of the world. People don't take positive decisions very easily.

Q: *I found this in many countries. The decision is no.*

MCCARTHY: That's easy. I mean, you can't get in trouble for saying no but if you say yes someone could accuse you of having given something away to the Americans.

Q: *Obviously, coming out of a small post like this you've gotten quite a spread of experiences. How did you feel about the foreign service, and your wife too.*

MCCARTHY: Very good, really. It was a good assignment. The second ambassador there was another good man, his name was Tony Ross.

Q: *He's also been interviewed by our program.*

MCCARTHY: And a couple of good DCMs. Bob Malone, a very good man, and Ed Brennan, who's since passed away. And the political officers that I mentioned. I think I had fallen among a lot of very dedicated, very competent individuals who also knew how to have a good time. So some of the way that I've led my adult life was, in part, formed there -- working hard, playing hard, always being interested in the cultural, historical aspects of whatever country I was living in. We traveled a lot, we looked around a lot, we tried to get to know what made the place tick.

Yes, at the end of 2 years there I felt very good about the foreign service and looking forward very much to my next assignment which was to be Cambodia. I had orders to go to Cambodia in the beginning of 65.

Q: *Did you have any feel, as you were at this embassy, here was a third world country, the United States the most powerful country in the world, and all. Was there any tinge of condescension, colonial, almost like a colonial power, from our embassy or no?*

MCCARTHY: No, no. It didn't work that way. This was just after independence. We were really newcomers there. No one knew too much, knew what to make of us, in particular. The French embassy was still enormous. The French ambassador, as I mentioned, really was calling most of the shots. The French government was paying most of the bills. Every ministry, in addition to having a Central African minister, had a French adviser who basically ran the place.

I think, if anything, we were looked at by the thoughtful central Africans as a lever with which they could push the French out a little bit more. So some of that was at play. These were big days for USIS. We were just getting involved in Vietnam and we were having a tremendous social upheaval back at home revolving around civil rights issues. So that we were doing a lot of time explaining what was going on in American society. As I said, basically very much playing second fiddle to the French.

Q: *What happened to your next assignment?*

MCCARTHY: Things changed. Toward the end of the time I was in Bangui we were inspected. The inspector was a man named Randolph Appleton Kidder. Randy Kidder, I don't know if you know the name.

Q: *He was ambassador to Cambodia.*

MCCARTHY: Well, almost. He got there but he never presented his credentials.

Anyway, he inspected us, we got along very well. He hired me to go off and be his junior political officer in Phnom Penh. This was around, as I said, we were building up in Vietnam. There was an incident in which an American aircraft was shot down over Cambodian territory.

Sihanouk used this to provoke a break in diplomatic relations. Randy went there, the plane was shot down, Sihanouk got his parliament to vote that he would not be allowed to accept the credentials of the American ambassador. So Kidder left, he never really got to serve as the American ambassador there.

I got back to Washington. I sat on the Cambodian desk for several months.

CLAUDE G. ROSS
Ambassador
(1963-1967)

Ambassador Claude G. Ross was born in Illinois in 1917. He received a B.A. from the University of Southern California and entered the Foreign Service in 1940. Subsequently, he served in Mexico, Ecuador, Greece, New Caledonia, Lebanon, Egypt, Guinea, the Central African Republic, Haiti, and Tanzania. Ambassador Ross was interviewed by Ambassador Horace G. Torbert in 1989.

Q: We were just in the Department, and you were getting ready to go.

ROSS: Actually, I was on leave in California when I got the cable from President Kennedy--I was one of his last appointments--sending me to Bangui. I came up before the Senate, the last man in a group of six that went before the Senate that day. Leading off was Henry Cabot Lodge going to Vietnam, then Admiral Anderson going to Portugal, then a man named Loeb going to Guinea who had been ambassador in Peru. Howard Cottam was on there, going out to Kuwait and Mike Blumenthal who was to be the U.S. trade rep.

So by the time they got to me, I think the committee was tired, and nobody knew where the Central African Republic was, anyway. There was practically nothing addressed to me about that. But they knew I'd been in Guinea, and I guess it was in the light of that fact that they queried me somewhat extensively about it.

Q: You didn't have to tell them the name of the prime minister? (Laughs)

ROSS: No, no. So I went off to Bangui in September 1963.

Q: Had you had a chance to see Kennedy?

ROSS: No, I did not. It was too bad. I had hoped to have it. I can't remember what the problem was now, but I didn't. I had been at post maybe ten days when I got a little note from Kennedy sending me a picture, an autographed photograph, and telling me he'd been sorry not to have had an opportunity to talk with me before I left.

The post, when I got there, was a small one, as you know. I had a DCM, a reporting officer, an admin officer, and PAO. That was about the size of the officer staff. Eventually we got another junior officer. The president then was David Dacko. He was one of the best educated of the Central Africans, and that was not saying an awful lot. He'd never been to university. He'd been to some kind of normal school and had been a teacher under the French administration.

Q: That was a pretty good level.

ROSS: Which wasn't bad. As I say, he certainly was relatively better off than his countrymen. I don't think they had anybody with a university degree at the time of independence. He was related, I think, to Boganda, who had been the leading light in French Equatorial Africa before independence. Had Boganda not died in a plane crash in 1959, just before independence took form in 1960, it's conceivable that the French could have succeeded in bringing French Equatorial Africa into existence as one unit, instead of the four that emerged. In other words, Gabon, Brazza, CAR, and Chad. But after Boganda's death, there was nobody who had that kind of following throughout French Equatorial Africa, so it split up. Of course, once that happened, then the vested interests built up and took over in each of these places, and there was never a chance of getting them back together again.

We had tried, at the outset, to have only one ambassador for all the four, with chargés in three, and the ambassador resident in Brazzaville. But that didn't last very long. By 1961, John Burns went out to be the first ambassador at CAR, and I followed him. I'd been out there then about two months when Kennedy was assassinated. That, of course, produced a tremendous reaction in CAR, as it did elsewhere in the world. We had all kinds of messages of sympathy and the country went into mourning for a few days.

Q: You had to be there to imagine how affected they really were.

ROSS: It was a tremendous impact.

Our interests in the CAR at that point were not very large. The French were in there. The country was nominally independent, but you had French advisors in all the ministries, more or less at the ministries' elbow. The French were the ones who were supporting the country financially and with technical assistance, in large measure. Their High Commissioner was automatically Dean of the Diplomatic Corps.

Q: And they didn't want much interference.

ROSS: They were very suspicious of us, thinking we were trying to muscle in and maybe displace them, a view that I was always working to connect. On the contrary, we'd have been delighted to lease it all to them. But we were under some pressure from the CAR to do something, and so we had a minimal program. One thing we did that I think was appreciated was a modest program to help them with road building and road repair. We brought in a team of SEABEES with proper equipment, and then they were to do some of this road-building. In the process they trained the Central Africans in the use of the equipment.

Q: And the basic idea that you need to repair a road.

ROSS: Exactly. That's right. Once you got outside of Bangui, you didn't have to go very far from the center of Bangui to hit the dirt roads. This red laterite develops potholes easily. So we had a modest program with various kinds of equipment here and there. In one or two things we were in cooperation with the Israelis, who had an embassy there. But I always was very careful about that, because I found out the Israelis tended to depict these projects as being theirs alone.

Q: Did we have any kind of a cultural program? You did have USIA?

ROSS: We had a PAO, so we had a library.

Q: That wasn't enough to worry the French.

ROSS: No. We had leader grantees, a modest few, going to the States. You're talking about four or five individuals a year.

Before I left, not with Dacko, but with [Jean-Bedel] Bokassa later on, I did negotiate a Peace Corps agreement. We did not have a Peace Corps there by the time I left. (I'm really getting ahead of myself, because I wanted to raise this in the context of working with Bokassa).

With Dacko, I had good relations, not terribly close, but quite proper and good relations. I had fairly easy access to him. He had a few people around who weren't terribly friendly to us, and I think some of it was the result of the French. In September of 1965, I had been there just over two years and was thinking that I might be leaving soon because a two-year tour was more or less the normal tour at that time. Then on the 31st of December, 1965, Bokassa pulled a coup d'état. He had been the head of the armed forces there.

Q: Wasn't he in some way related to Dacko, too?

ROSS: They were cousins, but somewhat removed. It wasn't a terribly close relationship. He had been head of the armed forces with the rank of major. He had a fairly good career, as Africans go, in the French Army, because he came in as a private and rose to the rank of captain, no mean feat. He had overseas service and all that, but essentially he was not very well educated. He was cunning, but not all that bright. He was terribly loyal to France, and particularly to [Charles] De Gaulle, whom he called "Papa."

I must tell this. This was the 31st of December when he pulled the coup d'état. A number of us, including the French High Commissioner and his wife and my wife and I and a couple of other chiefs of mission, were all celebrating New Year's Eve at the leading hotel in Bangui, which was owned by a Greek who had became a close friend of ours. We all were having this great party with a few of the local French, too, when we heard firing. We heard these sounds in the distance. We thought of firecrackers, celebrating New Year's Eve. Then we heard more firing, which got a little more persistent, and people began to get a little uneasy. But we really didn't take much notice.

One or two of the French who had left children in town got a little bit antsy and took off. One man who left turned out to be the only European casualty of the coup, killed in cross-fire near the presidential palace. He just happened to be in the line of fire. We didn't know that, of course, until much later.

We were there, continuing our festivities, and it must have been about 1:30 or 2:00 in the morning. Shortly before we were getting ready to break up, here comes this military procession from the center of town, passing on the road which ran right in front of the hotel, in the direction of the Army barracks, in military personnel carriers. In the lead vehicle sitting in the back seat, were Dacko and Bokassa. The car comes abreast of us. We were all out in front of the hotel to watch this go by. I was standing next to the French High Commissioner. Bokassa orders the car to stop, stands up, and yells out, "La revolution a réussi! Vive la France!"

I turned to the French High Commissioner and said, "Ah! This is the way it's done, eh?" And the poor man was frightfully embarrassed, because I swear he had no idea what was going on. This was typical Bokassa, you see. Bokassa was just so overjoyed, and he had this close connection with France, and that just came naturally: "Vive la France!" So there we were.

Before the year was out, however, the French High Commissioner PNGed. It didn't come to a formal action, but he had to leave. He and Bokassa never got along well.

I had good relations with Bokassa, but it was not the kind of thing you could depend on, because he was terribly unreliable and unpredictable.

Q: And a megalomaniac?

ROSS: That developed afterwards. When he first came in, he was quite diffident in some respects, but the problem was that you couldn't pin him down, because he was always influenced by the last guy who talked to him. So you never were sure that you had something going.

This Peace Corps agreement, for example, that we negotiated in 1966, and had been a long process, we finally got it nailed down by negotiation in Bangui It was effected by exchange of notes in Bangui with the Central African Government. That thing was only about a few weeks old, when one day I got a note from the Foreign Office wanting to cancel it. I thought, "What's this?" So I go poking around and find out that, reportedly, Bokassa was upset because our air attaché based in Chad had inadvertently given a ride to an American Peace Corps volunteer who was coming through the country--gave him a ride from Bangui to a place called Bouar, in the northwest of the country, where there was a Central African Army base. I think the French also had some of their force de frappe stationed there. Bokassa took umbrage at the air attaché because he'd done it for the Peace Corps guy without asking permission or letting anybody know. The Peace Corps volunteer was passing through; he was a tourist, in effect.

Eventually I asked to see Bokassa and I took the tack that I supposed he didn't know about the foreign office note. Then I explained the circumstances of what had happened and all, that this was perfectly innocent, our air attaché giving a fellow American a ride on his way home to wherever he was stationed in west Africa.

Eventually, I got him quieted down, and that was the end of it. But this was the kind of thing that could occur.
In some of his entourage he had people who were all too happy to do that kind of thing. It may very well have been that Bokassa didn't really know what was going on, but anyway, that was a useful ploy, I thought, and it worked.

One of the first things he did when he came in, which gave him good points with us and for which he might have expected more recognition in a concrete way, was to break relations with Communist China. Dacko had recognized Communist China shortly after I came there, and I had to help the Nationalist Chinese leave. He just broke relations and suddenly they had to go, and we helped them leave, helped them ship effects and all that kind of thing.

Then Bokassa came in, and the Communist Chinese were out within four days. Nationalist Chinese were back in. He was anti-communist, having seen military service in Southeast Asia. So that, of course, was well received in Washington, and I think Bokassa thought he was going to get a substantially greater increase in foreign aid from us than eventuated.

One practice that was initiated while I was in Bangui the last couple of years might be worth mentioning. My colleagues in the other parts of the old French Equatorial Africa--in the Chad and in Gabon (not in Congo-Brazzaville where we had closed the Embassy in 1965) and I got together with our colleague in Cameroon in several mini-chiefs of missions' conferences on our own. It was very useful to get together and talk about our mutual problems and our methods of doing things.

Q: We did that in Eastern Europe occasionally, too.

ROSS: We came up with a report to the Department on what we had said and done and with any recommendations that had been developed during the three or four days that we spent together.

I had one very unhappy duty while in Bangui--telling a missionary fritud of the death of her husband and how he died. I happened to be in Europe on R and R, when things started to deteriorate rapidly in the area around Stanleyville. When I got to Rome I went in to the Embassy to see if the Department wanted me to return to post. I'd only been out a few days. The first thing I did was to run into Mike Gannett who said Meloy, the DCM, was looking for me. Meloy told me that my mother-in-law had just died, and they were trying to reach me. So Andrea and the boys left me the next morning and flew over the Pole to Los Angeles, and I proceeded to drive to Paris quickly to get rid of the rental car we had and fly back to Bangui.

Because of the troubles we were in contact with American missionaries in the eastern part of the Congo around Stanleyville, and there was one man named Carlson whom we tried and tried and tried to leave his mission station and come out. His family came out, but we couldn't get him out. Eventually, one of the guerrilla groups overran the mission station and took him into Stanleyville, where he was detained in stockade or something. Then the Belgian paratroopers flew in and landed in Stanleyville, and took over the town. In the course of the fighting, Carlson tried to get out of the stockade, and was shot going over the wall.

Q: Bangui was the evacuation point?

ROSS: It was the evacuation point. We shared a common river border with the Congo, and so for that eastern part of the Congo, particularly the area around Stanleyville, that was the natural and quickest way out across the river.

Q: Although it is quite a ways from Stanleyville.

ROSS: Yes, not close.

Q: Was there anything else of major importance that occurred there at that time?

ROSS: I reserve the right to add something later.

Q: By all means, yes.

ROSS: There may be other things.

Q: By all means.

ROSS: Shortly before the Chiefs of Missions Conference in Tangier in January 1967. I thought I was going to Madagascar. I understand that my nomination had gotten as far as President Johnson's desk, when he received a call from an old friend who had just lost a congressional election in Utah and needed a job. First thing you know, this man was going to Madagascar. That was all right as far as I was concerned. I would have gone to Madagascar, but that would have been too much of the same kind of thing, really.

After attending the Tangier chief of mission conference, there was reason to believe I was going to Cameroon, again a bit more of the same, but a little more important. But then one day, my code clerk came in waving a telegram. It was the drop copy of a cable that had gone out asking for agrément for me as ambassador to Haiti! That was the first I had known about it. Half an hour later, another cable came in from the Director General, apologizing for not having been able to let me know beforehand that things had reached this point, and asking if I have any objection to going.

Q: You couldn't very well say no.

ROSS: No. I was delighted at the prospect, because it was, in many ways, a more important assignment. It was closer to home. At the same time, it was an interesting Post, as I found when I got there, and had one of the best embassy residences in the entire Foreign Service.

ANDREW F. ANTIPPAS
Vice Consul

Bangui (1964-1965)

Andrew F. Antippas was born in Massachusetts in 1931. He received a bachelor's degree from Tufts University and entered the Foreign Service in 1960. His career included positions in Africa, Japan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Korea, Canada, and Washington DC. Mr. Antippas was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on July 19, 1994.

Q: Then you went to the Central African Republic [CAR], where you served from 1964 to...

ANTIPPAS: 1965. I spent a year at each post [Douala and Bangui]. The CAR was much smaller in scope than the Cameroons even though it had a land area the size of Europe. The city of Bangui had a population of only 45,000 people at that time, out of a total population in the whole country of about one million.

Q: Before we get to that, what was the political situation there?

ANTIPPAS: The President of the country was a civilian named David Dacko. He was later thrown out by the Army chief, Colonel Bokassa, who proclaimed himself Emperor and spent the country's entire GNP for a year on his "coronation". The Central African Republic is situated just North of the then Republic of the Congo [now Zaire], which, at that time, dominated everything that was going on in the region. French power was very much "present." The French had a military force stationed on the tri-border area of Chad, Cameroon, and the Central African Republic. They had a military post there at which what was called an "intervention force" was stationed. It was smaller than a division--probably a regiment or brigade of paratroopers. I think that they actually intervened in Gabon, when a coup d'etat was attempted there. They were very evidently going to intervene wherever French interests dictated and to secure those countries whose administrations were basically friendly to France.

There were several insurrections going on. The Katanga area [Eastern Congo, now Eastern Zaire] was of the greatest interest.

Q: This was the southern Congo province of Katanga, which split away from the central Congolese Government. There were a lot of mercenaries there.

ANTIPPAS: There were considerable mineral resources there.

Q: The major company was the Union Miniere du Haut Katanga [Mining Union of Upper Katanga].

ANTIPPAS: The union leader there, I think, subsequently became the president of the Congo. What was his name? I can picture him but I can't remember his name. [Moise Tshombe]

Anyhow, there were some other, "half-baked" insurrections going on. One of them was called the "Simba Rebellion." They were a real bunch of "crazies" up in the northern part of the Congo. They captured Stanleyville and held our Consul.

Q: Michael Hoyt.

ANTIPPAS: At least one American missionary was killed during the Belgian-American rescue operation [of Stanleyville].

Q: The operation was called "Dragon Rouge" [Red Dragon].

ANTIPPAS: Exactly. There was a little chore I had to do from time to time in this connection. Our PAO [Public Affairs Officer] had his own airplane in Bangui. So we used to fly around the country. We went up to a crossing point 300-400 miles into the interior on the river that forms the border between the CAR and the Congo. This was apparently a traditional crossing point of the main North-South road from the Sudan. All of the canoes had been brought over to the CAR side and chained up there to keep the "Simbas" from crossing over and doing any more marauding. I went up there to try to pick up intelligence--to see if any "line crossers" could tell us anything about what the Simbas were doing to our people, who were still under house arrest.

One of the other chores I had in Bangui was to go down to the river [Ubangi River] every day and look for American bodies in the river. Bodies were floating down the river. Some of them would wash up in the shallows in downtown Bangui. The situation was kind of like Rwanda today, though not as bad. I have pictures at home of bodies floating in the river. One of the things which one learns is that the skin pigmentation of black people, after being immersed in water for a time, turns white. So the bodies all looked like Caucasians, floating in the river, until you realized that, in fact, they weren't. Anyway, this was a pretty grisly job.

I had originally been assigned to shift to Embassy Nouakchott, Niger from Douala. But this was changed to Bangui as Third Secretary and Vice-Consul, because the incumbent Administrative Officer had to have a hernia operation. He went up to Wheelus Air Force Base in Libya, where there was an Air Force hospital. So I was assigned to Bangui as Administrative Officer, Consul and Economic/Commercial Officer. I had at least three "hats" to wear. Claude "Tony" Ross was Ambassador. He was at age 43, the youngest career Foreign Service Officer to become Ambassador. Ed Brennan was DCM. Charlie Bray, who was then Political Officer, subsequently became spokesman for the Department and Ambassador to Senegal. In addition to a Public Affairs Officer (PAO) who was a USIS officer, The Military Attaché, as I recall, was also actually resident in Chad, at Fort Lamy [now called N'Djamena]. There was no Peace Corps contingent but we did have a couple of "SeaBees" doing some kind of construction work in the Western part of the country. We would stop with them if we drove the 800 miles to Cameroon. It was a very small, fairly close knit Embassy and diplomatic community. I was in Bangui when De Gaulle recognized Red China. The CAR was very close to De Gaulle. The Ubangi Shari, as the territory was called before independence, had been one of the first French African territories to declare for the Free French in 1940. So it had a place very close to De Gaulle's heart. He never forgot those African countries that had supported him at that time--particularly the CAR and Cameroon.

Consequently, De Gaulle gave them an extra dollop of aid every year. When France [under De Gaulle] recognized Red China in 1964, the CAR, and all of the other former French territories also recognized the PRC. The CAR kicked out the Ambassador of the Republic of China, who, of course, was fairly close to us. Then the Red Chinese and the Russians came in, which sort of changed the local atmosphere.

Q: Andy, while you were there in the CAR, how did the "Simba" business finally wind down? Or did it wind down while you were there?

ANTIPPAS: It did. My memory is not all of that exact on this. Of course, the CAR is on the northern border of the then Congo-Kinshasa [now Zaire]. The capital, Kinshasa, was called Leopoldville in those days.

As I recall, the "Simbas" were really a fragmented kind of opposition group, led by witch doctors, in effect. They were probably high on drugs, for all I know. In any event, they managed to take over a certain amount of territory in the northern part of the Congo, including the major town of Stanleyville, capturing our Consulate and Consulate staff. They were held as hostages in the town, along with a number of other American missionaries and other Europeans. It was quite a tense time, because we didn't know whether they would be killed if we tried to go in and liberate them. Eventually the U.S. Force ferried in Belgian paratroopers who cleared the area. I recall the one American casualty, a missionary who was machine gunned trying to scale a fence.

I had several jobs in the Embassy in Bangui. These were not particularly onerous in a small country like the CAR, which only had a population of about one million. At one point I had to be Administrative Officer, GSO, Consul, and Economic Officer.

As one of my jobs was the protection of American citizens. We had a lot of missionaries in the CAR. There were also Americans prospecting for diamonds out in the western part of the CAR, toward the border with the Congo-Brazzaville, as it was called [to distinguish it from the Congo-Leopoldville]. During the "Simba" affair I had made a number of contacts. There was a large number of Greeks in the former French Equatorial Africa in those days. One of them that I met was a coffee planter, who admitted that he had run away from conscription during World War II. He had good contacts over in Congo-Leopoldville. I used to go up to the crossing point, which I mentioned before, 300-400 miles up the river from Bangui. I would fly up there on the PAO's plane from time to time and we would look around and try to pick up tidbits of information. We didn't have a CIA "Station" in the CAR at that time--didn't get one until the Chinese Communists and the Russians arrived in 1964. I would go up there and try to find out what was going on. The CAR authorities were obviously scared to death that the "Simbas" might try to cross the river there, which was very broad. This Greek coffee planter had contacts with native "line crossers"--people who would go across the river and pick up information. I would talk with him and get some idea of what the situation was.

Q: How did you find dealing with the government there?

ANTIPPAS: It was relatively easy. The dress was informal.

The Israelis had a fairly active Embassy in the CAR in those days. Their Ambassador had been an Army general. Their aid mission was quite active. The Israeli Ambassador had persuaded the President of the CAR to go into the "summer uniform" of a short sleeve shirt and no tie and stop "doing the French thing" of wearing a dark suit and a tie. This made an awful lot of sense. This was the first time I ever experienced that.

Relations with the CAR Government were not much of a problem. We didn't have that many issues to deal with. The biggest economic interest we had involved diamond mining and some timber exploitation. The CAR didn't export very much else at that time except hardwood timber. The French were the paramount economic power, as they had been in Cameroon. They were very anxious to keep the Americans out.

Q: Tony Ross. How did you find him as an Ambassador?

ANTIPPAS: A great guy. A very nice guy. He had been a Middle Eastern specialist, you know. As a young officer, he had served in Egypt, where he did well during the 1956 Arab-Israeli War, I think. He had a Greek-American wife, so we got along very nicely. He was very sharp, very professional. He went on to be Ambassador to Haiti, and he was Deputy Assistant Secretary in the African Bureau. I think that he finally retired when Secretary of State Kissinger appointed someone else to be Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs.

Ed Brennan [DCM in Bangui] was my immediate superior. I remember that I lived with him and his family in his house, until I got my own place in Bangui.

You might be interested in hearing how the "Agency" [CIA] came to town and how such things worked at that time.

Q: Oh, yes.

ANTIPPAS: As I said, the Agency had no particular interest in the CAR. I think that they had a lot of interest in the Congo-Leopoldville [now Zaire] and what was going on there. They were supporting Mobutu even at that time.

When De Gaulle recognized Red China in 1964, all of the former French colonies in Africa followed suit. They "threw out" the representative of the Republic of China [ROC] on Taiwan. I remember that when the ROC Ambassador had to leave the CAR suddenly--almost overnight--we tried to "secure" his property. In fact, I was given the task of taking his sedan and driving it to Cameroon to keep it from being turned over to the Red Chinese. I remember that Ed Brennan told me to "hot foot" it out of town and get it to Cameroon. That was 800 miles away over basically savanna or desert kind of country. I did it. I beat it almost out of the CAR. But before I could get out of the country, I stopped off at the location where we had the "SeaBees" [U. S. Navy Construction Battalion]. I stopped overnight with them. Charley Bray [Political Officer] chased after me in another Embassy vehicle, caught up with me, and said, "You've got to turn around. We've changed our minds." It apparently not in accordance with protocol to take ROC

Embassy property and try to keep it from the incoming, PRC [People's Republic of China] Embassy. It would embarrass the CAR Government. So I drove back.

When the Red Chinese came in, we were very "uptight." Relations with them were not good. The Vietnam War was beginning to heat up at that time. We studiously ignored each other at social functions. The Red Chinese came in, and the Russians weren't far behind. They had earlier recognized all of these countries. They just didn't have resident ambassadors in them. Later, they set up resident embassies there.

When the Russians showed up, the Agency showed up, in the form of a "representative from the Department of Commerce in Washington." He came in with a lot of luggage. The Russians had decided to take a house, a former American missionary house which was two houses over from my house, in a very nice part of town. The "Commerce Department representative" came to live in my house. Of course, I was a bachelor, and this was no problem. However, they had managed to put some "bugs" in the walls of the house that was being refurbished for the Russians. The Russians were not the only ones planting "bugs" in those days.

Using the technology of the times-- the Agency guy had two large, Samsonite suitcases--he would sit in one of my bedrooms. At night he would fire a "thunderbolt" and turn on the "bugs." He would leave them on for a while, trying to listen while taping the conversations. He had to listen to all of this in real time. Then he would take all of the equipment away when my house boy was around. So he spent day and night in my house, listening to tapes. I remember one time that we had a fierce rain storm, with bolts of lightning hitting around the neighborhood. One lightning bolt turned on the "bugs" inside the house. I remember how nervous he was. If the Russians "swept" their house electronically, from time to time, as we would do, they might find the "bugs." He was firing "thunderbolts" from his equipment, trying to turn the "bugs" off. He told me that most of the time the Russians had radios playing, which was the technique that you use to try to foil listening devices. So we apparently couldn't pick up much. The first resident agent spoke Russian as well as French. We subsequently served in Vietnam at the same time. Anyway, the Russians, the Chinese, and the Americans kind of "peered" at each other, out there in the middle of nowhere in Central Africa. I only stayed in Bangui for a year. Charley Whitehouse [later Ambassador to Laos and Thailand] was the Personnel Officer for Africa. He wrote me a letter and asked me if I would be willing to go to work for the AID program in Vietnam, which was just then building up [1965]. The Department was assigning Foreign Service Officers to the "Office of Civil Operations" (OCO). I remember writing back and saying: "Hell, no." I'd been shot at in Korea and had just spent two years in the jungles of Central Africa. I didn't want to go to some place where I'd be shot at and also be in a jungle. He wrote back and said that the Department wanted to do right by those of us who had served in the hardship posts, so it was decided to send me to Japan. That was how I got my assignment to the Consulate General in Kobe.

Q: You were there from 1965 to 1967.

ROBERT E. GRIBBIN

FSO General
Bangui (1974-1976)

Ambassador Robert E. Gribbin was born in North Carolina in 1946. After receiving his bachelor's degree from University of S. Sewanee in 1968, he received in master's degree from Johns Hopkins University in 1973. He also served in the Peace Corps from 1968-1970. His career has included positions in Rwanda, Kenya, Uganda, the Central African Republic, and also ambassadorships to Central African Republic and Rwanda. Ambassador Gribbin was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in June 2000.

Q: *Well, you went out to Bangui. You were there from 1974 -*

GRIBBIN: 1974-76.

Q: *Who was the ambassador then?*

GRIBBIN: Bill Dale, and then Tony Quainton.

Q: *Could you describe the situation in the Central African Republic?*

GRIBBIN: The Central African Republic sounds like a direction rather than a country, still today, but it was very small, very out-of –the-way, very out-of-the-mainstream, not only in terms of the rest of Africa but from the rest of the world. It certainly didn't register at all on the U.S. Government's scopes. The only thing that made the Central African Republic notorious at the time was its rather despotic ruler, Jean-Bédel Bokassa, who later became emperor. But he was not the emperor in 1974; he was *cher Papa, maréchal* and *président à vie.* In any case, he ran the country as his own personal fiefdom. It as a very poor place and quite thinly populated. Still today, it has very few people. Bangui was a pleasant little city situated on the banks of the Ubangi River, which is a vast river, one of the two great rivers of the Congo Basin. The climate was not so bad, although it was kind of humid. There were nice rains; and also a good dry season. Central Africans, those who were educated beyond secondary school often also had a Parisian education – but there weren't many of them. The elite lived pretty much in fear of the president, which was well merited, but beyond them, his reach did not really extend to the people. The average citizen considered the president to be good theater, which is what he was, but his actions had very little impact on them.

Q: *The Central African Republic, is it a tribal unity or broken up? How was it?*

GRIBBIN: There are three or four principal tribes in the CAR, but the president was from the Mbaka, which is a small tribe to the south. It was the group French explorers first met coming up the Ubangi, so the first mission stations were there. Consequently, the Mbaka were the first to be educated and "modernized." Bokassa was a relative of Barthelemy Boganda, who was the

George Washington of the CAR, the founding father, who died just before independence in a plane crash. Bokassa himself had gone into the French Army because he didn't like school and had become a legitimate war hero. He served both in the Second World War and then in Indochina before he came back and was integrated into what was to become then the Central African Army. After Boganda died, Bokassa's cousin, named David Dacko, became president. Dacko was a fairly inept, ineffectual president. He was a very nice man, whom I later came to know quite well, but he was not a very effective president. There was some scheming in the military which Bokassa, who was the chief of staff, thought was aimed at him. So he quickly mounted his coup and ousted his cousin. Dacko was sent away to rusticate. Bokassa killed his military opponents and proclaimed himself president on New Year's Eve of 1965-66.

Q: *What was your job at the embassy?*

GRIBBIN: I was what they called in those days a FSOG - Foreign Service officer general. I was the vice-consul, the economic-commercial officer and partly a political officer. The only other Foreign Service officers at the embassy were the ambassador, the DCM, and the administrative officer - and one other political officer. Additionally we had two secretaries and a communicator.

Q: *Who was the DCM?*

GRIBBIN: Jim Rosenthal, when I first got there, and then Bill Swing.

Q: *What were our interests there?*

GRIBBIN: Minimal. The missionary community numbered about a hundred. An American company was involved in the diamond production and export. We had a small AID program. Part of our interest was cold war related. Bokassa was firmly in the anti-Communist camp. He had relations with Taiwan and South Korea and South Vietnam. Although the CAR was a place where we had small interests, we had a small embassy to serve them.

Q: *Did you have much in the way of contact with the neighbors? Did they make much of a difference, or not?*

GRIBBIN: Well, among the neighbors that counted was Zaire. The town right across the river from Bangui was called Zongo, so it used to be "Zongo, Congo," and then "Zongo, Zaire." A good bit of commerce moved back and forth to northern Zaire. In contrast, there was hardly any contact at all with the northern portion of the Republic of Congo, which was impenetrable forest and swamp. The river route to Brazzaville, however, was a main trade link. Overland trade came from the Cameroon, which was the CAR’s most vital partner. There was some commerce – cattle on the hoof in exchange for lumber - back and forth to Chad. There was almost no contact at all with the Sudan, which even then was engaged in civil war. Nonetheless, a Sudanese refugee population lived just inside the CAR border in the far east. The CAR was formally grouped with Chad, Cameroon, Congo, and Gabon in an economic community called the *Union Douniere des Etats de la Afrique Centrale.* The CAR’s most important external partner was France.

Q: *What did you do during the day?*

GRIBBIN: I ran the USIS operation and was also the backup Peace Corps director, and so these varying tasks kept me going. I handled the small amount of consular business. I issued about 100 visas a year and a dozen passports, chiefly to resident American missionaries. I helped oversee the Ambassador's Self Help Program that sponsored small projects proposed by local communities. I traveled in conjunction with that and met local leaders. As mentioned I supervised the cultural center and its library. I wrote economic reports on the diamond industry, the timber industry and on the prospects for tourism. I also wrote the standard reports the Department required - balance of payments, economic trends, budget analysis, and so forth.

Q: *Which were received with great interest.*

GRIBBIN: Yes, I'm sure - somewhere. No, the day was full, as I recall.

Q: *It was very good training, too.*

GRIBBIN: Oh, yes. I was even the chargé at one point.

Q: *Oh, my. I would have thought you would have to be with the USIS programs or the information act programs that one would be treading rather carefully because you had this volatile dictator and maybe the wrong message would come out or people would-*

GRIBBIN: Remember that we weren't selling democracy so strongly in those days, but we did have to be careful about how we promoted American values. We sponsored an English language club where people would come and try to speak English. We had a mixture of English and French language films in the collection. Frequently when television was desperate for something to air, they would call - often at the last minute - to borrow films to show on television that night. So we actually got to program television. One favorite film that people still remembered years afterwards was the 1956 NBA finals that we had in French. The TV station must have borrowed that a dozen times or more.

Q: *One was hearing stories about Bokassa. What sort of things were you getting about him?*

GRIBBIN: Bokassa was indeed a major figure and always good for a story. Those of us who lived in the CAR will never be lacking stories. One of my favorite ones involved an American astronaut who toured Africa. I don't remember his name right now, but he was a private citizen by then, and was involved in Evangelical work. Anyway, Bokassa was something of a self-proclaimed space nut, so when these visitors came to the CAR, he immediately offered them great hospitality. In fact, he took them to his private game park in the north. I believe Bill Swing was the chargé at the time. Bill went with them. But the rest of the embassy staff was invited to a state banquet, which would be on the top floor of the one hotel there in town. The top floor was a garden terrace about 7 or 8 stories up. Since Bokassa didn't often entertain, this was a big event. So we were all "convoked," which is the term they used, so those of us from the American Embassy, all the cabinet ministers and most of the senior military authorities showed up on time and were escorted up to the top of the hotel. Every 10 feet or so was a young soldier with an Uzi who had been there since about two that afternoon. But the guests of honor and the president

didn't show up, and they didn't show up, and they didn't show up. Although we sat down, we were not given anything to drink. A band played music so loud that we couldn't talk to anybody. So we waited from about eight o'clock till after 11, when the presidential party finally returned from the game park and showed up at the banquet. By this time, of course, the tropical dew had settled, and we were soaking wet, even though it hadn't rained. I remember that I kept worrying about these kids with these Uzis because they would nod off. I hoped that no dream would awaken them and cause then to spray the crowd. In any case, that event – the mix of enthusiasms and sheer self-centeredness - was very typical of Bokassa.

I met with him a few times while I was there. A group of American ranchers from Nevada were interested in developing a huge cattle ranch in the CAR. Essentially their deal was to provide the expertise whereas the CAR would provide the land and the financing. We're talking about something twice the size of Fairfax County. The government would obtain money from the World Bank. So essentially it was a no-lose deal, or a not-lose-much deal, for the American group, but the CAR would have to sign for all of the real obligations. The parties worked through this very, very carefully and came out with an agreement. I helped with translations and interpreted, in French, for Bokassa and these men from Reno. Ultimately, the World Bank refused the deal. Although that was probably the right decision given the bank's criteria, it was certainly the wrong decision from the point of view of the Americans involved and the Central Africans. Frankly, I don't know whether the project would have worked or not, but it was very interesting being in close proximity to Bokassa during the discussions. Sometimes he would interact with the ranchers, then his attention would fade and he would start talking other business to one or two of his ministers. One of his pre-occupations at that time was a bridge that he wanted fixed. He harangued his minister of transport and finally instructed him, "Joseph, if you don't fix that bridge by tomorrow, you go to jail." Well, the bridge didn't get fixed; Joseph didn't go to jail *that* time, but that was typical of the way Bokassa governed.

Q: *Did the Cold War intrude there? This is Kissinger seeing everything in light of the East versus the West and all that.*

GRIBBIN: Not really. The Russians were present but not a factor. To mark the anniversary of the end of WWII I remember the Soviets showed a movie which recounted how the Russians liberated Yugoslavia. However, the Yugoslav embassy retaliated by showing a movie of how the Yugoslavs liberated Yugoslavia. The Russians escalated by announcing another movie, which most everyone boycotted. A cold war issue that did surface was the diplomatic playoff between Taiwan and Red China. The Central African government wanted money, and both Chinese governments were willing to play. Over the course of time there were several flip-flops in local representation as one or the other would up the ante, if you will, in order to pre-empt the other.

Q: *Did Libya get involved at that time?*

GRIBBIN: Libya did establish contact, mostly directly between Qaddafi and Bokassa. After I left Bokassa, like Bongo in Gabon, became a Muslim. I forget his Islamic name, but he was as equally faithless to Islamic doctrine as he was to Christianity.

Q: *I have Tony Quainton talking about that.*

GRIBBIN: Right.

Q: *Did that happen while you were there?*

GRIBBIN: I think that it happened just after I left.

Q: *Was there a feeling that Bokassa carried much weight around the area other than with the oddballs like Qadhafi?*

GRIBBIN: I don't think he carried much weight with Qadhafi. No, Bokassa’s fellow traveler in the area was Mobutu, who lived right across the river. Mobutu was essentially Central African in all but name. Although he was not a tribal brother of Bokassa, he was kin to many Yakoma people of the CAR. Mobutu comes from Gbadolite, which is right on the northern border of Zaire.

Q: *Was he up there quite often?*

GRIBBIN: Oh, yes. Mobutu spent a lot of the time in Gbadolite. One of the things, as a junior officer, I used to do - the U.S. had more contact with Mobutu than we did with other African leaders – Washington or embassy Kinshasa would try to contact Mobutu when he was in Gbadolite. Washington would send messages to Bangui. Then I would take the message out to Mobutu's C-130 aircraft, which was on the tarmac in Bangui but which had a good radio. His crew would radio the message over to Mobutu. At some point I would be called to pick up a reply. Mobutu always thought of his neighboring chiefs of state as little brothers. He could be very patronizing, even to Bokassa.

Bokassa and Amin also struck up a friendship, being of like kind. In fact, Amin came to visit once.

Q: *From Uganda, Idi Amin.*

GRIBBIN: Yes. He came to visit once, and although there had been no announcement to that effect, we knew he was coming because Ugandan flags went up on trees around town. The diplomatic corps was convoked to the airport. Ambassador Quainton was there by then, but Tony did not want to go greet Idi Amin. So, he sent me. I waited around the airport for several hours, but Amin didn't come. We were sent home without explanation. Then about two weeks later, all the flags blossomed again, and we were convoked again to the airport, and again I was sent to greet Amin. Tony's ploy for the U.S. ambassador not be there didn't necessarily work, since the chief of protocol introduced me as the American ambassador. Because I was the only obvious English-speaking person in the queue - I was way down at the end - Amin stopped to chat. Bokassa and Amin formed sort of a community of outcasts, if you will.

It turned out that on the day Amin did not come he sent a personal flowery message. In his best idiosyncratic English, he wrote something like, "Dear Brother, I am very pleased to accept your kind invitation to visit" on such and such, but then went on to provide some excuse as to why he

wasn't coming. However, the person who translated the message for Bokassa missed the fact that Amin was declining rather than accepting. The translator spent a couple of months in jail for that omission.

Q: *What was social life like for you and your wife?*

GRIBBIN: Bangui was a very small place, small in the American community sense, and small in the diplomatic sense. Central Africans were very leery of contact with foreign missions - in fact, if we wanted to invite somebody, invitations had to be submitted through protocol at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Generally, they weren't passed along and certainly weren't passed along in any timely fashion. So aside from the few official functions that the ambassador hosted – such as the Fourth of July or when an important visitor came - social contact with Central Africans was constrained.

Since I ran the USIS center, I established contacts there. I also met many folks when I traveled upcountry. But in town itself there wasn't a very active social circuit. Connie and I were newlyweds, and weren't looking for a terribly active social life. We played tennis, swam and traveled about.

Q: *How about the French? Were the French sort of looking on the Americans as intruding on their -*

GRIBBIN: There were two kinds of French. Long term French residents, most in business or plantations, were introspective and tied up in their own social circles. I got to know some of them my second time around, but not really my first time around. There was also the French official diplomatic community - young French diplomats like ourselves, *cooperants* and Peace Corps like *militaires* - and in fact we got to know some of these people quite well. I remember the French ambassador as being fairly snooty. Maybe that was because I was young and he was snooty towards young people. But there was certainly the sense that the CAR was their place and they called the shots. As far as the U.S. was concerned, that was true. We didn't want to call the shots. We didn't want to cough up the couple of million dollars or more that would be necessary to do that. Consequently, we Americans felt little tension. I've always found that tension between America and France is more a phenomena that one finds outside than inside. Oftentimes it's something that the host country will try to encourage, because it wants alternatives to France. Bokassa, however, was firmly in the French camp and did not do that.

Q: *Were there French troops nearby? At that point I imagine there were French troops in Chad, weren't there?*

GRIBBIN: There were French troops in the Central African Republic off and on. In 1974 the base at Bouar had just been closed, so in this era there was only a small contingent in Bangui. The bulk of the French Central Africa force was in Chad.

Q: *Was there the general feeling that if struggle brewed, a nasty coup or something like that, that probably the French would send some troops in?*

GRIBBIN: Certainly.

Q: *Because that had been the pattern for some time.*

GRIBBIN: Oh, yes. There were a couple of coup attempts while I was there, including a very notorious one in February of 1976, which was led by the son-in-law of Bokassa who was married to the false Martine. That's another long story, and Tony probably tells it. But the Martines are interesting because of this connection.

Q: *I don't know.*

GRIBBIN: When Bokassa was a serviceman in the French military in Indochina, he fathered a child whose name was Martine, whom he left behind. He abandoned the child and her mother. But after Bokassa became president, at some point, he reflected upon his life, and he loved children - he had 28 or 29 - and he said, "Well, you know, we really ought to find Martine." So he asked the French government to help him find Martine. Subsequently, they canvassed Vietnam, which was fracturing in the early 1970s as the Vietnam war was drawing to a close.

Anyhow French representatives searched and they found a girl who was obviously of a mixed parentage whose name was Martine. She seemed to fit the bill, so they flew her to the Central African Republic. Bokassa turned out the diplomatic corps for a regal reception and she was much feted by the nation. So Martine was welcomed into Bokassa’s family. A couple of months later, the French turned up another girl, also *metisse,* also about 18, who really was Martine the daughter of Bokassa. Her mother had the documentation to substantiate that claim. The French faced potential embarrassment and also some peril. How could they tell Bokassa they had sent the wrong girl? But they decided that he would take it well, and he did. He provided the same warm welcome for Martine. The girls became known as the *vraie* Martine and the *fausse* Martine. Bokassa subsequently married both of them off. The *vraie* Martine to a young doctor and the false Martine to a young military officer. The military officer's name was Fidèle Obrou, and Obrou was involved, the ringleader, if you will, of the plot in 1976 to assassinate Bokassa. I don't know what his motives were. He was well connected and his future would seem to be assured. In any case, Obrou was involved in a plot to assassinate Bokassa at the airport by throwing hand grenades at him and shooting him and so forth. The plot failed principally because the pin on the hand grenade thrown at Bokassa was not pulled. Bokassa, being an old soldier, stood there with his cane and looked down at the hand grenade right between his legs. He noticed that the pin was still in it, so it didn't bother him. He started hollering for his guards to retaliate. Ultimately, Obrou was captured and the story ended very tragically. He was killed, of course. But vengeance was also wreaked on the new baby of the false Martine. The husband of the *vraie* Martine was a doctor who was reportedly instructed by Bokassa to kill the child, which he did. After Bokaasa was overthrown years later the doctor was convicted of that crime. Meanwhile the false Martine disappeared. She was probably killed.

Q: *I assume that any gathering with Bokassa was treated with a certain amount of care.*

GRIBBIN: Well, Bokassa didn't gather much. He was a very aloof president. He liked the people to know about him, but he didn't really care particularly about them. He didn't go to functions.

He didn't go to gatherings. He only turned out for the national day parade once a year, which was a very big, fun event. All the soldiers, many folkloric groups, and thousands of schoolchildren would march. It was a diversion from everyday life. Aside from that Bokassa didn't do public events.

Q: *Well, then, by 1976 you were ready to depart. What were you looking for, and what happened?*

GRIBBIN: In 1976, I came back to Washington and was assigned to the economic course.

ANTHONY QUAINTON
Ambassador
(1976-1978)

Ambassador Anthony Quainton was born in Washington state in 1934. He graduated from Princeton University in 1955 and joined the Foreign Service in 1959. He served at overseas posts in Australia, Pakistan, India, France, Nepal and as ambassador to the Central African Republic, Nicaragua, Kuwait and Peru. Ambassador Quainton has also served as the Deputy Inspector General, Assistant Secretary of State for Diplomatic Security, and the Director General of the Foreign Service. He was interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1997.

Q: You left there in 1976. You said that lightning struck. How did this come about?

QUAINTON: Some time in 1975, Dr. Kissinger noticed that the average age of American ambassadors was quite high. Even in places of considerable obscurity and unimportance, we were sending career officers just before retirement as a kind of golden handshake at the end of their careers. He suggested to his colleagues that perhaps there were younger officers who might be sent to some of these smaller places to see whether they had the necessary skills to be chiefs of mission and to advance in the Service. He looked around and identified four or five officers who were about 40 years of age. I was one of the lucky ones whose name came up, I suspect, partly because I had known and worked with Carol Laise, who was then the director general. So, I was asked if I would be willing to go to Bangui as chief of mission.

Q: Bangui being?

QUAINTON: The capital of the Central African Republic (CAR), later to become the Central African Empire.

Q: How did your colleagues in the Foreign Service react to your getting an ambassadorship?

QUAINTON: I don’t remember any particular reaction except “How lucky you are.” There were

not a whole lot of people who particularly wanted to go to Bangui per se. It was the heart of darkness in almost every sense of the word. The CAR is a small country: in population, smaller than Nepal, although larger in area than Nepal. Although I was asked in the fall of 1975 if I would like to go, I didn't actually leave Kathmandu for some time because of the paperwork and clearance process. I actually got to Bangui in mid-February, 1976.

Q: How did your family react to this? Having been pulled untimely out of Paris and going to Nepal and then going to Bangui.

QUAINTON: It was very hard in family terms because education in Nepal was already a problem for our children. There was no American high school in Kathmandu, although there was an American school that went up through the eighth grade. So, we had already been separated from our eldest daughter, who went to boarding school in England during the latter part of the time we were in Kathmandu. She had stayed on in Paris with a colleague for the first year that we were in Nepal. And then we went to Bangui, where there was no American school at all, and we were forced to send another child to boarding school. Our youngest daughter went to school in Bangui in the French system, as did our son for the remainder of the 1976 school year, after which he also went to boarding school in the United States. So we were without two of our three children most of the time we were in Bangui. They came for vacations, etc. My wife had been able to work in Kathmandu as wife of the DCM. She ran a very large English language training program under contract with USIS. There was no such opportunity in Bangui. Bangui is a very small place. Everything was dominated by the French and the only opportunity she had to work was as an English teacher in the French lycée. Technically, she was an employee of the French embassy, which caused some consternation in French official circles.

Q: You were in the Central African Republic/Empire from when to when?

QUAINTON: From February, 1976 until the summer of 1978. In theory, it was a three year posting, but in the spring of 1978 I received a cable from Secretary Vance telling me that I had been chosen to be the Department's coordinator for counterterrorism and asking me to come back on two weeks notice. I said I could not do that for family reasons. He asked if I would be able to take up the job in June and after further negotiation, we agreed I would start in July.

Q: What was the embassy like and the living conditions like at that time?

QUAINTON: The embassy was very small although much bigger than it is today. There was one part-time consular officer, a part-time economic officer, a DCM, a couple of secretaries, a couple of people from another agency, a small Peace Corps, and an administrative officer. There were no military, USIA, or AID. The AID program was tiny and, with the exception of the ambassador's self-help fund, was managed out of the Cameroon. So, it was a very small operation reflecting our very limited interests. Our primary interest was that Bokassa vote with us in the United Nations against the Soviet Union, which he always did. There was a little bit of American economic interest. There was an American diamond company which mined alluvial diamonds. There was a little uranium in the country which the French and Swiss were trying to exploit. And, there were a hundred or so American missionaries almost all Protestants from three different denominations, a handful of Lutherans who were left behind when the Germans left the

Cameroons and two small groups, the Independent Baptists and the Grace Brethren. They had come up the Congo River in 1919 together by boat and when they got to Bangui they divided the country in half. The Baptists went east and the Brethren west, and they agreed not to poach in each other's territory. That is how it remained throughout most of the ensuing 50 years, although as time passed, as in so many developing countries, people flocked from the rural areas to the city and brought with them their form of Christianity and in Bangui there was a certain amount of competition between these two groups, which in the countryside had been separated. So, I spent a good bit of time dealing with the missionaries. They had very few problems, although occasionally they would be expelled because the president thought they had done something wicked. They were very hospitable hosts to us and to members of the embassy as we moved around the country. The CAR is about the size of France, with a very poor infrastructure, so the hospitality of the missionaries was very welcome.

Q: The French influence was very strong there?

QUAINTON: Yes, it is great. The French subsidized about 50 percent of the government's budget, some 50 million dollars a year. They called almost all the shots, although they couldn't always control the president. Bokassa had been in the French army. He had been chosen in the late 1930s by his great uncle as the next chief of his tribe. His family thought a good way to train the future head of the tribe was to send him to Brazzaville, where he was made to enlist as a simple soldier in the French army. He had a very successful career in the army, unlike some of the other African leaders who only served in colonial regiments. He rose to the rank of major and served at Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam and also in North Africa during the Second World War. He was a man of considerable military experience. In 1961, the French made him the commander of the Central African Republic's army; his uncle became the first president of the country. In a coup a few years later, Bokassa became president for life and steadily promoted himself. By the time I got to Bangui, he was a seven star field marshal. His next step was to move beyond being a president for life, and he decided to convert the regime into an empire of Napoleonic proportions, which he did. The French, to the great surprise of many people, paid the cost for converting the country from a republic into an empire, and for making simple soldier Jean-Bedel Bokassa into his Imperial Majesty Bokassa I.

Q: This must have been the cause of a certain amount of merriment at the time?

QUAINTON: Well, there was a comic opera aspect to life in Bangui, but there was also a good bit of anxiety. As I was traveling out to Bangui with my family, we were held up in Paris on instructions from Washington because Bokassa had just executed the embassy's general services officer [GSO]. That event put a certain damper on our relations. The GSO was a third country national who had worked for 20 years in the embassy and who was associated with a young man who had thrown a hand grenade at Bokassa at the airport. There was no question about who threw the hand grenade, and there was no question about the business ties between the grenade thrower and the GSO. However, there was no evidence suggesting the GSO had been involved in the attack. But Bokassa was both unforgiving and paranoid. There was a public trial and a public execution in the presence of the diplomatic corps. All of this took place before I got there. So when I arrived, there was not a happy feeling in the embassy about our relations with Bokassa. Subsequent relations were often shamed and we went through a series of crises.

Some months before I got to Bangui, Bokassa had slapped the Italian ambassador in public for not providing sufficient economic assistance. The Italians withdrew their ambassador and left their embassy in hands of a code clerk. From Bokassa's point of view, this was quite an effective technique of intimidation. Most ambassadors to the Central African Republic were relatively junior; you didn't send your most senior and experienced diplomats, and none of us wanted to be sent home in disgrace for having been hit by the head of state. There was always an air of uncertainty about what might happen next.

Over the course of the time we spent in Bangui, there was a series of very dreadful incidents. A Peace Corps volunteer was bicycling past one of the imperial palaces on the wrong side of the road. He was ordered to stop, but his French wasn't very good and he didn't stop. He was then taken into custody, brought before the emperor who threatened him with his cane, tore off his glasses and stomped on them with his boot. It took us some time to get the Peace Corps volunteer out and, of course, the Peace Corps became rather jittery about what might happen to their volunteers. Notwithstanding this incident, the volunteers just loved Central Africa and went on with their work, and, although they were scattered all over the country, in general, they had no problems.

Two American journalists were arrested by Bokassa. One, Michael Goldsmith, was the Africa correspondent for the Associated Press. The other was Jonathan Randall of the *Washington Post*. Goldsmith had been rather indiscreet. He had filed a story about the wickedness of the Bokassa regime from the local post office to South Africa where his bureau was headquartered. The document was taken to Bokassa as evidence of sinister columns against the regime by foreign journalists. Both [were] arrested. Randell got out quite quickly. We made a lot of strong interventions on his behalf, and he hadn't written extensively enough to get himself into big trouble. He was only kept under house arrest. But, Goldsmith was actually taken to prison, where he was kept in a very small cell. He lived for several weeks on a diet of bananas and water. This happened just as my wife and I were going on home leave. We went on leave. I got out to California only to discover that Michael Goldsmith was married to Lyndon Johnson's niece and the White House wanted him freed. So, I was sent back to Bangui to get him out one way or another. I was briefed in transit at Dulles Airport. So, I went back to Bangui, but at first Bokassa wouldn't see me, realizing I was going to say very tough things. Eventually I was called to see him. I went to his palace in the countryside. I made my presentation demanding Goldsmith's release. Bokassa shouted at me and raised his cane, saying that I had plotted his overthrow ever since I had come to Bangui, that I was a tool of the CIA, and that he wouldn't pay any attention to these threats from the American government. I was quite discouraged at this response, but in fact Bokassa had listened. In addition, a major campaign was mounted from Gabon and the Ivory Coast to get him to let Goldsmith go.

None of this appeared in public. But, various people were persuaded to intervene directly with Bokassa, including Maurice Tempelsman. Eventually, the incident ended in typical Bokassa fashion. Goldsmith, on his release, said that one day his diet suddenly improved. Shortly thereafter, he was summoned to the imperial presence and told that he was going to be released and sent on the night plane to Paris. He was ushered into the imperial presence and given a glass of champagne. Bokassa said it was all a mistake and he was terribly sorry, these things

happened, but all was forgiven. If it hadn't been for the American ambassador plotting his overthrow, this never would have happened. Bokassa kept Goldsmith drinking champagne for several hours and told him stories about the war in Vietnam in a very engaging fashion, interspersed with attacks on me, the American ambassador. The departure time of the plane came and went, but the airport was instructed not to let the plane leave. Eventually, it left a couple of hours late, Goldsmith having been delivered to the airport in the imperial limousine. Goldsmith got back to Washington in a state of complete shock. He told everyone that Bokassa was a lunatic and that I was at great risk. Neither I nor my DCM thought that Bokassa would do anything rash, and he, of course, did not.

The next time I saw Bokassa, he kissed me on both cheeks and said that he was committed to eternal friendship with the United States and would like to pay an official visit to Washington to demonstrate his love for the United States. To my great surprise, as we were quite interested in his vote in the UN, a special envoy was sent from Washington. Not a very high level envoy, Tom Buchanan, director for Central Africa, but he came out with a personal letter from Dr. Kissinger inviting Bokassa to the United States at some unspecified time in the future. Bokassa was touched by the Secretary's expression of understanding and support. We gave a small dinner for Tom Buchanan and during Buchanan's call on the Emperor, Bokassa said, "I understand you are giving a dinner tonight. It is a pity I can't come, but I have instructed the government to go in my place." I said that I would be honored. I went home and tell my wife that the government was coming to dinner. She was planning a small dinner for 12 and the government was made up of 14 ministers but we couldn't find out which members of the government were coming. There was no way to find out. None of the ministers had ever set foot in the residence before. Nobody could come to the American ambassador's or to any other ambassador's without special permission from Bokassa. The only contact they had with the diplomatic corps was in their offices. But that night they all came. Dinner was at eight and at seven the national television cameras arrived. The journalists knocked at the front door and said that they had been instructed to come to the dinner and to film it for national television. We were a bit taken back, but we let them come in and they set up in the dining room. As each course came out, the klieg lights went on, and there was a live broadcast of the American ambassador's special envoy supping with the government. It was a highly bizarre place, as you can see.

In the latter part of my stay, the big question was human rights. Bokassa had a justified reputation for doing terrible things to his citizens and, as I have described, to Americans and foreigners. At this time, the Carter administration had just come into office and made human rights a priority. American ambassadors were expected to speak out on human rights. Central Africa was no exception. In 1977, every ambassador to the host government was instructed to deliver the President's declaration on Human Rights Day. Thinking that it was a waste of time sending this particular document to Bokassa, I sent it under cover of a diplomatic note to the foreign minister, saying "We know that your government is most interested in the policy of the United States with regard to human rights, and the embassy would be grateful if you would pass this statement on to His Imperial Majesty." Nothing happened for some time. However, on Christmas Eve, the minister of information arrived at my front door. He said that Bokassa had read Jimmy Carter's declaration and wished to associate himself with it and to declare publicly that the American policy on human rights was his government's policy. The evening news would carry his decision.

So, I turned on the local news. There was no declaration, only a very cryptic remark that a "very important statement" which was to have been made would not be made. No one in the country except me had any idea what this was all about. I thought, "Oh, well, this is a pretty funny place anyway." The day after Christmas, the minister sent his secretary general, his number two, to the residence. The official explained that they couldn't get all the details arranged by Christmas Eve, but that Bokassa had decided that that evening I would speak to the nation on human rights. He asked me to show up in half an hour's time at the national television's studios. I showed up at the station and, sure enough, after the evening news, they announced their support for the Carter Declaration and I was put on camera to talk about the importance of human rights to the people of the Central African Empire. I got a fair amount of credit in Washington for something over which I had no control. But, of course, nothing changed. The regime was totally indifferent to human rights, but if the Americans wanted an endorsement, it would do no harm to put the American ambassador on TV to talk about the subject.

Q: Tony, would you like to talk more about the coronation of Bokassa, his relations with the French, the human rights incidents, and what he kept in his food locker, etc.

QUAINTON: It might first be worth saying a few words about the French role in Central Africa. The French played the predominant role in the Central African Republic and indeed in the Empire after it was proclaimed, as part of a larger strategy of promoting French culture, language, influence and strategic interests in those parts of the continent where they had been the colonial power. The Central African Republic had been an extraordinary backwater in the colonial era. Before independence, it was the territory of Ubangi Shari. If, as a French official, one washed up there, one was at the end of the line or the end of one's career. This was not a place which was known for its importance in the French Empire. Nonetheless, the French maintained a very substantial presence. The French ambassador was clearly the most important figure in the diplomatic corps. He was a senior, experienced Africanist. The embassy's staff was made up of a wide range of French officials, not all of them from the Quai d'Orsay. France provided direct resource transfers to the Central African government, oversaw a whole range of Central African policies and tried as best they could to manage the country in French interests. There was also a substantial French commercial community which ranged from French companies making a variety of wood products to companies prospecting and mining for uranium, but the French were also engaged in the very basic services in the society. The supermarkets, the hairdressers, the barbers, the hotel keepers were still all French. So, the French community was an important one. It was not supplemented at this time by any French military presence, although there had been such a presence earlier on, and there was one again after Bokassa was overthrown, but at this period there was no French military base in the Central African Republic. There were a substantial number of French "cooperants," essentially Peace Corps volunteers, volunteers who were doing their national service in Africa. A lot of them were teachers in the local schools, keeping French language and culture alive.

In early 1978, Bokassa decided that his status as a seven star field marshal and president for life did not give him sufficient recognition in the world of post-colonial Africa, so he proposed to make himself emperor. The first indication we had of that was when his wife gave birth early in 1978 to a little girl, her name was Anne, and it was announced in the local press that she was the

Princess Anne. This implied royal paternity. There were many rumors about the empire, what kind it might be. It was assumed early on in 1978 that Bokassa would try to model any empire on one of the great medieval empires in Africa, picking on the great tradition of chiefly rule, but dressing it up in a more modern kind of royal framework. In fact, he decided what he wanted to be was not the successor to any chief in Africa, but a successor to the pharaohs and to Napoleon. So the style of the empire was Napoleonic; the pedigree of the empire was pharaonic. Bokassa announced that he had traced his ancestry back to the pharaohs. When the empire was actually established, it did not look at all Egyptian. Rather, it was a black version of Napoleon's empire. That, of course, was a very expensive proposition. The French were very reluctant to back it. They disapproved of Bokassa's Napoleonic ambitions, but did not insist that he be an African-style king. They ultimately agreed to pay the full costs of his imperial coronation - costs that ran, according to some accounts, to something on the order of 45 to 50 million dollars.

Q: Why would the French pay that much? Was it worth that much to them?

QUAINTON: They had no alternative to Bokassa. Bokassa had a claim to French nationality by virtue of his service in the French army. He had been a loyal friend of France on all African issues. He was a great admirer, publicly and otherwise, of Charles de Gaulle. He was a regular hunting partner of the President of France, Giscard d'Estaing, who came annually to the Central African Republic to hunt elephants with Bokassa in the eastern portion of the country. It also testifies a good bit to the personal qualities of Bokassa, which have not been much commented on by history. He and the highly intellectual President of France could spend two weeks on safari in the countryside together sharing war stories, reminiscences and discussing the affairs of the world in a way that was entirely satisfactory to the President of France, who later received a famous necklace of diamonds as a gift from Bokassa, which eventually created a great scandal in France. So, there were many ties; Bokassa was a loyal friend of France, a loyal member of the French army; he had a chateau in Sologne in the central part of France; and the French felt a certain loyalty to him not withstanding his quite extraordinary idiosyncracies. Not that they approved of everything he did, but they saw no reasonable alternative to him at that time, although in 1979 they brought about his overthrow by the introduction of French paratroopers. But, this was only after another bizarre set of incidents involving the shooting of high school students in the center of Bangui at Bokassa's personal direction.

Q: Can you tell me what was the reaction back in the Department of State on your saying, "By the way, we are going to have a Napoleonic empire here in the Central African Empire?" Was it a problem of keeping the titters from getting too loud?

QUAINTON: Clearly Bokassa's decision was thought in Washington to be the most extraordinary piece of foolishness. On the other hand, Washington was very cautious, since we had limited but real interests in terms of Bokassa's support for us at the United Nations and our limited economic assets in the country. The embassy tried not to make fun of Bokassa in the messages and cables that we sent in. I must say I consciously tried to describe events with as straight a face as possible. It was easy to make cheap and rather amusing comments about this kind of exotic regime, but the end result might have been to put individual Americans, missionaries and business people, in peril.

Q: I would think that would be a problem because in a way, from the American point of view, it would be so amusing that it would be very hard not to have stories about it circulate the Department's corridors and get to newspaper people because people would think it was funny, and you have to really watch that.

QUAINTON: We tried to avoid too many quotable quotes, although I think there were times when we did allow ourselves to describe with a certain tongue in cheek quality the political evolution of the Central African state. The republic took some months to die or the empire some months to be born, during which Bokassa began the preparations for the coronation. He invited the Pope to crown him, as the Pope had been invited to crown Napoleon. He developed a new court protocol for the empire. He consulted a number of ambassadors on the subject, not including the American ambassador, as we weren't thought to have any particular wisdom about imperial practices. He consulted the Greek ambassador resident in Yaounde on the court procedures at the court of Constantine Palaeologus, someone whom he felt might be an appropriate model for his own empire.

Q: Constantine Palaeologus was the last of the Byzantine emperors.

QUAINTON: That's right, in the 15th century. The Greek republican government had some difficulty coming up with anything that was useful for the new empire. Court protocol was, however, developed and we were sent appropriate instructions in a diplomatic note on how to comport ourselves in the presence of His Imperial Majesty, including instructions as to how far we should stand from him, what kind of bow we should make, how we should answer questions from the imperial personage (the answer to any question, we were instructed, was always to be "Yes," but if that left something to be desired, you were permitted to say, "Yes, but."). It was announced, although never enforced, that all those who went into the presence of His Imperial Majesty would retreat backwards. Bokassa took all this as a great joke himself. I think he had great fun writing it all up and sending instructions around to bemused governments as to how they should behave in his presence.

There was a great question as to how the United Stated should be represented at the coronation. Bokassa invited the President, as he invited the Pope and the president of France, and there was a certain amount of exchanging of views among the diplomatic corps about the level at which we were going to be represented at this solemn occasion. At the end of the day, the French decided to send a minister, Mr. Gallet, who was then the Minister of Cooperation, the French aid minister, and his wife. Most other governments were represented by their resident ambassadors, although there were some ministerial delegations from other African states. If I am not mistaken, President Mobutu came up from Zaire to be present at the coronation.

Having decided on the level of delegation, there was then the problem of the ceremonial gift that one was expected to give on the occasion of his coronation. This posed some considerable problems for us. The office of protocol had only a limited supply of gifts for coronations and they were generally not suitable. I had started my tour in Central Africa with a gift for the then president. His birthday was the same day as George Washington's and as it was the beginning of the bicentennial year, 1976, when I arrived. I had brought with me a rather beautiful Limoges bowl inscribed with the arms of George Washington and the bicentennial years - 1776-1976. I

took it on my inaugural call, which took place only two days before Bokassa's birthday and I thought, tongue in cheek, it was appropriate to give him a token of my esteem. He looked at the bowl bemusedly and said how beautiful it was, looked at the dates, 1776-1976 and said, "Ah, what a long life George Washington had." But, he noted, they were both generals and founders of their countries.

With that as background, the office of protocol came up with two plates from the Franklin Mint. Sometime in the 1970s, the Franklin Mint had produced a series of very elegant silver plates engraved in gold with portraits of the presidents of the United States. Some of them were long since gone - John F. Kennedy, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, etc. - but Chester Arthur and Millard Fillmore were still in stock, and I received two plates to give to the emperor on the occasion of his coronation. He kept me waiting for some hours to present our official gift because I was way down in the protocol list of coronation delegations. Ministers got in first. But eventually he got to me. He expressed enormous pleasure, real or feigned, and said that the plates would have a prominent place in the imperial state museum when it was created. Alas, it was never created, and the plates have long since disappeared.

The coronation was indeed a splendid event. It took place at a sports palace built by the Yugoslav government some years before as part of their aid program. It was a rather handsome basketball stadium seating several thousand people. There was a great golden throne in the shape of an imperial eagle. Bokassa, himself, wore a Roman toga embroidered with a hundred thousand pearls. He came wearing a gold laurel wreath in his hair, and an imperial toga and staff. As in the case of Napoleon, he crowned himself in the presence of his family, visiting delegations and selected guests. He then drove in a coach pulled by the six white horses, which had been flown from Paris to draw the new gold coach from the sports palace to the cathedral.

The cathedral was a rather charming brick church built before the Second World War. Bokassa's first cousin was the archbishop of Bangui and in a solemn mass the coronation was graced by Cardinal Silvestrini, who had been sent to represent the Holy Father on this grand occasion. The cathedral had been decorated, I exaggerate not, from floor to ceiling with cut flowers flown in from France. This was a very lofty church and there must have been tens of thousands of flowers which covered the walls. Cardinal Silvestrini sat on his throne to the left facing the altar and Bokassa sat on his throne to the right. He, of course, wore an ermine cape of Napoleonic proportions decorated with "Bs" for Bokassa. It was all rather splendid. The irony of it all was that Bokassa was no longer a Catholic, but had become a Muslim some months before, during the republic, when he was visited by Muammar Qaddafi.

It is probably worth saying something about the visit of Libya's Muammar Qaddafi to the Central African Republic because it has a number of interesting aspects. Qaddafi was invited on an official visit. Perhaps he offered himself up as a sacrificial lamb, but I think he was anxious to come. This was a period in which Qaddafi was aggressively promoting Islam in subsaharan Africa. He came to Bangui with a very large amount of cash. It was said Bokassa was given a million dollars to become a Muslim and ministers $100,000 and civil servants $10,000. In this impoverished country, there was a considerable rush to convert to Islam. Jean-Bedel Bokassa became overnight Salahuddin Ahmed Bokassa. The man who is today the president of the Central African Republic, Ange Patasse, also became a Muslim but has long since given up.

Orange juice became the drink of the day for several weeks, notwithstanding the president's enthusiasm for Chivas Regal, but the prohibition on alcohol also passed when Qaddafi's visit receded into the past.

Qaddafi did a number of things during the official visit. There was a marvelous state dinner at which Bokassa organized a local dance troop of bare breasted maidens dancing erotic African dances. Qaddafi was not much amused, but Bokassa thought that it was an appropriate tribute for a visiting head of state, to give them some of the local culture. But it was not the austere Islamic kind of culture to which Qaddafi was used to on visits. He met with the diplomatic corps. I am one of the few American diplomats in recent times who have actually met Qaddafi. I talked to him over tea with five or six colleagues. He speaks some English and was rather gracious, not particularly fanatical in his personal address. The day after the state dinner, he spoke to the assembled members of MESAN, the principal and only party in the Central African Republic, at the same sports stadium in which Bokassa was later to be crowned emperor. He gave a several hours long exhortation about the virtues of Islam, asserting that Islam was the religion of the oppressed, the religion of the black man, while Christianity was the religion of the oppressor and the white man.

Finally, he brought with him a movie called "The Message" made by his government, filmed with the approval of religious authorities in Cairo. It was a film was on the life of the Prophet. It is quite a remarkable movie with some very considerable esthetic merit in which Anthony Quinn plays the part of the Prophet's uncle. The Prophet never appears, it being sacrilegious to show a picture of the Prophet. The Prophet is heard speaking at various points, quoting from the Koran. It is a desert western in many respects. There are camels galloping across the sand converting heathens to Islam. It is, in fact, very skillfully done. It was shown in a movie theater in the African quarter of Bangui. However, the movie with Anthony Quinn was all in English and there was no one in the government of the Central Africa Republic who spoke English. So the movie, after it was turned on, was immediately turned off while Bokassa ordered a translator to be found. A university student was eventually produced who had the daunting task of doing simultaneous translation for a Hollywood quality movie. The highlight of the movie was a moment in which Bilal, an African slave converted to Islam - indeed, he is often claimed to be the first of Muhammad's converts - is engaged in a battle in the desert outside of Medina and every time that Bilal cuts down an enemy of the faith, all of whom are, of course, desert Arabs, everybody in the audience rose up and cheered. The view in Central Africa, as in other parts of subsaharan Africa, is that the best Arab is a dead Arab. I remember being bewildered by this until I was reminded that slavery for Central Africa was Arab slavery, not European slavery. Arab slave traders raided from the Sudan southward and westward, and memories of the Arab people were not happy memories for the black population of Central Africa. Qaddafi was unaware of this history and was rather bemused throughout it all.

Q: Did Qaddafi have his famous corps of women bodyguards?

QUAINTON: I think there must have been bodyguards, but I was not aware of a heavy security presence around him. In any case, by the time of the coronation, Bokassa was still a Muslim and the Church had excommunicated him. So, it was all the more remarkable that Cardinal Silvestrini was there. The Roman Catholic priests of the empire, almost all of whom were European,

solemnly protested to the Vatican the extraordinary decision to send Silvestrini to the coronation. They regarded this as a sacrilege and refused to participate in the coronation ceremonies.

The other highlight of the coronation was the choir. There was a choir of children who had been trained for some months to sing Mozart's *Coronation Mass*, unfamiliar to most of the children of Central Africa, the irony being that the coronation concerned is the coronation of the Virgin, not of some lay figure of note. There was a spectacular party which ended with a state dinner. In front of every guest was a bottle of vintage Dom Perignon champagne. There were many courses elegantly served, fireworks followed and the empire was launched at the expense of the French taxpayer in a rather grand way.

Q: I take it you were the representative?

QUAINTON: I was the representative. The Central African desk officer came out to join the delegation. I neglected to mention that not only were we instructed on protocol, but also on the dress. Men were expected to be in full court attire, top hat, morning coat, and striped trousers, the only problem for me being that I had rented my morning coat in Paris which was designed for a cooler climate and was of a rather thick flannel. In the 100 degree temperature of Central Africa, it was oppressive. The ladies had all been instructed on what to wear by the empress, who invited the ambassadors' wives to a tea party to explain how they should be dressed. Long pastel dresses were favored by the empress along with broad, rimmed hats. So, all of the wives came appropriately attired. Unfortunately, when the French minister's wife came with her husband at the end of the ceremony to present the French official gift, the court protocol officer decided that her dress was not sufficiently long and she was sent away. Although the French were paying for the event, the French minister was told that he could not come until his wife was correctly attired for the imperial presence. The French were furious, but Madame Gallet changed. I was kept waiting to present the U.S. gift while the French observed court protocol.

Q: I would think that on something like this in the diplomatic corps it must have been tested to the utmost as far as trying to keep from making comments about what was going on. You are standing there in a herd watching this and seeing something of this nature I would think there would be an awful lot of asides and it would be very difficult to keep a straight face.

QUAINTON: That was, of course, true. There was a great deal of that. In a quite extraordinary way it was all solemn and beautiful. If you spend enough money on arrangements you will have something that is quite magnificent in its way. We clearly mocked what was happening and deplored the waste of resources. The amount spent on the coronation was roughly equal to one year's budget for the entire country.

Q: Who was the scene director of this?

QUAINTON: There were Frenchmen at every level who designed the show. Not only were there clothes to be designed, there were the imperial china, the imperial glassware, jewelry for the emperor and empress, all produced and designed in Paris. There is a most beautiful set of Limoges china with the imperial seal on it, of which I acquired a piece after the fall of the empire. It was all done by French artisans and businesses. I would guess the French taxpayers

got a fair amount of money back from this event. Without a doubt, it was one of the most bizarre events in modern African history.

Q: Did Bokassa change at all? Did this change anything particularly?

QUAINTON: If anything, he was somewhat more aloof, but this was a man who was enormously gregarious. He loved people, loved to dance, loved to drink. While things tightened up in terms of access to him, he was still accessible. But, he was not seen about as much with a multiplicity of women and friends as he had been in the days of the republic.

There is an interesting, again horrifying story, about his two principal wives, one who became the empress and who was known originally as La Marêchal. He also had a Romanian wife who was called La Presidente. The African wife was absolutely stunning, a beautiful woman in her mid-20s who had six children by the age of 24. She really was a person of considerable charm. The Romanian was a glamorous blonde who had come to the Central African Republic on an officially sponsored Romanian government dance tour of Africa. The Romanian ambassador arranged for this group to give a private performance for the president. Bokassa was entranced, as he always was with a pretty new face. He kept the troupe over a long weekend and apparently worked his way through it three a night and then kept the most beautiful of the dancers to be his wife, to the horror of the Romanian government and ambassador. She became the number two wife of the president of the republic. She faded into obscurity with the proclamation of the empire.

The other great story related to Bokassa's family was that during his time in Vietnam when he was an officer in the French army, he fathered a child whose name was Martine. He went back to Vietnam later on to find his daughter. A girl came forward who claimed to be Martine, who was obviously of mixed African and Asian blood, and he immediately adopted her. Then another girl with a better claim came along and he adopted her as well. So, there were two Martines in Bangui on the social circuit, both of whom were claiming to be the president's daughter. He set them up in private houses. There was a kind of romantic streak to Bokassa. He loved the thought of himself coming to the rescue of a lady in distress.

Q: You are describing all this, but the thing that has come through to, say me, just by listening to reports and never having served in Africa was about the cannibalism. Where did this sort of thing get started?

QUAINTON: The cannibalism story surfaced after Bokassa was overthrown, the year after I left. I left in the summer of 1978 and Bokassa was overthrown the following year, 1979, after the student disturbances I mentioned earlier. It was said that in the freezer at Berengo, which was the palace Bokassa had some 25-30 miles outside of town on the edge of the forest, the French discovered body parts which were designed for the imperial table. I regard that as highly speculative. In my time, there was certainly no suggestion of cannibalism in a country which was rife with rumors and where one might well have heard such things. There is no doubt that Bokassa was a person capable of great brutality and one who had no scruples about violence when it suited him. Cannibalism, however, seems to me to be most unlikely.

Q: After he became emperor, were there any other developments concerning our relations or your life there before you left in 1978?

QUAINTON: There was a moment when Bokassa was actually helpful to the United States government. It was in 1977, when Idi Amin held hostage a group of American missionaries.

Q: Idi Amin being the dictator of Uganda.

QUAINTON: Uganda was a neighboring state on the east, although there was virtually no contact between Bokassa and anyone in Anglophone Africa. When Amin prevented these missionaries from leaving the country, we interpreted this as a hostage threat. Washington cast around for ways to bring pressure on Amin. It occurred to them, I think naively, that one crazy brutal president could influence another. So, I was asked to go see Bokassa and ask if he would intervene with Amin to let these American citizens go. I went down to Berengo and saw the president with my instructions in hand. He called in his prime minister, who took notes. I made my demarche and Bokassa listened. Then, to my rather pleasant surprise, he said he would do what his great friend, the United States, wanted, and then he read back to me almost verbatim the talking points I had given him. He then instructed the prime minister to draft the cable to his brother president Idi Amin immediately conveying his personal desire and the desire of the American government, to have the missionaries released. They were released. Whether this was as a result of Bokassa's intervention, one will never know.

Q: What were Bokassa's external relationships? Looking around, he has Zaire, Congo, Cameroon, Chad, and the Sudan. Did he have much of a relationship with these other countries?

QUAINTON: Yes. He had an exceptionally close relationship with Zaire. He and Mobutu came from closely related tribes. They regarded each other as brothers and he would refer to Mobutu as "mon frère cadet," my younger brother, and Mobutu referred to him as "mon frère ainé," my older brother. Bokassa was also very close to Houphouet-Boigny in the Ivory Coast and called him his father. He was fairly close to Bongo in the Gabon. He was not very close to the Cameroonians or the Chadians and I am not sure why. The more Frenchified the ruler, the more likely it was that Bokassa would feel a bond. Bokassa was enormously proud of his French and what he had done for France. He spoke quite elegant French and found an affinity with African leaders of the old school. Indeed, when he was thrown out by the French, he was deposited in the Ivory Coast, where Houphouet-Boigny allowed him to live for several years before Bokassa climbed on a plane and flew to France to live in his chateau when he completely ran out of money. To everyone's surprise, he returned back to the Central African Republic with his wife. He was immediately clapped into jail.

Q: Is he still there?

QUAINTON: He died last year after living for many years under house arrest. In the end, he was virtually a free man, much diminished in health and spirit. When he came back, he thought he was going to be greeted by an enthusiastic nation waiting for his return after many years of exile. Perhaps the Napoleonic image still lingered in his mind.

Q: Returning from Elbe.

QUAINTON: Yes.

Q: His overthrow did not come while you were there?

QUAINTON: No.

Q: Well, then in 1978, where did you go?

R. GRANT SMITH
Deputy Chief of Mission
Bangui (1976-1978)

Ambassador R. Grant Smith was born in New York in 1938. After receiving his bachelor's degree from Princeton University in 1960 he received his master's degree from Columbia University in 1962. He also served six months in the United States Marine Corps in 1963 before joining the Foreign Service. His career has included positions in Karachi, Kathmandu, Belize, New Delhi, Bangui, and an ambassadorship to Tajikistan. Ambassador Smith was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in March 1999.

SMITH: I wasn't there as long as I originally expected because my next assignment required some French language training and I came down to Washington for French language training, so I was only there about nine months.

Q: *'76 - French language - to where?*

SMITH: To Bangui, as deputy chief of mission. I was interested in -

Q: *Bangui being the capital of -*

SMITH: The Central African Republic.

Q: *And you were there from when to when?*

SMITH: '76 to '78.

Q: *Was our friend Bokassa there?*

SMITH: I was going to say, Bokassa was president when I arrived and emperor when I left.

Q: *Ah, then you were there with Tony Quainton.*

SMITH: Yes, I was his DCM.

Q: *I had a nice long interview with Tony. I'd like to get your... What was your impression of the Central African Republic when you arrived?*

SMITH: Well, this was our first time in a former French colony, and our experience had been very much in former British colonies up until then, having served in, well, three plus Nepal, which of course had its main relationship with the UK. So it was quite a... The nature of former French colonialism is very different from the nature of former British colonialism, and it took a lot of adjusting. I mean the French cultural imperialism and even more so in some ways than India, the Francophone African view of the United States comes by way of Paris, came by way of Paris, anyway. To back up a bit, later, when I was traveling some years later, I had an opportunity to be at a luncheon with Houphouët-Boigny.

Q: *The president of the Ivory Coast.*

SMITH: The Ivory Coast. And the person I was with didn't speak French - I was a bag-carrier - so I had an opportunity to have some conversation in French separately. And I asked Houphouët about the French and the British, as colonial masters, and he said, "Well, you know, it's as if there are two masters and each of them has a dog, and one is very rich, but he makes the dog sleep outside, but the other is poor and the dog sleeps in the bedroom." It was very clear which he... Houphouët, who had been a senator in France before independence, where he thought... and in Bangui we could see elements of very much assimilated Central Africans there, or Africans. The economic relationship was particularly striking, that the French had maintained an economic relationship in a way that the UK had not, after it gave up its colonies, and had maintained a control through the economic relationship. The Central African franc, being issued for all of he Central African countries, was pegged to the French franc, 50 to 1, and the Central African Republic could not print money. The French had a veto in the bank on printing the money. So when it came time to pay the troops, if the government didn't have the money, it couldn't just print it, it had to get a loan. To get a loan, really, it had to go to France. So the French could decide, well, do we want a coup or not? Pay the troops or not? It gave them tremendous influence.

Q: *When you went out there, what did you see as American interests in the Central African Republic?*

SMITH: Fairly small - some trade interests. There, in fact, was an American company trading in diamonds there. Some human rights interests, some humanitarian interests. I don't recall any deep security interests, although of course that was a period of U.S.-Soviet competition, and we were trying to keep those votes and those countries on our side to the extent possible.

Q: *You mentioned human rights - because you were there by '77, when the Carter Administration came in. What sort of issues were human rights issues there?*

SMITH: Well, Bokassa himself became a human rights issue and became a human rights issue

while I was there but even more so after I left, in the sense that he was extremely arbitrary, ran a very arbitrary system, and while I was there threw one American and one British journalist in jail, beat the British journalist before he threw him in jail, which certainly got everybody's attention - the fact that the British journalist was on his way to have dinner with me when he got thrown in jail. And later there was a case of a Peace Corps volunteer who I don’t think he got beaten but got thrown in jail and got thrown out of the country, for just stopping in front of one of the emperor's houses and asking questions. It was a very arbitrary government, and it was only later that the mistreatment of the schoolchildren occurred, which became *the* major human rights issue and ultimately resulted in the French deposing Bokassa.

Q: *Well, how did Tony Quainton use you as a DCM?*

SMITH: We were very small. We had an ambassador, a DCM, a junior officer, a couple of others - an administrative officer. We had some AID projects, so I was very involved in self-help projects, AID projects in building a new chancery, which we succeeded in doing while I was there, political reporting, a little bit of everything.

Q: *What was your impression of Bokassa while you were there?*

SMITH: I think that we were always suspicious of him, but only as things went on did we come to know how arbitrary and irrational he was. And as we were trying to do some AID projects there, it became clear that the more we learned about Bokassa the more we realized that this was going to be difficult. His administration, Central Africans in general, were very suspicious of foreigners. We thought at first that this was a racial thing, but some of the African diplomats there also had trouble. It may have been particularly Central Africa - I mean, this was a country which had been very badly treated by the slave raiders. Slave trading in that country or raiding in that country continued into the 20th century, slave raiders coming down from the north.

Q: *Sudan?*

SMITH: There was a slave-raiding area in the northern part of the country which existed until 1911, 1914, and people could still remember. So that may have been an element. Bokassa's background in the French military may have been a background. But as it went on, we began, I think, to get a better appreciation of him. Tony Quainton has probably told you some of the stories about Bokassa.

Q: *I'd like to hear them again, because-*

SMITH: He was certainly cunning, and he went through this whole thing with Qadhafi.

Q: *Could you talk about that?*

SMITH: Qadhafi visited - I don't remember which year it was - well, it must have been in '76, before he became emperor, certainly before the coronation - '76 or early '77. The huge display for him, some of it must have been particularly strange for a Muslim who considered himself a serous Muslim. All of the African women out there dancing and singing "*As-salaam 'aleikum,*"

shaking-

Q: *Essentially topless, weren't they, at that time?*

SMITH: Well, no, they weren't topless, but they were shaking their bodies. He was there for a couple of days. I didn't go to the big dinner for him. Tony Quainton did. But the result of the visit was that Bokassa converted to Islam, and one or more of his ministers also. It was widely believed that there was a considerable under-the-table payment, of a million dollars or something, just for this conversion, plus a promise of various other things, including weapons. Of course, a few months later, he declared the empire, declared himself Bokassa *Klimin*, and he later told Tony Quainton (I was with him.) that the whole thing was planned - what did he say - "*Il est malin, mais je suis plus malin que lui*. [He is cunning, but I am more cunning than he is.]"

Q: *Which means what?*

SMITH: *Malin*.

Q: Malin?

SMITH: "Cunning." So he presented this, anyway, as something that he had planned, the whole thing of having Qadhafi visit, getting these payoffs, getting some arms, and then converting, and then delaying the empire, declaring himself Bokassa *Premier*, having a coronation mass.

Q: *Yes, the Pope sent a representative.*

SMITH: That’s right. We did not send a special representative from Washington. It was interesting that the Chinese, the Americans, and the Russians, all used their local ambassadors, did not send special representatives.

Q: *Well, the French went pretty far, didn't they, on this one?*

SMITH: They did. The French obviously knew a lot more about Bokassa than we did. As I said, in the course of the two years I was there, we gradually got to know and understand him more, and I think the incident of the two journalists, the incident of the Peace Corps volunteer, and then some things we heard from the French after those - we really realized how arbitrary and irrational he was, and therefore we weren't surprised at what happened later, the killing of the schoolchildren, or Bokassa beat the schoolchildren to death, although that was farther than he had gone, that we knew about anyway. But he had beaten people. He did drink prodigious amounts of whiskey, and there was one incident with a Russian at the Soviet embassy where a busload of Soviet embassy staff member were going by his - he didn't call it his palace - his farm, about an hour south of the capital, and they were stopped at the checkpoint and they were taken in and harangued. I don’t think they were beaten, but treated very badly, detained and harangued and everything. But in the course of the hours that they were there, he drank a huge amount of scotch, and by the end of it he was maudlin, and they were the greatest friends.

Q: *Was there cunning behind this irrational behavior, or was he cunning but also irrational?*

SMITH: I think he was cunning but also irrational. He did have an addiction to liquor. He had no concept of dividing state funds and personal funds. And after the coronation we discovered that the cotton stabilization fund was empty, or almost empty. It had so much before and this much afterward. He was useful in some ways, in the sense that he was a friend of Mobutu. He supported Zaire in the problems it had in Shaba in '77-78. They were very much with the French in areas that were of concern to us; that was helpful. But clearly there was a large element of bad judgment on his part. He would go off to France for long periods, spend huge amounts of money, give away diamonds.

Q: *Women, were there problems as well?*

SMITH: There were always problems with women. I forget how many wives and children he had, but there were always stories of others.

Q: *Yes. What about the Congo-Brazzaville? That was at that time still a Marxist régime which was very much in our bad books. Was there any particular connection with the Central African. It abuts onto it?*

SMITH: I don't remember any particular connection. The only connection I remember is that the plane, the jet Air France-Air Afrique route went to Brazzaville and then to Bangui, so we occasionally saw people just because of that. Much of our contact was with Cameroon, which is adjoining. The AID mission which supported Bangui was located in Cameroon and for us was a big city.

Q: *Any relatively high-level visits from the Department of State or elsewhere while you were there?*

SMITH: We got very little visit, very little interest. I don't remember a congressional visit. There may have been one. I certainly don't remember one. Very little interest in Washington.

Q: *Well, then, in '78, whither?*

SMITH: In 1978, I returned to Washington to work on the Morocco Desk.

ALBERT E. FAIRCHILD
Deputy Chief of Mission
Bangui (1978-1981)

Mr. Fairchild was born in Pennsylvania and raised in Pennsylvania and North Carolina. He was educated at the University of North Carolina, the University of Chicago and Georgetown University. Joining the Foreign Service in 1963 he served abroad in Dakar, Kabul, Teheran, Niamey, Teheran and Bangui. In his assignments at the State Department in Washington, DC Mr. Fairchild dealt

primarily with Management and African affairs. Mr. Fairchild was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2012.

Q: Well then you say you were going after a DCM job in Africa. What happened when you left?

FAIRCHILD: You mean how I came to get that job?

Q: Yes, how did that come about?

FAIRCHILD: Well, when I knew I would need a new job I got in contact with a former boss of mine from the educational and cultural affairs bureau, Bill Edmondson, who was then a Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Africa Bureau. I explained to him I was going to fetch up in a month or two without a job, and was wondering if there was something good in Africa. He asked if I'd be interested in a small country DCM-ship, and I said I certainly was. So he said that he would have the executive director of the bureau call me within a day or two, which he did. His name was Dick Salazar, and he called me up and told me that I had been suggested as DCM for three embassies: Togo, Benin, and the Central African Republic. Although at that time it was known as the Central African Empire for reasons that I will explain later. So he then called back another day saying that my file had gone out, and that a man named Goodwin Cooke would like me to be his DCM in Bangui in a month or two. "How does that sound to you?", asked Salazar. I said "Sounds good, but I would like about 24 hours to mull things over and check it out." He then said, "What are you going to check?" I replied by saying "I am going to check with people who know what the Central African Empire is all about, and try to contact people who know Goodwin Cooke." I didn't want to buy a pig in a poke, to use a fine old Southern expression. Everything seemed to work out and I accepted the Bangui DCM-ship. We left on direct transfer in late June, and had about a week or ten day vacation in Rome. I had wanted to show Parvin and the kids Rome, St. Peter's, the Coliseum, and all that. We also used the occasion to do some shopping because Bangui in the Central African Empire was not the kind of place where you had lots of stores where you could get new clothes.

Q: Goody Cooke, I supervised him in Belgrade for awhile.

FAIRCHILD: Is that when Larry Eagleburger was there.

Q: Larry and I did Serbia together. And we came out together.

FAIRCHILD: Goody Cooke was a wonderful boss, and I think what made him wonderful was he had just been DCM for an ambassador who was not very good, or at least didn't treat Goody very well.

Q: Where was that?

FAIRCHILD: That was in Abidjan in the Ivory Coast. The Ambassador's name was Robert Solwin Smith, and in fact I knew him because he had been a deputy assistant secretary in the Africa Bureau before. I thought Smith was very sharp at that time, and he handled all resource issues – especially aid and commercial issues. But apparently he wasn't very kind to his DCM.

So Goody had this in mind, and he wanted to make sure he treated his DCM the right way and used him well. Also I had not taken the DCM course as it was a direct transfer. Goody was very thoughtful, and I remember very early on we had a chat that some people today might call the "psychological contract" even though nothing is written on paper. I remember Goody saying something like this: " I want you to feel free to contact anybody in this government, and be on good relations with them and entertain them, but two people are mine exclusively. You have to know them of course, because you have to deal with them when I'm out of town, but as long as I am around I am their principal contact, and they are the president of the country and the French ambassador." Being a former French colony the French ambassador was not only the most important ambassador in town but also was the dean of the diplomatic corps. It was very sensible of Goody to set up these ground rules early on. Also later on for one reason or another we had a conversation about the workload in the embassy. We only had 10 people in the embassy, including Goody and me, and there was an American director of the Peace Corps in addition to the Embassy staff. But otherwise there were just ten of us. At one point Goody said something like "Are we both fully employed?" I said, "I don't think so. I think there is enough work here for about 1.5 top bosses in the Embassy." He said, "That is my impression too, and my solution to that problem is to start letting you do a little bit more and I will work on my tennis game, or something else."

Q: All right, well let's talk about the Central African Empire. What was the political context you were in?

FAIRCHILD: We arrived not too many days before the Fourth of July reception. In fact I think that was one of the requirements laid out in my assignment there. One of the reasons for that was the fact that our then ambassador, Tony Quainton, had already left about three weeks before. Grant Smith was the chargé at the time, and I was replacing him as DCM. Grant was going to leave a week or two after that, so they wanted me to get in the saddle and get introduced to *le tout Bangui* at the Fourth of July Reception. We arrived at about 10:00 at night, and were taken straight to the empty ambassadorial residence. We were housed there since there was no ambassador and Grant and his wife were still in the DCM residence. The ambassador's residence was very nice, very comfortable, and we certainly enjoyed that. The country was a typical infrastructure-poor African country, totally landlocked as its name implies, the Central African Empire. It was under the less than enlightened rule of Jean Bedel Bokassa, who had started life as a soldier in the French Army. Bokassa had a fairly distinguished career, certainly for someone from the colonial troop background. He served with some distinction in Vietnam, and eventually became chief of staff of the armed forces of the Central African Republic, from which position he launched a coup at the end of 1966 against the then president of the country, David Dacko. But at some point in the 1970's, he got it into his head that if Europe could have emperors then why couldn't African countries have emperors. I guess he had the local example of the Ethiopian emperors. He claimed to see some parallels between his career and life with that of Napoleon. So he determined to have himself crowned as emperor, and it occurred in December 1977. The Embassy calculated that he spent about $30 million on his coronation, which at the time was about one third of the annual budget of the whole Central African government.

There is an interesting story about the coronation that I'd like to tell you. One of the people I got very friendly with there was the Papal Nuncio, Bishop Oriano Quilici. We were chatting once

about Bokassa, and I asked the Nuncio what role if any he had with the coronation. He said, "Bokassa called me in several months before the coronation. He told me about all these things in common he had with Napoleon, and said that it would be really much appreciated if the Holy Father could come from Rome and put a crown upon his head there in Bangui. He also promised not to snatch it away and put it on his own head as Napoleon did." Quilici replied to Bokassa's request by saying that he would forward the request to Rome, but was not sure the Holy Father would be able to officiate at the coronation. So, he eventually went back with a formal reply, which of course he drafted and which was approved by the Vatican, that stated, "The Holy Father no longer does this sort of thing, but we will designate our good friend and confidante the Papal Nuncio Oriano Quilici to be the representative of the Holy See at your coronation." With the stipulation, however, that Quilici take no part in the ceremony, although the Nuncio was authorized to have a Te Deum at the cathedral following the coronation. The Nuncio was somewhat nervous when he took this answer to Bokassa because he was known to have a pretty nasty temper. But in the event he took it quite placidly, and said "Oh well, that is all right, how about a Cardinal then?" To which Quilici very cleverly said, "Well I am sorry, but since the Holy Father has already designated me, it just wouldn't do to go back and try to change that."

Q: Well the French, or rather Mitterrand, put quite a bit of money into this didn't they?

FAIRCHILD: Mitterrand came later. He was elected in 1981. When we were there Valery Giscard d'Estaing was President of France. I think he came for a private visit once while we were there, a hunting trip as I recall, but it wasn't one….

Q: I thought the French helped in the coronation.

FAIRCHILD: Oh, they did. Most foreign governments except the United States and maybe the USSR, well maybe the Soviet Union did something after all. I know the French provided or helped provide some of the Limoges dinnerware for the imperial household. I think they also provided a dozen or more white horses to pull the royal carriage. Most of the poor horses died because they couldn't adapt to the climate, the equatorial climate of the CAE. The Germans donated about 30 BMW motorcycles for the imperial bodyguard. But I believe only the French supplied cash support for the coronation, and the French were of course the biggest aid donor there. I don't know how much they spent every year but it was an awful lot – many millions. They had aid projects as well as direct budgetary support for the government. At one point I discussed this issue with the subsequent French ambassador. When I first showed up there the French Ambassador was Robert Piquet. I didn't really talk these issues with him, but with his successor, Jacques Humann, a delightful and straightforward Alsatian, I did discuss them. Ambassador Humann urged us to start the AID program again after Bokassa was overthrown in a coup designed by the French, which is something I will discuss a bit later. I said that we would try to do that but it would be modest. He said, "Well you give about $240 million to Sudan, now why don't you give at least half of that here?" My reply was something of a non-answer, but went like this: "Mr. Ambassador, why don't we agree that the United States will continue supporting Sudan the way we do now, and you don't have to do anything there. You will carry the larger burden here, however, and we will do something very much more modest." He said, "I think I get your drift." So that is how that was left. The CAR had been a French colony that was formerly called the Territory of Ubangui-Shari, which refers to two rivers, the Ubangi in the

south and the Shari in the north, demarcating the northern and southern borders of the colony.

Q: Was Bokassa, later there was a rumor that he had the bodies of little children in his deep freeze and all that. A whole series of you might say horror stories grew up around this man. Had this started at that time or not?

FAIRCHILD: There were occasionally people who gave him trouble who disappeared, or ended up in jail for a long time and subsequently died there. But it wasn't anything on a massive scale. While we were in Bangui there were protests against Bokassa, mainly by university or high school students. A couple hundred students were rounded up in 1979, and were stuffed into some pretty tight cells in a prison not too far from the house that we lived in. Some of them suffocated and died there, so that became a major human rights issue. Human rights were consistently disregarded by the Bokassa regime. This cannibalistic thing you asked about was real, but it was what I would call ritual cannibalism as opposed to a regular source of protein. I am told that this was a practice of the M'Baka tribe from which Bokassa came, and was part of their old traditions. I just don't know the extent of that practice, however. I do know after the coup against Bokassa the French alleged that they found some grisly things in the royal meat locker. That caused some speculation on how widespread cannibalism was, but I also know that there was a French interest in discrediting the Bokassa regime – so maybe there was no sound basis for this story. I remember when I heard about the imperial meat locker discoveries, and told Washington about it – you remember I was chargé for my whole third and last year there – I asked my wife if she remembered when we were invited to the palace for a dinner if we were ever served any *pate maison*. Fortunately we recalled it was either fish or chicken when we were entertained. We were quite satisfied that we never partook of Bokassa's enemies – if in fact those cannibalism stories were true.

Q: I am reading a book called Flyboys which is about American naval pilots who were captured by the Japanese during WWII. On one island Chichi-jima the general there was great for having some of the pilots executed and the doctor taking out their liver and it would be served sort of as a sushi.

FAIRCHILD: That is rather grisly.

Q: Yes. So it is not unknown in the "civilized" world. When you got there, what were Goody and the others in our embassy saying about Bokassa?

FAIRCHILD: I think the general attitude was that he had a pretty firm grip on power and there wasn't much that could be done about that. It probably wasn't in the perceived interest of the United States to get involved in any sort of regime change there. At least that was the initial reaction. As things got worse on the human rights front we became much more active, even to the point of cutting off all our little USAID projects. We were spending $750,000 to $800,000 a year, mostly on health projects or health related projects. We had no USAID presence there and we were served by the USAID regional office in Cameroon next door. So our interest and activities were satisfying "basic human needs," which was the term used for such assistance programs at that time. While we were not complicit in the coup that ousted Bokassa in September 1979, we certainly welcomed it and recognized the new government immediately.

The new government was headed by the same David Dacko whom Bokassa had overthrown back in 1966. The coup that ousted Bokassa was primarily "made in France." The French I think finally decided that he was an embarrassment, and they had the support of many leading Central Africans to undertake the coup. Dacko went on the radio in the early hours of the day of the coup and said, "I am the only person who has ever been elected to head this country, and I am back." I think that was a fairly compelling argument.

Q: Well, now can you talk about the relations that I think are important, namely those with the French. The American relations, the embassy. How did this…

FAIRCHILD: I think relations between the French and us were very close indeed. We were close, both in a policy sense as well as in our social life. My wife and I, as were the Cookes, were very close with the people in the French embassy – the ambassador, the DCM, the cultural attaché, the head of their aid program, their Consul General, and others. I think we fully recognized they were very much in the driver's seat on both the policy and assistance side, and that we could best accomplish our limited U.S. objectives in the country by supplementing what they did. The connections with these former French colonies and France are very tight, or at least were so in the 1970s and 1980s. For example, they had their own big aid programs through the *Ministere de la Cooperation* that were not always well connected to the policy side of the French foreign ministry, and sometimes their aid people tended to act almost independently. They also had the *Payerie de France* that was an extension of the French Ministry of Finance. They did things like pay pensions to Central Africans who had formerly been in the French military. In fact Bokassa was very proud of his previous service and would go, I was told, in person every month to the *Payerie de France* to get his pension check. And of course the Church was very active in Central Africa.

Q: You mean the Catholic Church.

FAIRCHILD: The Catholic Church. We became very good friends with the Archbishop of Bangui, Joachim N'Dayen. He was actually a cousin of Bokassa, and one of the few people – perhaps the only person – who could address him critically in public. Bokassa would occasionally attend Mass at the cathedral on major feats or special events, and would sit in the throne-like chair that was there for the chief of state. On such occasions the archbishop would deliver a sermon that was usually on how good rulers behave and how bad rulers behave. Clearly he was lecturing his cousin on how to behave as chief of state. I was personally present for at least two such homilies, not that they had much of an impact on Bokassa's behavior. And there was an active group of European religious people: a number of French priests, Dutch priests, and Italian nuns. I also became fairly friendly with the chief administrative officer of the archdiocese, Father Lamerand, who was someone who had what the Church calls a "late vocation." He had actually been married before, and after his wife died he decided to become a priest. As I said he was basically the administrative officer for the archdiocese. In our program of Self-Help projects we tried to involve the religious community if possible on at least one project per year. But we also liked to be even-handed in this, so one year we would do it with the Catholic Church and the following year we would do it with one of the Protestant missionary groups.

Q: Did the French have troops there?

FAIRCHILD: They certainly did. Near a town called Bouar, there was a French military base, at a distance of about a hundred kilometers from Bangui. There were I think about 400 to 500 troops there at the time, and it was one of the major French "*points d'appui*" - the support bases that they had in Africa. They had something similar but probably larger in Gabon and in Senegal. One never saw these French troops in Bangui, however. Their role was not to be active in Central African affairs, but to be ready to respond to crises or intervene elsewhere in Africa when needed.

Q: Was Qadhafi messing around there?

FAIRCHILD: Absolutely. He was quite active. His ambassador, for example, and their staff paid the highest salaries to their employees, with the net result that they were able to wean the better people away from other diplomatic employers. Qadhafi also promised large amounts of aid, only a little bit of which got delivered to the CAR. He wanted something in return. There was one period prior to our arrival where he had promised a couple of million dollars to Bokassa on the proviso that Bokassa and the leading members of Central African government convert to Islam. Many, including Bokassa, had dutifully done that. But I don't think Qadhafi ever came across with the cash, so most people went back to the Church or to whatever they were before.

The former prime minister, a man named Ange Patasse, converted at that time and took the name Harun Al-Rashid Patasse. Patasse was out of power, and in fact in the political doghouse, when Dacko took power following the coup. He called on me once in the Embassy, after I refused to meet with him elsewhere and secretively, and he seemed almost certifiable. He used only the first person plural, as if he were king, and had a delusional quality to most of his political plans. Patasse became chief of state several years later, and when faced with military mutinies called upon help from a Congolese warlord. Those were the times when a number of unspeakable atrocities were carried out by Congolese mercenaries against Central African civilians.

Q: I have interviewed Tony Quainton who talks about this sort of surreal thing when Qadhafi came to Bangui, including Bokassa putting on native dances for him with bare breasted women, and of course all these supposed Muslims who came with Qadhafi were sort of intrigued, you might say.

FAIRCHILD: Bokassa frequently hosted events at his palace, which was called the Palace of the Renaissance, *Palais de la Renaissance*. Following dinner there was this terribly long session of what they called "*animation*," meaning the dances to which you referred. Usually the ladies auxiliary of the sole political party did the dancing, or rhythmic chanting of praises for Bokassa with something like line dancing. The idea was to follow the *animation* with ballroom dancing by the guests. Fortunately by the time we got there Bokassa was getting old, and I guess he was getting feeble from drinking too much so he would call the festivities to a close at midnight. But I think in Tony Quainton's time he would have a dance band come on and there would be dancing almost until dawn. They would also lock the doors so the diplomatic corps, which I sometimes called the Décor Diplomatique because we were trotted out for every kind of event or visitor who came through, were stuck in that palace until the dancing ended and Bokassa was ready to retire.

Q: Did we as you say towards the end of his time there we became more active in human rights. How did this manifest itself.

FAIRCHILD: Well, we had made certain protests against the behavior we learned of, but primarily it was by simply cutting off our assistance programs. Before that cutoff was announced, I must have been chargé at the time because I was called into the foreign ministry about a broadcast on the Voice of America which I had not heard, that talked about the human rights abuses in the country. I remember the three people who talked to me were the foreign minister, the Central African ambassador to the United States who happened to be in Bangui at the time, and the political director of the foreign ministry. They basically said that the U.S. should not make broadcasts like this since it amounts to interference in the internal affairs of another country. I said, "I have not heard the broadcast, but I will be sure to find out what was said." I did note that I couldn't really comment until I knew precisely what was said, but that as far as American history goes we have made a practice of paying attention to these issues. I noted that there were even American ministers to the Czarist government in Russia who made formal complaints about the treatment of the Czar's Jewish citizens by his officials back before the Bolshevik Revolution. This is the way Americans are, I explained, and this is what American policy is, and thus no one should expect the United States <u>not</u> to make comments on human rights abuses wherever they occur. They were all quiet after that, and I am sure they knew exactly what my response would be. They were just following orders, and needed to be able to say they had called in the American chargé d'affaires and chewed him out.

Q: How did you address Bokassa, as your imperial highness or what?

FAIRCHILD: The proper form of address was *votre majeste imperial*. Or you would refer to him in the third person as *sa majeste imperial*. Before Goody Cooke arrived I was chargé for a couple of months, and at one point was talking to the chief of protocol to find out how to do the presentation of letters ceremony – meaning the letters of accreditation that Goody would have to present to the emperor. During this meeting the chief of protocol was telling me about how to entertain members of the government, and the imperial court properly. There was sort of a mirror image in the imperial court for government functions, so there was a counselor in the imperial court for foreign affairs for example. It was not the Minister of Foreign Affairs, but someone who was supposedly well versed in foreign affairs and who might have been a minister at some point in the past. The guidance from the chief of protocol was that these people shouldn't be served ordinary whisky, for example White Horse scotch. He actually told me that we should serve Chivas Regal or another premium scotch. You shouldn't serve an ordinary sparkling wine, a *cremant* for example. You should serve a real champagne – Veuve Clicquot if possible. But his guidance soon became even more incredible. He also said if you are at a public function and the name of His Imperial Majesty Bokassa I Emperor of All Central Africa is mentioned, you should incline your head slightly. With my tongue firmly wedged in my cheek, I enquired, "Should it be slightly less, to the same degree, or more that good Catholics are supposed to incline their head at the mention of the name Jesus when they are attending Mass?" He gave me a look that was right out of what I can only call the heart of darkness, and said, "Since you are diplomatic personnel I guess you are exempt form this kind of thing." Total theater of the absurd, or as Tony said surreal protocol.

Q: Did you have visitors there? I would think there would be a problem with most European and American visitors to make sure they didn't giggle.

FAIRCHILD: We had no visitors of note there, certainly not U.S. government officials. Not even from the Department of State – at least while I was there. I was there for three years, as DCM for two and then Chargé for the last year. I was Chargé for my final year by the way because we had trouble getting the ambassador who had been nominated out there. This was because there was a list of seven or eight ambassadorial nominations, and Arthur Woodruff who was to be Goody's successor was on that list. The whole list was blocked in the Senate by Jesse Helms because he wanted to grill Henry Precht, who was on the list for Mauritania, about who lost Iran. Henry had been the head of the Iran desk at State while the Iranian revolution occurred, and since he had not held deputy assistant secretary rank and thus was not at a "policy level" the Department opposed his testifying as Helms wanted. So we went for a whole year without an ambassador, although I enjoyed the experience of being chargé; it was an eye opener about the responsibilities one has when in charge of an embassy and what limits one needs to impose on oneself. But it was good to be in charge, as Mel Books said in that funny movie History of the World Part I "it's good to be the king."

I have just one more example of sort of the surreal things that went on there. The telephone system didn't work at all because the land lines had all been rotted out and they hadn't been replaced. People brought notes around, or used radio communication. We in the embassy for example had little radio sets that we would use in our homes to connect us. It worked fairly well, but of course you had to keep their batteries charged. One afternoon when I was chargé I got a note form protocol convoking me to appear at 4:00 that afternoon for the ceremony of the "baptism of the street." They were naming the street in front of the cathedral after the Empress Catherine, the primary (but not the only) wife of the emperor. This was be followed by a Te Deum in the cathedral. So I got dressed up and went to this thing, and got there a little bit early. I guess because of the alphabetical order they had me sitting next to the North Korean ambassador. Both Koreas were represented in Bangui at this time, but I didn't want to sit next to the North Korean because he didn't speak to anyone except the Chinese and would occasionally spit on the floor. So I just traded his name card for the much more friendly Ivorian ambassador, the ambassador of the Ivory Coast. The Ivorian ambassador, Jean-Marie Agnini Bile-Malan, was also a good friend and fellow member of the Lions Club. So, this ceremony occurred, and after it ended and we were dutifully trekking along the road to the cathedral when we were given invitations to a black tie dinner that night at the palace. This abrupt command-performance invitation also had implications for our social schedule in that we were to host a dinner at our home that night for about a dozen people, including a couple of ambassadors and their spouses. I figured even if I left right after the Te Deum was over I would get home with very little time to spare and my wife wouldn't know about the event. So I grabbed the invitation and wrote a message to Parvin on the back of it, rejoicing that I still had a car and driver there and could get word to her. I was standing next to the Soviet Chargé whose name was Kirsanov. In spite of being the Soviet Chargé, Kirsanov was a very pleasant person. He was clearly distressed, saying "Oh my God what am I going to do? Poor Madame Kirsanov is not going to know about this." I said, "Why don't you just do as I did, write on the back of the invitation card a note to your wife and I will have my driver deliver it to the Soviet Embassy." He was extremely grateful for that.

So both notes were sent off to both wives, and sure enough we all went to the palace that night for another memorable evening of woodenly formal dining and an hour or so of "*animation*" entertainment. But that kind of thing happened all the time, and there was very little notice with the phones not working. You would get an invitation or a confirmation about an hour ahead of whatever was going to happen.

Q: How did you find dealing with Bokassa nose to nose, I mean what was he like?

FAIRCHILD: The only time I was close to him or engaged in conversation was the ceremony when Goody presented his credentials, his letters of credence. Bokassa was quite chatty. He actually spoke quite well. It wasn't very elegant French, but he spoke it well. This was sort of elevated small talk basically. I remember when I first arrived there, I think it was the day after Grant Smith had left and I had become chargé, I received a note from the protocol office at the minister of foreign affairs saying, "His Imperial Majesty will receive you tomorrow at 10:00." I wondered what the hell is this all about, and thought I was really in the soup now. But three or four hours later another note came from the foreign office saying the equivalent of "Ooops! We made a mistake. It wasn't you we were supposed to summon; it was somebody else." I never actually had a one-on-one with Bokassa. Goody Cooke did, of course. I remember on one occasion, it was when Goody went to call on the emperor and basically tell him we were cutting off the aid program because of the human rights issues, Goody told me his impressions of the Emperor. This meeting was at 10:00 in the morning, and Goody had the impression that Bokassa was half drunk. We had heard that he liked to have a little tumbler of Chivas Regal instead of orange juice with his breakfast. To make sure that he got the message, and to have a written record of the demarche, we sent a diplomatic note to the Foreign Ministry repeating the message that same afternoon.

Q: I understand that one reason why the Qadhafi effort to convert everyone to the Muslim religion didn't hold very well was because of the desire for good scotch.

FAIRCHILD: Yes, probably so. I know of a similar situation in Russian history regarding the non-adoption of Islam as the state religion. In the primary chronicle of Russian history dealing with the time when Russia converted to the orthodox form of Christianity, it is related that one of the religions that presented itself to the Prince of Kiev at the time was the Islamic religion. The Khazars of Central Asia also represented the Jewish faith before the Prince, and there were representatives of both the Latin church and the Eastern church. But in reviewing Islam the chronicle said its adoption would allow for some good political connections for the Russian people, but in Islam one cannot drink alcohol, and so Islam was rejected since "drinking is the great joy of the Russian people." Well in the Central African Republic drinking was the great joy of the Central African people too. In fact one of the main problems there was drunkenness and alcoholism. Not among the few Central Africans that were Muslim, of course, but certainly among the animists and the Christians it was a real problem.

Q: Well let's talk a bit about Central Africa. Was it split up into tribes and did you get out and around?

FAIRCHILD: There were lots of tribal groups in the Central African Republic. None of them

dominated in terms of numbers. I think the M'Baka was the lead tribal group at the time we were there, it was certainly Bokassa's tribe, but it probably only accounted for eight or nine percent of the population. There were lots of other small tribal groups. The lingua franca in the country was Sango, which is a language spoken all along both sides of the Ubangui River. I am told it is very close to Lingala, which is spoken in Northern Zaire, or the Congo as it is known now. We did get around, but it was difficult because there were I think only about 80 miles of paved road in the country, and that was between Bangui and M'baiki – M'baiki being where Bokassa had his home town palace. There were dirt and laterite roads in the rest of the country, and they hadn't been maintained very well since independence so it was hard to get up country. I should also say when Goody Cooke was there, he would do a fair amount of traveling, certainly when the U.S. military attaché from Kinshasa – who was accredited to Bangui as well – came to visit with his airplane. One could travel all around the country using the aircraft. But when that happened I had to stay and watch the store. And when I was chargé it was not really possible to leave town, except perhaps for some sort of emergency. The bottom line was that I didn't get around the country that much.

Q: How was life there?

FAIRCHILD: Life was actually fairly pleasant, in spite of some of the weird aspects of the Empire I was talking about earlier. It is equatorial Africa, so it is hot and humid – but not unbearably so. A large part of the year there is a lot of cloud cover, so that helps moderate the temperature. Central Africans are very gregarious, pleasant, generous people. They became even more gregarious after Bokassa fell, and they no longer had to fear reprisals from associating with foreigners. In fact when I first got there it was mostly and only officials who were free to deal with you, because they had to. It was their job. A lot of other people seemed aloof. Once you engaged them they were fine. Any food not grown locally was fairly expensive. Bangui was one of what we call a "consumables post," meaning that you took a shipment of food with you, mostly canned food and non-perishables. But there were a couple of supermarkets where you cold get products from France, including a nice selection of cheeses. The local fish *capitaine* was quite good to eat, and actually it was more expensive sometimes than fish flown in from France. While we were there, both before and after he 1979 coup, there was a normality about life there in that commercial establishments existed that did a fair if not great business, there was a banking system in place, the business community had French people at the top with the secondary level occupied by Portuguese and Greek business people. Local production included coffee, tobacco – used mainly for cigars, and other agricultural products. So, it was many steps above the kind of place depicted in Naipaul's A Bend in the River.

We were thrown on our own resources for social life, but in the diplomatic community one never wants for receptions and dinners to attend. There were some Americans who because they didn't speak French very well tended to associate only with themselves. But if you spoke French you had a wide variety of people there. The Germans had an embassy, I would say in fact even though we were very close to a number of French people, our best friends there were the German number two and his wife, Peter and Heidi Haucke. If other foreigners didn't speak good English they all spoke good French. The Russians were there up until the coup against Bokassa, and shortly after that the restored republican government of David Dacko broke relations with the Soviets and expelled them as they did the Libyans.

Q: Ok, let's talk about the coup. You were there during the coup, yes?

FAIRCHILD: Yes.

Q: How did that manifest itself?

FAIRCHILD: I was preparing to take some R&R – rest and recuperation travel – with my wife in August, but there was something in the air. One sensed from the way people talked that something was going to happen. I think a lot of people including the French had pretty much had it with Bokassa because of his human rights violations. So, given the almost palpable sense of imminent regime change, we cancelled our plans for this trip. Goody Cooke seemed happy that we did so, although he never actually asked that we cancel our R&R. One September night several hundred French paratroopers landed at the airport, and took over the radio station and other strategic points. It was basically all over by morning. On the radio there was nothing but martial music, and at some point around 2:00 in the morning former president and restored President David Dacko got on the radio and said in effect "I am back." The French supported him, and there were a number of Central African leading personalities both governmental and business and socially prominent people who had conspired with the French. I don't know whether they provided the initiative, or if the French signed them up after having determined to oust Bokassa. But by the next morning they had taken over the entire city. I remember driving to the embassy that morning, and as none of our local employees had showed up I drove my official car…but I made sure the American flag was flying from the post in front of the car. As I went around this one bend to get into town, there was a French army jeep with three French paratroopers and a .50 caliber machine gun pointed at me. For a few seconds I thought to myself "I don't know what this is all about but I sure hope it goes well." Two of the French paratroopers, not the guy with the gun but the other two, stood up and saluted. I immediately thought, if this is a coup it's is my kind of coup. So, after saluting back, I drove on and we started dealing with the problems in the embassy.

Q: Did the name change immediately? Central African Republic.

FAIRCHILD: Oh yes, immediately. Various decrees were issued of course. The French military presence stayed around for awhile. The French code name for the military operation was "Barracuda," and in fact the major choreographer of the thing was the former French military attaché – Colonel Olympio Mazza – who came back with the paratroopers. The whole coup was done with minimal loss of life. No French were killed, and I believe only one Central African soldier was killed.

Q: Bokassa went where?

FAIRCHILD: Actually he was out of town on a trip visiting his friend Moammar Qadhafi in Libya. Once the coup occurred he got in his plane and flew to France asking for political asylum. This happened under the Giscard d'Estaing government. Bokassa claimed that he still had French nationality because he was a veteran of the French army. They kept him parked somewhere at Charles de Gaulle airport for about a day and a half, maybe two days while the politicians and

lawyers deliberated. Finally the government said, no we are not going to give you asylum; you'll have to go somewhere else. I think the French worked out a deal whereby President Houphouët-Boigny in the Ivory Coast gave Bokassa asylum. So he flew there and wound up staying there for about a year and a half, during which time Bokassa was planning some kind of coup with the use of mercenaries to get himself back in power. Houphouët-Boigny finally wearied of all Bokassa's plotting and meetings with known mercenaries, and cancelled his asylum and deported him. At that point it was shortly after the French elections of 1981, so Bokassa again applied to the French for asylum – this time to the socialist government under Mitterrand, and they granted it to him. At the same time Bokassa was tried *in absentia* by the new government, found guilty of conspiring in the death of many Central Africans, and sentenced to death.

Parenthetically, some years later when I was DCM in Niamey and on my way back to post via Paris following consultations at EUCOM in Stuttgart, I had another Bokassa related encounter. That would have been in 1986, I think. Bokassa had been convinced by a number of French right wing political types, and perhaps by other Central Africans, to go back and reclaim his throne – his earlier death sentence notwithstanding. Some of those French right wing types had persuaded him to include their organizations in his will and leave them some property he had in France, including real estate property. Long story short, he went back, was arrested immediately as he got off his plane, and his family was put on a plane and sent back to France. While at the Paris airport I saw the family arrive, and was given the whole story by a French security officer whose natural reticence was overcome when I told him I was a former American charge d'affaires in Bangui. Bokassa was again tried, again found guilty, and again sentenced to death. But they decided not to carry it out. They instead put him in prison for a couple of months, and then sent him back to his home at Berengo, near M'baiki, where he basically lived out his life – which wasn't that long, maybe a year or two – under house arrest.

Q: Was there much during this whole time, I haven't asked sort of the pertinent question. What were American interests in the Central African Empire?

FAIRCHILD: Very basic I think. I think the main interests were humanitarian. There were some American citizens there, mostly missionaries. But I think a lot of it was continuing to show the flag. In the early 1960's the Kennedy administration decided that we would have U.S. embassies in every newly independent African country, and so our presence in the CAE or CAR was an example of that universality principle. This principle has been renewed by every subsequent administration, despite occasional post closings.

Q: Did we get involved in going after their vote in the UN?

FAIRCHILD: Yes, absolutely. There were the usual pre-UN general assembly consultations, and we would try to get their vote on a number of issues. They were generally cooperative even under Bokassa, unless there was some issue directly important to the Central African Republic. Communications were not good between Bangui and their embassies in New York and Washington. Sometimes this was only because their embassies in New York and Washington weren't able to pay their telex or telephone bills on time. They simply sometimes had their phone or telex simply cut off. So we always made sure to remind the Department that it needed to discuss the issue at hand with the actual CAR ambassador on the spot because sometimes the

instructions from Bangui would simply not be received. Once, after the coup, I was calling on a high government official who became a very good friend and still is, Jean-Pierre Lebouder, who in spite of his name is Central African. His father was French, and his mother Central African. He was then the Minister of Planning and the principal contact for us with the Dacko government, the same job he held under Bokassa. Subsequently he actually became Prime Minister, but that was only for about six months. Anyway, I was talking to him about a vote we were trying to get the Central Africans to cast. It had to do with **not** inviting the Palestine Liberation Organization to attend the upcoming World Bank/IMF meetings as an official observer. We were making a major effort worldwide to get countries to vote against inviting the PLO, so I called on Jean-Pierre to secure CAR support. He said, "Well this is a political decision. As you know the Central African Republic, even when it was an empire, is in favor of Palestinian rights. Given the political nature of this issue, you will have to see the President about that." Well I couldn't get to the President in the short time available. I did see his French advisor, an advisor the French provided after the coup. His name was Jacques Serre, someone who had been a former colonial administrator there back in the old days. So I basically made my case to him, saying "The U.S. government is most anxious to get this request to the President." He said, "I will make sure he gets it." Despite Serre's assurance, I was uncertain how well that would go. So, knowing the Gabonese were providing lots of money to help Dacko get his government re-established, I suggested the Department approach President Bongo of Gabon who was usually in favor of whatever the U.S. position was on major issues, to use him to press the Central Africans. Apparently he did just that, because in the final vote the CAR voted with the United States. So, yes, getting the CAR to support us in UN and other international organization votes was obviously one of the main interests we had there.

Q: Did we have Peace Corps there?

FAIRCHILD: We did, and a fairly substantial presence given the size of the country. I think there were about 80 volunteers when I was there, and they were all over the place. They were involved primarily in health work, also in fisheries and well digging. We got an injection of extra volunteers after the periodic series of dustups in the ongoing civil war in Chad. A lot of the volunteers in Chad came down and were attached to the Central African program. They were mostly very good people, the Peace Corps volunteers. We had a number of friends among those stationed in Bangui, but also got to meet those from upcountry when they would come to town periodically.

Q: One of the things that has surfaced from time to time with the problems of female volunteers, unwanted advances etc. Did you have any problems of that nature?

FAIRCHILD: My first reaction is to say no, absolutely not. But I don't know that for sure; there may have been one or two incidents of that type. Had there been a problem of major proportions I'm sure that the Peace Corps director would have talked to the Ambassador or me about it. The first director in fact was a single woman, Karen Woodbury. She was very sensitive to this kind of thing, but never mentioned anything about such a problem either to Goody or to me. For the second half of my time there, the Peace Corps directors were a married couple who shared the job and shared the salary. We had a very good close relationship with them, Les Long and Lynn Lederer. I don't ever remember their mentioning it either. Most of the problems we had with the

volunteers were health related. A volunteer up country just had to go swimming because it was so hot and humid, so he would swim in a pond that invariably was infested with bilharzia, also known as schistosomiasis. Getting rid of the infectious parasite that transmits that disease involved serious medical treatment, even medical evacuation in some cases.

Q: OK, this is probably a good place to stop. Is there anything else we should cover, take a quick look through your notes.

FAIRCHILD: Just one thing. We had some pretty serious civil disorders in December, 1979, after the coup, and again in early 1980. We were quite concerned about the ability of the Central Africans to control the situation. I think it was because a lot of government mechanisms, primitive though they were, had broken down and people were unhappy. This foreshadowed some of the military mutinies they had later in the 1980s and 1990s because people just weren't getting paid. During these disorders we maintained very close contact with the French. In fact I lent one of our radio sets to my French counterpart, Martial Laurens. We would check in with each other several times a day. We knew that some of the CAR army units would occasionally encounter large numbers of hostile demonstrators, and we were worried that violent encounters between the two might lea to more serious civil disorders. I also made sure that I renewed the informal unwritten agreement with the French Embassy that if the balloon really went up, and things just came to pieces there with lots of attendant violence, that Americans would be considered honorary Frenchmen for purposes of evacuation. It was clear that the French would have planes and troops in faster than we could ever manage such a thing. The French were quite insistent, however, that they were not going to use their troops in country to put down civil disorders unless it became an extreme, life or death situation. When I took the radio over to the French Embassy, Martial said, "We should have call signals. You shouldn't be using your name. I know what you Americans call us, so why don't you refer to me as *Grenouille* (Frog)." I said, "OK, and you can call me by the code name Cowboy." He laughed and said, "That's very clever, nobody is ever going to figure out who is talking to whom!" I said, "Martial, I really don't mind if the people who are listening know that the French and the Americans embassies are talking to each other." Anyway that is how we addressed that potential problem that fortunately never materialized.

Q: OK, I will just put at the end here so we will know where to pick it up, we are talking about 1980 is it?

FAIRCHILD: When we left it was the summer of 1981. I was headed back to Washington to take the deputy job in the office of Inter-African Affairs. It was what is now known as the Office of Regional Affairs office in the Africa Bureau. My boss there was Larry Williamson.

ROBERT E. GRIBBIN
Ambassador
(1993-1995)

Ambassador Robert E. Gribbin was born in North Carolina in

1946. After receiving his bachelor's degree from University of S. Sewanee in 1968, he received in master's degree from Johns Hopkins University in 1973. He also served in the Peace Corps from 1968-1970. His career has included positions in Rwanda, Kenya, Uganda, the Central African Republic, and also ambassadorships to Central African Republic and Rwanda. Ambassador Gribbin was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in June 2000.

Q: *Well, then, by 1993, was it, did you go out to the Central African Republic?*

GRIBBIN: I went to Bangui in January of 1993.

Q: *And you were there from 1993 to when?*

GRIBBIN: To October 1995.

Q: *In 1993 when you arrived, what was the situation?*

GRIBBIN: It was my second tour in the Central African Republic. In some respects in the intervening years since I had left not much had changed. The country had not made much economic or political progress. The government was headed by General André Kolingba, who had taken over some years earlier. He was a Yakoma tribesman from the eastern part of the country who was under siege by democratic forces that wanted to transform the Central African Republic into a more modern African state. President Kolingba's ability to respond was terribly constrained by poverty and by government misrule and mismanagement – some of which he was responsible for. The French were still very much in evidence in the Central African Republic. They controlled and supervised some of the inner workings of government - one of the key advisors to the president was French and France controlled the currency. A French military force of close to 2,000 men was stationed in country – 1500 at Bouar and 500 in the capital of Bangui.

Q: *Again, what were American interests and what were we doing?*

GRIBBIN: American interests in the Central African Republic were minimal. There were Americans to protect – missionaries, conservationists, businessmen, travelers, NGO personnel and others. We had quite a thriving Peace Corps program. Perhaps surprisingly, but since independence, the Central African Republic was one of the best Peace Corps countries on the continent. Volunteers had very positive experiences and they made good contributions to local life. Apart from U.S. citizens, the CAR was located at a crossroads of Africa. It had fairly nasty neighbors in Sudan and Zaire and Chad, so it was a useful post from which to do some listening in the region. Additionally there was a vibrant international conservation interest, because the CAR had important fauna and flora – elephants, butterflies, gorillas and things like that. However, the CAR was certainly not very high on the African Bureau's list of priorities, and so one of the delights of being ambassador there was that I pretty well did what I thought best.

Q: *Again, you mentioned crossroads. What about AIDS? Was this a trucking crossroads?*

GRIBBIN: No, not a crossroads in that sense because Zaire was impassable. It was, however, at the end of truck routes that linked the CAR to Cameroon and the sea. Although the CAR was not tied into East Africa where AIDS was rampart, AIDS was present in the Central African Republic. I talked about this issue with a couple of Central African doctor friends. I told them I had come from Uganda, where thinking about AIDS was much advanced both in the medical and public policy spheres, but in the Central African Republic I found it a very hush-hush topic to be avoided. I asked, "How do you counsel people when you find that they are HIV positive?" The doctors replied, "We don't tell them." I said, "What?" They said, "No, we don't tell them." I asked, "Why not?" They responded, "It's like we do with most terminal illnesses. If you tell somebody he's going to die, and then he dies, you're responsible for his death, so we don't inform our patients when they're terminally ill." I said, "Well, this must put a real constraint on medical ethics." They concluded, "Well, it's the way we have to do it." Clearly, with this sort of constraint doing something about AIDS was an uphill battle. We did have personnel from CDC in Atlanta trying to break the infectious cycle of AIDS via control of sexually transmitted diseases. In addition to treating STDs, the project focused on partner tracing, that is once folks with STDs were identified, an effort would be made to identify all their sexual partners because those people were going to be most vulnerable to HIV infection.

Q: *Were there any particular issues you had to deal with while you were there?*

GRIBBIN: My most important accomplishment was to bring democracy to the country. This was the culmination of popular Central African desires to become democratic. It reflected the winds of change that were blowing throughout Africa. The immediate task was to organize an election. This occurred in the summer of 1993. As my predecessor Dan Simpson had done, I met and counseled political aspirants for the presidential job, all of whom wanted the American blessing, which, of course, I wouldn't give. Beyond that they wanted the democratic credibility that flowed from such association. The election itself was a thorny problem. How to help a very poor country, which had never really had an open vote before, arrange a free and fair election? In addition to efforts to level the playing field, we were faced with organizational matters – how to ensure the wherewithal so that voting could take place, that ballots could be counted and they could be fairly judged. There were five candidates, or five principal candidates, and a number of lesser candidates, if you will, for the position, including the incumbent president. The key candidates were Kolingba, the incumbent president; Ange Patassé, a northerner who had been involved in the Bokassa government many years before; David Dacko, who had in fact been the first president of the Central African Republic and had been ousted first by President Bokassa and sent to rusticate in the jungle for 10 years or so. Restored to power by France, Dacko was ousted a second time by General Kolingba. The final notable aspirant was Abel Goumba, who was more of a '60s style revolutionary than anyone else. Kolingba may well have been the youngest of this group, and he was at least 60. We were talking about the old guard here. A few younger candidates put their names forward. However, in the tribal and political alignments that had grown up, the elders who rose to the top over the years were adamant that this was still their turn and probably their last shot to make a play for the presidency. With French and European Union monetary support plus smaller sums kicked in by the U.S. and by Germany bilaterally, we Western ambassadors forged an advisory group. We aided the electoral commission to craft the election. We provided training to poll workers and watchers. We authorized ballot boxes to be

built and ensured that ballots were printed, properly controlled and distributed. Obviously, we were involved in the intimate details of the whole exercise, and indeed supervised the whole political process. We heard complaints from candidates about lack of access to the media and of harassment by opponents – in and out of government. I used America's moral authority and my access to the local media to foster equanimity. Several of my staff members attended many political meetings – as a demonstration that the U.S. took the process seriously. I spoke often with President Kolingba and his advisors to ensure that they did not use the powers of state to overly intervene or influence the outcome of the election.

President Kolingba had reigned in isolation for the last years. He was surrounded by a group of his fellow tribesman who had no ability, if you will, to take political soundings, but they knew what their president liked to hear. They told him that there was no trouble, that he was in good shape to win the election. If not, they would see to it that he would stay in power anyway, because after all, the military leadership was all Yakoma. Well, to cut to the quick, the president was ill advised. He was not very popular, and any pollster would have looked at the tribal breakdown in the country and realized he was in trouble. As president he never did much bad, but never did much good either. He didn't pay the civil service on time, for example, but he'd say that was not his fault. There was no money in the treasury, and so forth. When it came down to the election itself, there were two rounds of voting. The two top candidates would move on to the second round if no one won a majority in the first vote. Patassé led, Goumba was second, Dacko third, and Kolingba came in fourth with only 11 percent of the vote. It became evident in the last days of the campaign and then as the vote came in that Kolingba felt that he'd been railroaded by the West - by me and the French envoy especially - into this democratic process in which he would lose - and that we hadn't told him that he would lose. This was a fairly wrenching change for France because it could perfectly well live with Kolingba. Nonetheless, French policy in Africa changed to support democracies where they flourished. The CAR was a difficult test of new French thinking because in the French view Patassé was probably going to win. That was my view as well. However, Paris found Patassé an unattractive candidate for lots of reasons, but one of which had to do with his inside knowledge of relations with French politicians, including Giscard d'Estaing, during the Bokassa era.

Q: *Diamonds.*

GRIBBIN: Diamonds and that sort of stuff. They also knew that Patassé was a bit bizarre in his personal behavior, as were all of these candidates, I might add. But I got to know them all well, and I enjoyed my meetings with them. Patassé was absolutely certain that he was going to win. Kolingba never really accepted that he was in trouble until the very end, and he tried to talk me into letting him not go through with it. Dacko was a very pleasant old gentleman, but he had really had his day 30 years before. Goumba, who was the oldest of the old, was the feistiest and the one who really, I think, had the best programmatic ideas in terms of how to transform the CAR into a functioning state.

Anyway, I have two stories for you. Just a day or two before the voting, I was eating breakfast alone on my terrace, as I usually did. My wife had not yet come to post because our eighth-grader was finishing the year in Virginia. Next to the terrace was this beautiful fragrant flowering frangipani tree. I looked up from my toast, and I saw a huge snake in the tree. I called my

houseman. He assembled the gardener and the security guards from the front gate, and they managed to get the snake out of the tree and kill it. It was a mamba, about eight feet long.

Q: *Ooh.*

GRIBBIN: By the time I came home that evening, the word all over town was that President Kolingba had been so dissatisfied with the American ambassador that he had sent a snake to kill him, but the ambassador's magic was more powerful. Instead, the Ambassador defeated the snake. This event enhanced my standing.

The other issue, though, was really much more serious. As the ballot counting got underway, it became very clear that Kolingba was going to lose. We knew that. In addition to observers from overseas who came in for the elections, my embassy team was sent all over the country. I myself visited numerous polling places to watch the voting and then the counting. Officials and official observers crowded around a small table in the glow of one little kerosene lantern, all of these poll watchers very carefully and correctly counted 100 to 500 ballots and then properly certified their count. These ballots were transported to the Supreme Court. In public session the Supreme Court took the summary count out of each box and began the national tally. Matters got tense in Supreme Court chambers when the numbers began to run so strongly against the President. Late one morning - I had been in attendance when the counting session opened and had been back once to watch - I got a call from the president of the Supreme Court, Edouard Frank, from his chambers. "Ambassador, I'm very frightened. I think they're planning to kill me this morning in order to halt the counting. Kolingba can then claim that the process is tainted and throw it all out." I talked to the judge for a while to calm him down. The man was terrified, so I said, "Sit tight and I'll come over." So I got my driver and went over. I went up to his office. It was about 11:30 or 12:00 or so. The session was supposed to start about then, and there were troops, of course, all around, but there always were. There was something of a crowd too, but no one looked particularly antagonistic or overly excited. Matters appeared normal. We got in touch with a couple of the other justices, who were willing to proceed. The chief justice agreed that he would go ahead if I would come with him, so I escorted him over to the chambers and sat down in the front row and stayed there for the next three days while the ballots were finally tabulated. I heard from a number of people afterwards that in fact something had been planned that afternoon; now whether it was an assassination or just destruction and seizure of the ballot boxes or burning of the Supreme Court or what was never revealed. But at least partly because I was present, the perpetrators felt they couldn't go through with it. The next move then, on the eve of the announcement that he had lost, President Kolingba exercised his presidential authority to pardon all the prisoners in the country - I mean all prisoners, 5,000 prisoners. They just opened the gates of the prisons, and the prisoners walked out, including Bokassa. Part of the idea in releasing Bokassa would be to whip up either anti-Bokassa or pro-Bokassa sentiment on the part of people that either felt negatively about him or who were his fellow tribesmen and felt positively about him. Violence on either score would then require, if you will, the implementation of martial law. But people were not aroused either pro or negative by Bokassa's release, but it was a very tense night. I was in contact with the French general, the French ambassador, and other colleagues in the diplomatic corps, trying to ensure that we would make it through okay. On the next day the voting results were announced, and we moved on to the second round with Patassé and Goumba. In that second round, then Patassé won. He now serves

as president. Kolingba finally took defeat in good grace and even relief. I visited President Kolingba on several occasions after he retired to his villa, but one of his last acts was to award me the Central African Order of Merit. Incoming President Patassé would not be outdone by that. One of his first acts was to award me the same Central African Order of Merit. So within two weeks I received two Orders of Merit from the outgoing and the incoming presidents.

Q: *Well, how does the transition work?*

GRIBBIN: I think most Central Africans didn't notice. One government quickly replaced the other. Life went on pretty much as before. There was great hope that this change would generate additional resources from the outside. We were, in fact, able to get a little bit more in the way of democracy funding from the U.S., but we didn't resurrect a bilateral aid program. The European Community and the World Bank, which were the two major donors, and the French Government were all more concerned with macroeconomic policies and indicators. They needed broad reforms in order to move ahead with their programs. When the Patassé government introduced some reforms, new funds did flow, but none of it happened quite to the extent that the Patassé government wanted. Still this was a very positive experience. The CAR held a free and fair election. Patassé was legitimately elected.

I was satisfied that he was elected because if defeated, he was perfectly capable of mounting some sort of insurgency or military opposition that would have been devastating. His victory was probably the best thing for the CAR at the time. Subsequently, the Patassé government did not prove to be terribly much better than its predecessor, particularly in terms of management of the economy and of government resources, although it was marginally better. Under Patasse the geographical locus of power shifted north to another tribal region. However, military leadership came from the east from the previous center of power. This meant that the new government did not trust its own military. In a year or two this led to difficulties which resulted in non-payment of military salaries and then several military mutinies. Subsequently regional and UN peacekeeping operations were established in the CAR when public order deteriorated.

But we didn't know all that was going to happen. In 1993 this flower of democracy bloomed, everybody was very pleased, we believed we had genuinely turned a corner and moved to more responsive government. During this period of euphoria, I invited the National Democratic Institute to do legislative training. NDI also did a program of political party training. The legislative training aimed at teaching new Members of Parliament about committee responsibilities, researching and writing bills, responding to constituents, etc. In short, the full range of things that our legislators and representatives take for granted but which were new for these officials. Many members had not yet carefully read their own constitution to see what their powers were. Among the items that National Assembly members learned from NDI was that they had the power to ask people or to compel people to come and explain themselves to National Assembly committees. Shortly after this training, members began to exercise this interrogatory power. Once they got up the gumption to call the prime minister in and ask him to account for some of his financial shenanigans. He was so embarrassed by the directness of questions which resulted in his disingenuous answers, that he felt compelled to resign. Members told me, "We didn't know we could do this. It was thanks to the American training that we learned." I said, "Now wait a minute, canning the prime minister was not my idea at all." No, but

obviously our training revealed the mechanism for doing it. The idea that public officials should be accountable for their actions was a revelation.

Two other projects that I was particularly proud of in this epoch come to mind. I had some democracy and human rights money to allocate, which was a small pot of money administered by the African Bureau of the State Department that comes from AID. I concluded that there was an absence of democratic culture in the Central African Republic. Parenthetically this was true in most African countries, partly because the children were never taught about democracy. My team consulted with friends in the Ministry of Education where Simone Bodemo, the secretary general, was much enamored of this idea. She and her curriculum committee put together a book of about 100 pages aimed at sixth- and seventh-grade equivalent students. They used texts from the Central African constitution or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or African literature to illustrate certain points. They structured the book so as to permit a sixth grade level discussion about the issue raised, but also that some of the words would be useful in vocabulary building. The whole book was designed to support democratic culture - education about civics, along with the necessary language, vocabulary, and thinking. I was able to get extra money from Washington and arranged to have the USIS printing plant in the Philippines print, I think, 52,000 copies, enough to put one in the hands of every two children in that age bracket throughout the whole country. It was the only textbook that was that widely available. It is still in use today and probably will be until the book becomes so completely tattered it can't be used. I thought that was a useful project that will have a long-range impact on sustaining democratic culture in the nation.

Q: *That's one of the things you want to look back on being in the Foreign Service, doing something like that. You really have done. You've made a difference.*

GRIBBIN: I think so. Another project was a similar one that we backed into, but which turned out to be very successful. Some friends from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where I grew up, contacted me to ask if their daughter, who was graduating from high school, could come to Africa, and do something useful. She sent me her résumé or CV or whatever you have in high school. It turned out that she had participated in Alabama's YMCA-sponsored Youth Legislature. I thought that's a good idea. I can link her up with our USIS assistant and we'll assemble a group of local high-school students during the summer to see what interest might develop in a youth legislature project. If that panned out, I planned to seek funding under the democracy program. We followed through, Jaynie Rogers Randall came for the summer and found a group of high school students and their teachers to be astonishingly enthusiastic about the idea. Jaynie laid it out, how it was done and what was required and so forth. But things went so quickly that this group of students decided that they did not want to talk about how to do this; they wanted to do it right then and there. They visited and watched the actual assembly, and then held debates, wrote bills and so forth. So they moved very quickly into sessions of a mock legislature. Later we proposed a more systematic program. We tapped this target of opportunity without realizing there was such willingness to become involved.

Q: *You must have left there in 1995 with a certain amount of satisfaction.*

GRIBBIN: I did. I thought that the CAR was coming along politically quite nicely. At minimum,

it had gained more civility and was headed in a better direction. Economically it remained isolated in the middle of Africa, still one of the poorest countries on the continent, and one of the smallest in terms of population - probably not even three million people. It had diamonds as a principal export, but also timber products, huge logs half the size of this room in diameter. Uranium and gold deposits were known. There was plenty of land suitable for agriculture or cattle. There were all sorts of possibilities. Yet the country was never a going concern economically. These resources were either siphoned off by the special interests or failed to get into public coffers, where they could be appropriately used. The CAR never realized its economic potential, but I still had hopes.

Q: *Well, this is probably a good place to stop. In 1995, where did you go?*

GRIBBIN: In 1995 I came back briefly to Washington and went directly on to Rwanda.

End of Reader