

DJIBOUTI

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MADISON BROADNAX Title XII Officer, USAID/REDSO Nairobi (1976-1978)

Madison Broadnax was born in Georgia and graduated from West Virginia State and Michigan State. He served in various USAID missions in Sudan, Korea, and Nairobi. He was interviewed by W. Haven North in 1998.

Q: Let's turn to your Nairobi experience. What years were you in Nairobi?

BROADNAX: I was in Nairobi from '76 to '78.

Q: What was your function?

BROADNAX: I was appointed as Title XII Officer.

Q: What's that mean?

BROADNAX: That was, you know, the 1975 Food Program, called Title XII in the legislation. That's how it got its name. That's what I was supposed to go out there and promote and find senior officials in agriculture that could qualify for training under the Title XII concept.

Q: You were assigned to the REDSO, right?

BROADNAX: REDSO, right.

Q: You served a whole region.

BROADNAX: Right. Princeton Lyman's (Chief of the Development Resources Division in the African Bureau) idea was to have a Title XII officer in the REDSO region -- one in Abidjan and one in Nairobi. But then, when the politicians heard about it, they took an exception to it. They said they better find something else for me to do because they didn't want me doing that.

Q: Congress?

BROADNAX: No, some of the politicians back in Agriculture. Anyway, that left me pretty much free to do what I wanted to do. Meanwhile, a cable came in suggesting that REDSO respond to a request from the Government of Djibouti to explore some agricultural assistance possibilities. I went to Djibouti.

Q: That's a tough one.

BROADNAX: You talk about tough. It's worse than tough. As soon as I got there and I went over the country, I just told them that it didn't have any possibilities for agriculture.

Q: What kind of a situation?

BROADNAX: It was just dry. No water. But there was a French hydrologist, and I told the Embassy people, "Before I give them my opinion, I want to talk to this French hydrologist." So I went to Bordeaux, France. That's where he was. And we talked. I said, "When are you coming back to Djibouti?" He told me. He came back. So he and I went all over these areas. So I went back and told the Ambassador, "The answer is the same. I think they're wasting their time talking about developing agriculture here. They just don't have the land resources for it." We finally brought out a soil scientist from the Philippines and a hydrologist from the Geological Survey here in Washington. Everybody agreed. So we finally ended up recommending a fisheries project. The last I heard, it was going very well.

Q: But there was no potential for any kind of agricultural reproduction?

BROADNAX: They didn't have any water! No water. That was the thing.

Q: How did the people survive?

BROADNAX: They were living on cattle. Fish and imports. Then, the next time, the Ambassador in Nairobi called and said he'd like me to go to the Seychelles. And I went. There again, there was a minuscule land resource, but they had a research station. They were trying to grow a new crop. But their germ plasm was poor. What I recommended for them was an information communications project. They had a technician in USDA who was very good. She came out. Developed a project for them. The project, so far as I know, went very well.

HARIADENE JOHNSON
Office Director of East Africa, USAID

Washington, DC (1977-1982)

Hariadene Johnson received a bachelor's degree and a master's degree from University of Texas at Austin prior to joining USAID in 1967. Her career posts included Ghana, Liberia, Tanzania, and Djibouti in addition to serving as Office Director of East Africa for USAID from 1977-1982. Ms. Johnson was interviewed by W. Haven North in 1998.

Q: What area did you cover [as Office Director of East Africa]? What were the countries under your responsibility?

JOHNSON: I'll give you the whole list: Sudan, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, Seychelles, and the Comoros. It was a ten country area. It started out that it was essentially a bilateral program in Kenya and one in Tanzania that would start and stop. We kept running into political issues. The Foreign Affairs Minister of Tanzania had the poor judgment to dance in the isles of the United Nations on the day that they voted to recognize Red China instead of Taiwan China as China. We got a phone call the next day from Kissinger saying, cut off the aid to Tanzania. Tanzania, it was just on again, off again, on again, off again. At that time and now, I think most of our implementation issues and policy issues were the fact that we never really stayed long enough. Nobody in the government really thought we would stay around very long. They said, "Okay, relations are fairly good right now, but they probably are going to fall apart again later." That issue went up and down the whole time I was there. We had a regional East Africa program run from Arusha, which was the headquarters of East Africa Region. Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, had formed a regional organization headquartered in Arusha that represented an attempt by those three nations to coordinate, especially transportation, but also other area, so we had a regional program in Arusha. We were not in Uganda at that time when I started, because Idi Amin was still in power. And, during the five years that I was working in East Africa, you had Idi Amin get kicked out by Obote and then Obote get kicked by Museveni.

We did not have a program in Sudan and we started one up. It was a bilateral effort to start up a program in Sudan; the previous bilateral program had been halted due to the assimilation of the American Ambassador and several key staffers, and lack of cooperation from the government of Sudan in doing anything about it. The politics of the situation were such that when we politically came to foreign policy terms with the Sudanese, then they wanted to start up a USAID program. Again, it sounds like, you know, if you have an Embassy then you have a USAID program.

In Djibouti (which was one of the five parts of the greater Somalia empire) where we did not have a program officer, we started a program, The Somalis had under various colonial regimes felt that their nation, their country of Somalia had been dismembered into five parts. There was the Ethiopian Somaliland, which was the Danakil desert, which was fought over back and forth; there was Djibouti, which the French for years officially titled French Somaliland and then they changed its title when it became obvious that there were problems with that and gave Djibouti independence; Somali itself, under its borders represented an amalgamation of the Italian Somaliland and British Somaliland, and a part of Somali was given at independence to the Kenyans that the Somalis felt belonged with them as part of the Greater Somali. The national flag, it is a five pointed star, represented the five parts of Somaliland. We had ceased assistance

in Somali and I'm not sure that I really remember why. I'm not sure why we got kicked out of Somali.

Q: The Russians took over.

JOHNSON: I don't know what was occurring.

JOSEPH P. O'NEILL
Temporary Duty (TDY)
Djibouti (1986)

Joseph P. O'Neill was born in New York in 1935. From 1953-1956 he served in the US Army. After joining the Foreign Service in 1961 he served positions in Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, India, Portugal, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Sudan, and Eritrea. Mr. O'Neill was interviewed by Thomas Dunnigan in May 1998.

Q: Any more comments about your time there? Tell us about this TDY you had in Djibouti.

O'NEILL: That was after I finished Ethiopia. Let me say this about the Cubans down in Ogaden. When I was there towards '86, they had been turned into beer soldiers. They were selling their weapons, shoes, and clothes for beer, the Cubans. They had really deteriorated. One, they weren't being paid much. The other thing is that in looking at the time that we were in Ethiopia, the Amharas as a tribe were the dominant tribe. They were the ones who provided the kings or the emperors. This is no more. We can go back and talk about when I was in Eritrea. There were any number of times when the Emperor, Haile Selassie, or Mengistu could have made some equitable solution with the Eritreans for a united country. But Mengistu was not a rational man. I think, by the time we got there, he was slipping slowly but surely into a state of mental imbalance. He was only interested in people who didn't have the guts to tell him the truth. I only met him once on one. I used special English when I have to talk to certain people because while he spoke English, he didn't particularly like it. He didn't like to speak English. He understood all the sayings. He also thought I was CIA and wondered why I wasn't thrown out. I said, "Maybe because you wanted to have an embassy in Washington." Of course, that was not the reason. That was pure bragging on my part.

Q: It had its effect.

O'NEILL: It had its effect. The question of Mengistu's mental competence - (He's alive, by the way, still in exile in Zimbabwe) he killed without feeling.

As for Djibouti, I'd come back to Washington and I went up to see Jim Bishop. We were very lucky at that time. We had the greatest front office in the Africa Bureau. We had Crocker, Wisner, and Jim Bishop, fabulously great guys. So, I had gone up to see Jim Bishop to say "Mea culpa" because I had gone to Frank Wisner and told him after Addis I wanted to go to Khartoum

and be the DCM not knowing that Frank did not do personnel work, never has, never will, not terribly interested in it even for his own people. Even with our Vietnam association. So, I went and said, "I really should come and see you. I'm sorry I didn't do it. What can you do for me?" He said, "Tough, baby, I don't have anything for you. But I need somebody to go out TDY to Djibouti." I said, "My French is rusty. I haven't used it since Vietnam, but I'll be very happy to go out." He said, "Alright, you go on out because the ambassador is being called back to the United Nations for three or four months."

Q: Djibouti was now independent?

O'NEILL: Yes. So, I went out for three months. They had a big problem down at the port over AID food. Things weren't being moved. The AID guy there, his mind was not really between his ears. It was resting someplace else. We had one fellow at the station. They were trying to build a new embassy, etc. So, I went out. I cleaned up the AID portion of the thing and then started to do some small reporting on Somalia, helped with the administrative stuff, did some reporting on Ethiopia from that side of the border, and made myself somewhat useful. The Ethiopians were kind enough seeing that I returned from Washington to increase staff in their embassy. It was just very nice. I told them how much I enjoyed my time in Addis and told them what I was going to do only three or four months. It was useful for the future. Later on, I was involved in Somalia. I was involved in Eritrea. It's not a big place. I went out and saw the Legionnaires, who were very, very, very well disciplined, but I saw them play among themselves: mean mothers. Of course, Djibouti is really sort of like Shanghai in the '30s. There is nothing that's not for sale there. It's great working. I'd get up about 5:30, have breakfast, work until 1:00 or 2:00, go home and have lunch, and sleep until six or seven in the evening. It was so unbearably hot during [the rest of the] time. At 7:00 pm, I would go out to eat.

Q: The sun was down and you could begin operating again.

O'NEILL: Right. I improved my French and the rest. There was one very bad problem there, which I solved. We had a Marine general who was in charge of CENTCOM. He had come in to Djibouti, had met the French general, told him he was the senior military officer in the whole area. He was not noted for his diplomatic tact. He said he wanted to use Djibouti a sort of staging base and was going to take this up with the president of Djibouti, Goulet, who is still, by the way, in power. He must be 90 if he's a day. He went off and he saw Goulet. He made all these promises. He didn't clear it with DOD. He didn't clear it with State. He didn't clear it back with anyone. The Djiboutians don't know what's going on. The French believe that we are going to come in and take their back door, which Djibouti is for them. They need Djibouti because they don't have "long legs." They have "short legs" and they need to refuel in Djibouti for Tahiti, Reunion, for all the other places they have along East Africa and in the Pacific. So, I come in. The first thing I do after seeing the foreign minister is go running over to see the French ambassador, Ambassador Thomas. I tell him how pleased I am to be here. I tell him how my son, Kevin, speaks French with a French accent because he went to lycée in Addis Ababa and he's now at the Lycée Rochambeau in Washington because I don't want him to lose his French, which, thank God, he never has. Then I say things like "You know, when I'm here, I will do nothing with this government without talking to you first. I'm going to see the foreign minister. I'll be seeing the president when he returns. I don't intend to see very many of the local politicians

because I'm waiting just for our ambassador to return. I ask the ambassador, "Do you and your army ever have generals who talk before they think?" He said, "Occasionally." I said, "You know, we have them in the Marine Corps." That was the end of that. Then I found out from our people in Paris that he had sent back saying, "They've got a new officer here. He speaks French and he seems to know the area. He's been very helpful and has told me all about Ethiopia and what Washington is thinking." Ambassador Thomas, a very fine guy, very nice.

What was luck of the draw was his political officer, who was married to a Thai/Vietnamese girl. So, she was a little lonely there. She spoke excellent French, of course. She had nobody to speak Thai with. So, we went to a dinner one night and we started to speak Thai. We spoke for a few minutes. Then we spoke French. She also spoke English. Then I would say to her, "What's the exact phrase in French for this?" I would ask in Thai and she would say it. We had a wonderful time. By the time the ambassador returned, the question over us storing things in Djibouti had gone. We had started the first (not in my time, but about six months later) agreement in which we kept the French informed, that we would bring in our observation planes to refuel in Djibouti so they could watch Russian submarines coming down the Red Sea after they had been refueled at Dalak Island.

Q: I think that's one of the most astute things you did in your service was to call on that French ambassador first thing because he would have found out immediately what you were going to do and he would have resented it.

O'NEILL: Absolutely. I did the same thing when I was in Equatorial Guinea. The Spanish prefer that you always tell them what's going on. They always know more than you do about certain things. After they trust you, they'll tell you everything.

Q: Did we get involved at all in refugees from Yemen when you were there in Djibouti?

O'NEILL: No. By that time, the civil war in Yemen had quieted down. All the people who had been picked up by the Britannia and the rest had been moved on. The British had an honorary consul there who was in charge of one of the British banks there, who I had met on a previous trip down there, who was very nice. It was good. I didn't do a lot of in-depth reporting out of there, but nothing fell apart while I was there.

LANGE SCHERMERHORN
Ambassador
Djibouti (1997-2000)

Ambassador Schermerhorn was born and raised in New Jersey and educated at Mt. Holyoke College. Entering the Foreign Service in 1966, she had several assignments in the State Department in Washington dealing with a variety of administrative and political matters. Her overseas posts include Colombo, Saigon, Teheran, London, and Brussels, where she served twice. In 1992 she was named

US Ambassador to Djibouti, where she served until 2000. Ambassador Schermerhorn was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2002.

Q: Lange, in the first place, let's talk a bit about Djibouti as such. What sort of is the history of Djibouti, because this is not a country that's not well known, the government, the language?

SCHERMERHORN: Well Djibouti is one of the last former colonies or territories in Africa to become independent. It didn't become independent until 1977 which is almost a generation after those of the late '50s and early '60s, of course. It had been a French overseas territory; it had been called the overseas territory of the Afars and the Issas. The Afars are an ethnic group and the Issas are ethnically Somali, but one of the clans of Somalia. The French involvement with it goes back to the 1880s or so, the 1890s, and if you look at the capital city, which is called Djibouti Real, Djibouti City, it reminded me in some ways of Colombo, my first assignment. It's an overseas colonial city of that period. That was sort of when it was constructed, most of the buildings, between 1910 and 1930, I would say. In its heyday it was a very, very attractive place. It's a little the worse for wear these days because Djiboutians don't have money to maintain the buildings and so forth in the way one would hope.

Actually, Djibouti is a totally new creation. It didn't exist until the end of the nineteenth century. The population center, such as it was, was a little town called Obock, on the north coast. Djibouti is cut almost in two by part of the Red Sea called the Gulf of Tadjoura that goes away inland; so you have to go way around to the end of this until you get to the northern part or take a boat trip across, which from Djibouti to Obock is about two hours in a small boat. If you drive it's longer. Obock was the landfall, or whatever you want to call it, the center for the salt caravans that came out there. Djibouti, geologically, is very interesting. It's at the northern end of the Great Rift Valley which actually extends from Tanzania up around Kenya, Ethiopia, and right through Eritrea, part of Djibouti, part of the Red Sea and then it continues on. So geologically it's got that structure.

The landscape is like – people used to say, and I don't know if it's apocryphal or not, but that the movie in the '60s, *The Planet of the Apes*, was filmed there; But it looks like a lunar landscape when you get out of the city, some of it. It's got a lot of basal black lava rock, lots of sand, and lots of stony escarpments that aren't particularly hospitable for travel. It has very few resources but because it is on the end of the Great Rift Valley it does have some potential for thermal energy and for wind power because of the way it's situated. It doesn't have oil as far as anyone knows, although there are believed to be other oil deposits in northern Somalia and offshore in that area. Because it's such a humid, hot...it's arid, so there's very little potential for agriculture. It's pastoral; it's nomadic shepherding and camels and whatnot. Sheep are the kind of money, or the coin of the realm, if you will, and the people are basically nomadic. It wasn't until the French came that the port was established in Djibouti. Obock was not considered suitable and there was a better potential harbor in Djibouti on the southern part of this part of the country. So this is a manmade creation of recent day, really.

Djibouti, administratively, is divided into four districts: Obock district – and they call them cities, but by our lights they're small towns, or villages even – Obock, then north next to it is Tadjoura, and Obock and Tadjoura is where the Afar ethnic group is predominant. Lastly, you have the

Dikhil district to the west and Djibouti district where the city is in the east and the south. In the French administrative model they centralized everything in Djibouti City, which is now a point of issue for the Afars. They'd like to see justice devolve to the regions and so on; but it's such a small country that in some ways this doesn't make sense. That's the roots of what some of the political problems are now. So the French actually went in there, in part, as a counter to the British being in Aden; protecting the route to India, the British took Aden; and then they more or less appropriated; they never made it a formal colony but they appropriated the coastline of northern Somalia and called it British Somaliland and administered it, but administered it very lightly. So the French decided they needed to balance this and have a...

Q: When did the French go into Djibouti?

SCHERMERHORN: In about 1890 it would be a serious...the cultural center of the French embassy there is called the Arthur Rimbaud, after the French poet who was a very interesting character. He wrote most of the poetry for which he's remembered today before he was twenty-three or -four. At that point he went off as a trader in East Africa following in the route that Richard Burton had actually had landfalls in that area, actually a little south. Rimbaud was a variously thought to be a slave trader, a drug trader – drugs of the period, the different kind of thing. He was a trader and he wandered all over that part of the world in what is now parts of Ethiopia and parts of Somalia and Djibouti. He finally became ill and he left on a ship for Marseilles when he was about thirty-seven or -eight and he died just as soon as he got to France. So he had a very short life and an even shorter writing life for which he is remembered. So that was the kind of atmosphere people were in. The salt trade was big.

Q: Well in a way was this occupying Djibouti sort of an end run after the Fashoda problem on the Nile and the Sudan? The French wanted to...

SCHERMERHORN: They wanted a foothold and I haven't done enough reading to know that it was in direct result of Fashoda, but it was certainly the scramble for Africa, part of this. And they thought, here the British are after Suez. This is what became important; to have some kind of presence at that end of the canal is basically what it meant. Then, of course, they used that as a place...they stamped it with the Foreign Legion partly. The Foreign Legion of course we think of in Morocco and Algeria but it was also in Chad and it was also there, and still is today; part of the French military presence that continues is a battalion of legionnaires. So the French moved themselves in and there were a few businessmen who came. For example, the leading Djiboutian businessman today is actually of Lebanese descent and he's fourth generation. He's a Muslim, but he's an Arab Muslim, not a Somali or...He owns a food conglomerate, we would call it, the ice making company, the coal stores, the Coca-Cola bottling franchise, which at one point Djibouti was said to have the highest per capita consumption of anywhere because of the heat. Actually, they regularly get medals – what I learned there is that Coca-Cola has a contest; they have samples from all their bottling franchises every year and they award medals and the one in Djibouti often does well with this. They do their water with reverse osmosis and apparently this makes for a good product.

They brought in some “foreigners” because the Somalis, as I said, there were no people there who were really, at the end of the nineteenth century, educated in a European fashion; they were

all these nomadic people. What built up in Djibouti City was a cadre of people, as in all the colonial things, who worked with the French in one capacity or another. They had various administrative arrangements. As I said, they kept changing the name but at one point – I think in the '40s – it was the Overseas Territory of the Afars and the Issas. This leading businessman who is now in his '80s was a...they allowed Djibouti to have representation in the French parliament in the chamber of deputies and this businessman back in the 1940s was one of the two Djiboutian representatives, Said Ali Kubesh – a good Lebanese name with a little French accent.

So the French needed this as a foothold and then there became a small but influential group of French businessmen who basically had a lock on the port provisioning things and providing services to the community which was basically French, and an increasingly, if you will, middle class or upper class Djiboutians who adopted French manners.

Q: Did Djibouti act as anything, sort of an entrepôt for Ethiopia, for Asmara, for Somalia?

SCHERMERHORN: Yes. I should place it geographically because it's again just at the bottom of the Suez Canal, Eritrea to the north, what then was the Eritrean province of Ethiopia – now is independent – Ethiopia and northwestern Somalia sort of enclosed by all of these. And it is an entrepôt because of course Ethiopia has no major port; they did on the Red Sea Massawa and Assab but those were not as well developed as ports, nor as good harbors, and of course they were not outside the canal. They were in the Red Sea, not out in the major gulf area. Not in the major roadway, I should say. So, yes, this became very useful and of course when Eritrea became independent in 1993 then it became even more of an issue; and when Eritrea and Ethiopia went to war in 1998 it became very much an issue. So it has a strategic importance and it was also a useful place as a staging area for French troops; that's why they have their presence there or that's one of the reasons they assert as to why they have a significant military presence there. Even though the military presence is considerably reduced from its high point, it's still about 2500, 2700 troops.

Q: The French military there is really for to be used somewhere else?

SCHERMERHORN: Yes.

Q: It's not sitting there protecting the...

SCHERMERHORN: No. Although clearly after independence whatever treaty arrangements or agreements they made, the presence of the French means implicitly that Ethiopia is not going to move in on them; and this is one of the things that is of concern to Djibouti: as the French put more daylight, if you will, between them and Djibouti, what is the future for them because Ethiopia is paranoid about a lot of things and they could someday envision "having to take over Djibouti for the port" if they were given free rein or something.

Q: Well they don't have a window on the ocean, in a way.

SCHERMERHORN: No, they don't. It's a landlocked country.

Q: After Eritrea made its move...

SCHERMERHORN: It's a landlocked country of 60 million or so people, which requires a lot of outside provision. The thing that makes Djibouti port so important – the fact that it's a viable, well-developed port, but it was linked as early as 1900 by a railroad that goes directly from Djibouti to Dire Dawa in Ethiopia, which is about halfway, and then continues on to Addis Ababa. The line has one track – the train goes up and down once a day – and the rolling stock is very old. It really needs major redevelopment to be more useful than it is now; but it's a lifeline and if it were not to function at all it would be a great problem because while there is some air cargo, it's expensive and there really isn't a cargo airline that's been developed. That would be a great boon for East Africa, a cargo airline, but nobody thinks that it's economic at the moment. It's one of things where everybody is waiting for the time when it will be economic, so everybody is waiting.

Q: What about the government there?

SCHERMERHORN: Well let me go back to 1977. Why did they wait so long to become independent? There was a nationalist movement of sorts but it was never as strong as it was in a lot of the other African countries, especially the West African countries. In this colonial setting the Afars were nomadic too. They didn't have any more claim to education or anything than the Somalis, but they were the ones who, because they were sort of a minority and because the Somalis in Somaliland were oriented toward the British, and because there were more Afars at that point – early on in the situation – in that area than there were Somalis, some of the Afars became affluent working with the government and got into the administration and so forth.

Beginning in the 1930s, I think more and more Somalis of the Issa tribe, which is the tribe of the northwest Somalia, the clans, began moving – they were always moving across these borders which are very porous because they're nomadic people, but they began migrating toward this new city basically that was being created. The Afars didn't want independence because they were afraid there would be a point when the Somalis would outnumber them and that wouldn't be good. They'd rather stay with the protection of the French. They thought their bread was better buttered that way. It was put to referendum and the first two times basically the Afars voted down independence which was a little unusual in those days, but then there was pressure for a third one and in 1977 they carried the day. The Afars claim that the Somalis packed the books by sending a lot more people over the border to vote. This will never be known. There's some truth to that; whether they were actually sent or whether it was a natural migration, the balance had tipped.

Q: The Somalis were interested in an independent state as opposed to being part of a greater Somalia?

SCHERMERHORN: Well this is all intertwined and it's hard – this is against the backdrop of British Somaliland and Italian Somalia, having both been granted independence in 1960, a few days apart by their respective colonial powers. There was the SNM, the Somali Nationalist Movement, and there were people there who were very strong advocates of Greater Somalia; and the five-pointed star of Somalia stands for...

SCHERMERHORN: So the balance was tipped and independence. The Somali Nationalist Movement then had advocated the five points of Somalia being organized under Greater Somalia – some elements, not all of them; this gets wider with splits in Somalia when this happened. One part was the Somalis of northeastern Kenya; the second was the Somalis of Italian or southern Somalia; the third was the Somalis of British Somaliland, north, west and northeast Somalia; the fourth were the Somalis of the Ogaden region of Ethiopia which is the part of Ethiopia that bulges out towards Somalia; and the fifth were the Somalis in Djibouti. They all have somewhat different characteristics; of course in Kenya under the old guidelines that the borders became independent in 1960 and so the two, north and southern Somalia, and Djibouti at that point because the Afars were not willing to see this subsumed into anything else. Of course, the Ogaden was Ethiopia and that became a later issue.

Anyway, in the beginning it was just some Somalis who were successful in stimulating Britain and Italy to give independence said, okay, these two parts now are independent; we are going to voluntarily fuse together and be the Republic of Somalia. So this was one instance where what emerged from the independence movements was not the replication of the colonial borders. This was a new creation subsequent to independence, which is a very important legal point for some of the issues that are now going on in Somalia, although it was not described by people at the time nor particularly recognized as being something different.

You have a very interesting situation. You see very starkly when you're in that part of the world, the results of three different models of colonial administration. Southern Somalia is kind of chaotic and British Somaliland they had a very light hand, they didn't even call it a colony, it was just a protectorate or something and consequently the British did very little there; but that had the benefit of not upsetting, in a great way, the local customs and mores. They kind of let them administer themselves in the way according to the clan and tribal mores.

Q: Mainly to keep other people out, on the British side.

SCHERMERHORN: Yes. In Djibouti you had this highly centralized French model, very bureaucratic, which maybe worked in administering the colony but doesn't work when you convert it to what's it got now. It doesn't work as well. We never got to greater Somalia and in fact...I'll talk about Somaliland, too, and my experiences there separately so why don't we wait and talk about that and talk about Djibouti now.

Q: Let's talk about your staff.

SCHERMERHORN: Well, the embassy was very small. We had, when I went there at the end of '97, it had been reduced to four officers, including the ambassador – three staff and one military officer. We had ambassador, a DCM who was also the econ officer at the -02 grade and at the 03 or 04 depending on who was available a person who was half the time political, half the time consular; and an administrative officer. We had one secretary and two communicators; and the reason we had two communicators is the equipment there was quite old and needed more maintenance and also the idea was that the second communicator could be a swing person and when there were requirements in Africa somewhere they could be detailed to do that; and then

and Army major who worked for the Central Command in Tampa administering...he did not function as an attaché; the attaché was the attaché in Addis. We had no other agencies present.

Q: No Marine guards?

SCHERMERHORN: Marine guards left in September of '97.

Q: So while you were there.

SCHERMERHORN: This is an interesting thing. The Marine guards we'd always had universality with this but after the fall of the Soviet Union and with so many new embassies there was a demand. At some time in the early '90s, the dialogue went something like this, as I understand it, the Marine Corps said to the State Department, "We need to reduce the number of Marines because our total force is down and we don't want the percentage of people in the Marine guard program to be higher than [whatever the percentage was that they liked,]" and the State Department said, "Well, gee, that's funny. We were just going to come to you and say we need more people in the program because we have more embassies." Well the compromise was they didn't take any away but they didn't give them anymore either. So there were not enough guards to do the twenty-four hour shift in all these places; you need a minimum number to make the shift work and so forth. So there was triage and people somewhere in Washington and Marine Corps headquarters decided they'd have to take away the guards from some of the places. Again, as I said, a lot of this fell on Africa.

In 1993, I think it was, they closed about fifteen or so Marine guard programs in various places. One of them was in Luxembourg, interestingly enough. The majority were in Africa. Then, of course, we continued to open posts – Vladivostok and Yekaterinburg and more places in Russia, and here and there and around – so they did another round of this in '97 and that's when Djibouti lost theirs; which is somewhat ironical when you think of what happened a year later in Nairobi and Tanzania.

I was very disappointed because I've always thought the Marines have been an asset in the places I've been, and especially in a small community. On the other hand, it's such a small community and not a lot of amusement and potential for getting in trouble with the French military – the brawls at the bar.

Q: No matter how you slice it, these are young men and they're the same problems you'd have with college students.

SCHERMERHORN: Yes, it's the same thing. Before I got there I was very disappointed. After I got there and thought about it for a while, I was disappointed but in some ways I thought, well, maybe it's okay. The way the embassy was situated and constructed I don't think it made a difference for the security necessarily. That's hard to evaluate. So we didn't have that either.

The one military person was this wonderful Army major. Put this against a backdrop of the end of the 1980s when we had a lot of military, not permanently stationed but short and long TDYs because of the Gulf War and then UNISOM in Somalia following on it. And we had more

employees in the embassy; AID was there up until the early '90s and various other people were there; USIS I think had a small program there. Anyway, as I had mentioned earlier, in '93 a lot of these places closed down their programs in smaller African countries without a lot of real planning as to what was the best bang for everybody's buck in terms of keeping our interests alive in a variety of places.

Between them they knew the American community who came up to me and said, "You know, before these people were here nobody ever paid any attention to us." There isn't a large American community; they were mostly missionaries. They had started all these...you know, they had them over on Friday, which is the Sunday in Djibouti since it's primarily Muslim, to swim in the embassy and had parties for the children. This is partly because they both had young children themselves, so they had more avenues of approach maybe but a lot of people wouldn't have done...So there was a lot of good feeling in the small American community and the French community and the Djiboutians too because they were very visible in the community and people said to me more than they thought previously. This may or may not be true; I don't know because people always tend to say what...but they weren't saying

Q: [inaudible] to a...

SCHERMERHORN: A positive situation, yes. The only aid we had present in 1997 was a \$50,000 a year self-help program which has to be administered by aid regulations with accountability and all of this. Terry had organized how to do this and we had a very good system and it was a committee of everyone in the embassy, including the secretary. We sat down to decide this and we tried to parcel it out according to region and type of thing. The women in the community were really very taken with all of this, that there were women doing this. Somali is Muslim and it's a male dominated culture in many ways, but it's not hardcore Arab Muslim. The Somalis have a much more relaxed approach, shall we say? People were concerned because they saw the embassy shrinking all the time and some Somalis would say to me when I first got there, "We're so glad you're here. We thought maybe you were going to close the embassy because it keeps getting smaller."

Their reaction was very carefully...if people in Washington think people don't watch this in small places... "And then there wasn't an ambassador for a long time."

Q: What was this saying? It really was a bureaucratic thing back in Washington.

SCHERMERHORN: I would just say, "Well, you know, we have a process by which we get nominated to be an ambassador and it takes time. Don't worry about it." I was worried about it though; given the climate I could see...people are still talking about do we need universality. The day when the great United States of America cannot afford to have an embassy everywhere, then we're in really hard times. People don't appreciate how especially in these small countries they really look to us. Yes, they have this relationship in Djibouti with the French and it's a love/hate relationship and there's a lot of symbiosis. They need certain things; but they like to branch out; they like to be more independent. They like to develop closer relations with us. The cynics here would say, well who cares whether we have good relations with Djibouti or not? We'll get into that later, post 9/11.

I went into a very positive situation in the embassy. Ambassadors are permitted two choices; they may choose their DCM. I didn't have any desire to change in midstream. First of all, in a place like that it's hard to find people who can go. The main issue that limits people is schooling. In Terry Roble's case there was no problem because she'd been in France prior and her children had started in French nursery school and she was happy to put them in the French school. The oldest one was seven, and five, so there was no issue. The admin officer actually started her own bilingual school. That's another story. She's a terrific woman. Anyway, I was blessed with these two. The third one was a young man who'd been in Saudi Arabia and been in a lot of different places, and he was the consul cum political officer.

The secretary was wonderful. She'd been in many, many places in Africa and she'd been selected to go there by the man who never got there, the reason for which there was the years...so when Terry Roble heard – I got in touch with her saying I'd been nominated and we were back and forth; she said, "Well, you know, Donna got her just before Stan found he wasn't coming and she's been here with me and she'd like to stay and I recommend that unless you have somebody you want to come," and I thought that's all the recommendation I need. Somebody who had been in Africa, likes it, and wants to be there. Most of the secretaries I know are at the stage where they wouldn't want to go to a place like that. So I thought that was a great idea and I said, "Fine, let's do it." And she was absolutely wonderful too. She functioned like an officer. She drafted and she did...She was so bright and so able to put things together and figure out who was who. So it was really a benefit. I was blessed with that.

The interesting thing about this staff...there were two male communicators. Of the three spouses – this is an interesting comment, if you will, on our foreign policy – of the three spouses at the embassy at that point, as I said we had one – all American citizens, of course, now, but one originally Somali – Mrs. Robles' husband; one originally Iranian – Mrs. Krasnajafy's husband; and one of the communicator's wives was originally Vietnamese; and the secretary's husband was originally Filipino, but back during the Vietnam era Air America had hired a lot of Filipino engineers and mechanics and he had initially been hired by them in Laos and then they offered him a contract after that in Africa to do admin/GSO type things because we needed them. So he had been around in Africa doing that and that's where Donna met him. She used to laugh and say, "Well people ask for me but they really do it because they want my husband because he can fix everything," [laughs] which is true. The admin officer's husband was an engineer too, so in a place like Djibouti where maintenance was a real problem this was a tremendous boon. We had these PIT (Part-time Intermittent Temporary) jobs but of course the bureaucracy is such that one of the first things that happened when I got there, there was a big to-do about we had to have these cut-outs, because it was so small, about who supervises whom and all of this kind of thing. And then they said, "Oh, his appointment has lapsed. You have to renew it after a year and he can't work for her." I had to sort that out. I said, "Look, let's not be crazy. We have these resources that we need and you can't hire anybody else. It's one of these almost axiomatic...in the small places where you most need the PITs, that's where the rules say you can't have them because..."

Q: Could you explain what "PIT" means?

SCHERMERHORN: PIT is part-time intermittent temporary, which is terminology for somebody who is hired locally, is not brought from Washington as worldwide available; so in this case they went with their spouses and then a job existed there. Again, you have a choice; you can try to find qualified engineers on the economy of these places – which you're not going to find – who want to work there, or you can put some people in it who aren't qualified or you can use what you have. However, we're always tripping over ourselves on the administrative side. This is all based on the government's anti-nepotism. You have to evaluate each situation and work it so that it comes out. This is a country where it's over ninety all the time and when it rains it pours and floods. It does rain but not for very long. So, you need to paint all the time; you need to constantly fix things. The air conditioners always need...this kind of thing. So, having these spouses work was terrific.

What had happened over time, when Washington would say, "We're going to take away the direct-hire positions and you can hire a PIT," they would say this and then when you went to do it and make it work they'd say, "Oh well, it's nepotism," and I'd say, "We only have seven people. How many dependents can we get out of that?" We're lucky that we get some that want to work; some of them didn't want to work. So, it's again, talking across purposes saying, "We're telling you what to do but we're also telling you that you can't do it." This is endemic now in Africa.

Q: It sounds like though you had an experienced staff because one of the complaints I've heard about so many of our small African posts is that they end up with say somebody doing consular work who has never done it – I mean brand-new – and nobody else in the very small embassy has ever done it. So you have an awful lot of – I won't say incompetence, but lack of competence because everybody is new at the thing. It sounds like you had an experienced crew.

SCHERMERHORN: The consular officer was...Henry hadn't done too much of that but he had taken the course before and all of that; that was okay. We really needed a political officer more than half-time. So this was not a good fit because they had compressed jobs and that was how it came out. These were extraordinary people.

Rowena, the admin officer, this was her third African post; but from the first one she was clearly somebody who had her head screwed on right and knew...she had actually closed our post in the Comoros. That had been her first post and she closed it. We posed a lot of confidence on her. She bid all these. She liked being in Africa. She finally got a little upset and she needed to go back to Washington. I was very positive about her in my evaluations. I said to her, "You know, Rowena, you have all the tickets to go high in the admin field so you should go back and do a job in personnel because I think every admin officer needs to have that." Since I had not that long before been there I was able to talk and I recommended her to people, and it did work out for her to do that and that was very good and she's onto something else now.

For example, we didn't have USIS and she had started – I inherited all these things but, I kept them going and expanded them because they were so good – something where once a month we had what we called "English conversation" at the embassy. We got Somalis who wanted to hear English spoken come in and we were up to sixty or seventy people and we'd have it on the patio outside and we'd just serve soft drinks. We'd have a theme to every one. We had a guest speaker

do something – either somebody in the embassy or somebody we knew – and then we'd have discussion. And they loved this because there was no USIS program, nothing. I'm sure in a lot of other embassies they weren't as proactive with this. So we kept that up.

Q: When you went out to Somalia did you go out with either given to you or your own mental instructions about I want to do this or I want to do that? Were there any situations or problems?

SCHERMERHORN: The new assistant secretary for Africa had just come in the summer of '97.

Q: Susan Rice?

SCHERMERHORN: Susan Rice. In fact, I told you there were a whole group of ambassadors waiting for hearings in July and they didn't get them but they did have a hearing for Susan Rice because the administration said it was alright. So she was fairly new. In fact, there was a chiefs of mission conference in November of '97 in Washington for which everybody came back, but I hadn't yet gone out. Those of us who were just getting confirmed then went to this. Obviously, there are some very big, important countries in Africa that are the focus of attention; and it was Nigeria and the Congo was a problem as always, and South Africa and Kenya and Ethiopia at that point it was sort of because people respected it for its size; as I said, the 800 pound gorilla of East Africa, but the war hadn't started at that point. The smaller countries got short stripped.

There was something called the African... Anyway, we were trying to put together – it was a political/military project – we were trying to create basically a peacekeeping force for Africa by training people and having them contribute various military units to a joint force. Mostly we were starting in West Africa with the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) and all of that. Again, there wasn't a lot of time. When you figure there are something like fifty-four countries in the African bureau, as I said, fourteen in AFE alone, that you know the African bureau has the same structure as the other geographic bureaus but it has many more countries. It only has one assistant secretary and three DASes and sometimes desk officers have three or four countries. People say, "Yes, but they're small countries," but that begs the question. It doesn't matter what the size of the country is. You're still asked to do one human rights report; you do one of the same as the big countries do but you don't have the people to do it, either in the embassy or at the end of it. And in some respects it's more difficult to do that kind of reporting from a small country without a written tradition where the information isn't that easy to come by. If you're writing on human rights in France you've got all these human rights organizations that put out their reports; you've got people in the government who will tell you anything you want to know. In these smaller countries you don't have that level of support so it's much more difficult.

By the same token, it's much more difficult in Washington because if you're talking about in Ethiopia, yes, there's a constituency in Washington in the agencies. There's somebody whose portfolio is that place. So there's always a nexus of interest to talk to people about it. Some of these small countries, the State Department desk officer is probably the only one who has any consistent interest in it and even they don't have consistent interest; they're doing five countries. However, this is not understood when people start talking numbers and how many people you need to do things. They don't take into account the degree of difficulty of doing what it is, but they expect the same things. You get these round-robin demarches.

One of the issues that has always been a problem in the African bureau if you want to make a demarche and you're asked to present a written paper to the Djiboutian minister of foreign affairs, he doesn't speak English and he doesn't have very many people who speak it – not at the level that they can understand some bureaucratic paper. So you need to present it in French. We had one part-time translator who was a Frenchman who sort of washed up on the beach there, a very interesting character. Yet, these complex demarches and of course they always came in and said deliver it immediately because it's for a meeting that starts tomorrow. Except, by the time you got it, tomorrow was already there, which was useless because if anybody from Djibouti was going to the meeting they had probably left already; or it was in New York and the ambassador up there would take care of it.

The cry of these posts is please do these translations in Washington, for several reasons: doing one translation is much more efficient than having each embassy do it, and maybe not having quite the same translation and also just using up a lot of time. They found it very difficult to do that. It's because a lot of the demarches came from USTR (U.S. Trade Representatives Office) and issues like there where they wouldn't probably even consult the State Department or present it to them in its final form enough ahead of time to do. So this was always a problem. Again, we're very ethnocentric about our...we just assume all we do is fling the paper on the desk and everybody is going to immediately drop everything and read it tomorrow. You'd go and you'd make your presentation orally, but still.

Q: When you first went there what type of government and to whom did you first present your credentials?

SCHERMERHORN: As I said, they said there had been a change in plans and the then eighty-two year old president, or whatever age he was, normally went out of Djibouti during Ramadan; he had a house in a suburb of Paris. He changed and he stayed and he said he was going to leave just before the end so if I got there I could present my credentials the next morning. So I did and I arrived at nine o'clock at night and got off to this steaming tropical place, the first time I'd been in the tropics like that since Vietnam and it was nice. Steve at protocol said come in the morning so we went at eight o'clock and the DCM and the admin officer went with me. So we're three women and we go and you're escorted in - and that's fine - and greeted, and then you read your statement and go through all the protocol. That was very nice; they do things nicely. Then we sat down with the president to talk. He spoke French and he looked at the three of us and he said, "You know, I think the United States must like me very much to send me three women," and I'm thinking uh-oh. So we have a little fun with that; and I made a statement that said...it was very hard to write a statement because we had basically abandoned Djibouti. Having had activities with them in the end of the '80s and then we just...but, you know, you tried to make lemonade out of these lemons and tell him we're going to try to help some business come here, always couched in the conditional because I knew it was...

Also, Djibouti had had a civil disturbance – “civil war” is perhaps too strong – in the early '90s, '94 and '95. Everything the Afar community feared before independence about being upstaged by the Somalis and basically not having their rightful share of the pie had happened as far as they viewed it. They felt they weren't given – under the constitution the way it was set up

the prime minister was an Afar but it was mostly a figurehead kind of thing, and that they didn't have everything they wanted. Then there had been an armed, actually, rebellion in these two northern provinces where as I said, Obock and Tadjoura, and then there had been a truce signed with part of this group in 1994, '95. Yet, another part of it, a minority part of it, had declined to participate in the truce and said no, we don't agree. So the ones who came in out of the cold there was some power sharing and they got a couple of cabinet seats and so on, but we still had this group of Afars that were armed and creating some mischief. Their leader was a man called Ahmed Dini Ahmed and he had removed himself to Paris where he was in exile and launched literary missives from time to time and other... There were incidents with guns and people killed, which still happened a little bit. There would issue something claiming responsibility or disclaiming it or whatever, and basically it was a power sharing issue: we don't have what we want.

At the time that this happened, my predecessor once removed, Chuck Bacay tried to get the Peace Corps to come there and they had signed an agreement and they were all ready to come when this rebellion broke out, so we withdrew the offer. When Chuck left he was going back to Washington as deputy director of the Peace Corps. He said he would work on this. Mrs. Roble had tried to restart this and I knew that so before I left Washington I went and talked about it. That was one of the things that we were saying that we would try to get them there, and they wanted English language programs. This was again part of their independence from the French, but they felt increasingly isolated there. Djibouti is like the Francophone hole in the Anglophone donut. The other Francophone countries are not contiguous to Djibouti; it's a problem for them. Of course if they had English they'd be well positioned with Arabic, English, and French. So that was one of the things we were trying to be positive about. A little scrap here and there and getting spare parts for these Humvees and this sophisticated transportation equipment that we had given them in 1989 or '90 when we were there; but we hadn't arranged the funding in the out years for the spare parts.

Q: The Humvee is the present equivalent to the Jeep, except much bigger and much more sophisticated.

SCHERMERHORN: There were some other trucks and so forth too. Part of this of course was we had given it to them because we wanted to improve our relations with the army. Then of course we got concerned that the army was using this against the Afar dissidents and maybe there were human rights violations and all of that. So here's the eighty-three year old president saying, "They sent me a woman," and I felt like saying, "Well, Mr. President, some of your people are concerned that they might not have sent anybody at all," but he was twinkling when he said that. It was all very cordial and nice. The next day we went to the airport to see him off. In Africa they still do that in a few places when the president travels.

There I was, so I began my round of calls and of course the next call was on the dean of the diplomatic corps who was the Ethiopian ambassador who was a woman. She had been there already – this was now January of '99 – since '94, four years. She was a very nice woman and spoke very good English and beautiful French because she had done her university in France in French so she was a good person for that. Ambassador Sale said, "Well you're my third American ambassador," and I said, "Oh, well, okay." One of the reasons she was there for so

long, there aren't many Ethiopians who have good French in their diplomatic service. She had been in Senegal before, another French speaking country. I think she was Amhara, and of course the current regime in Addis was Tigrean, but they valued her expertise and her assets. Then, she said to me, "Well, you know, when I first came the president was a little astonished and not very receptive." but she said, "Now that I've been here three or four years and he sees how I work and so forth, we have a good relationship."

He was of the old school; he was eighty-three at that time. He was the George Washington, if you will, of Djibouti. He had been also in the chamber of deputies. That's why he had a house in Paris, and he became the first president. In theory there were supposed to have been elections, and I think there was one along the way and nobody opposed him, but clearly at this point people were beginning to think what was next and he had said that there would be an election. This was one of the demands of the Afars during the dissident period. There was a constitution that called for elections but basically this man had been in place since the first election and it was time to do something else.

The diplomatic corps was a wonderful conglomeration: Ethiopian because of course that's an important relationship for Djibouti, and the French because of course there's that still somewhat paternalistic relationship, if you will. And then there were the neighboring countries: Yemen; Saudi Arabia who only had a charge – they did not have it at ambassadorial level; Iraq; Libya; Sudan; no other Europeans except the French and a European Union representative office subordinate to the European Union in Addis.

Q: No British?

SCHERMERHORN: No. The British had an honorary consul who traditionally had been the representative of the shipping line there, who at that moment happened to be a Belgian. The honorary Belgian consul happened to be a Brit also, the Chinese and the Russians. Now this is quite a group, right? The Russian was a lovely man who was usually under the weather from his vodka intake; he spoke very good French and Arabic. The French ambassador when I got there was unusual for France in that he had been a career army officer and retired from the army after a long career and then went into the diplomatic corps. He had been the deputy of the mission in Saudi Arabia and I guess that was because of the military issues. And, in fact, our young second secretary, Henry, the political cone consul, he had been in Saudi when the French ambassador was there and he knew the family and so forth. The Chinese ambassador – this was very difficult to figure out because, he went around with a minder all the time because he did not speak French or English or Arabic so he had no way of communicating. He had a young, very attractive, nice man who spoke impeccable French and impeccable English and always went. It was very heavy going.

Q: Did you get any feel – do you think he was somebody put out to pasture to keep away from somewhere or was it a reward?

SCHERMERHORN: I was astonished to find that it was his third Francophone African embassy for China; two in West Africa and this. The Chinese had a big aid program there. I shouldn't say a big aid program in terms of money. They did a lot of building and renovating of buildings for

the Djiboutians. For example, when you went into the foreign minister's office there was a little model of a new foreign affairs building which wasn't built yet but they were going to fund it. They rebuilt the wall around the hospital, they renovated the presidential palace, which I said, maintenance is a difficult issue there. The French had always kept these things immaculately, but once they left...there are some photos of Djibouti City in about 1982, about five years after independence, and it looks beautiful; the buildings are pristine, white, everything. However, fifteen years later that's not the case. They need painting, they need plastering, they need all of this stuff. They don't have either the resources or the management ability to keep these things organized. It's hard. This is something Americans do well and we find it difficult to...we say preventative maintenance is a concept that in Africa...

Q: In the Arab world, too. I've served in a lot...

SCHERMERHORN: It's like inventory control. For there, it's when you get to the bottom of the box you order another. They don't look ahead. It's not a culture, a mindset, where you plan ahead. It's something to do with the fatalism of the religion and the hardness...

Q: "Inshallah" (God willing).

SCHERMERHORN: Yes, inshallah, and the hardness of the life. You count each day you're here as a lucky one and you don't worry about the future that much, I guess. Maybe that's kind of a pop psychology way to look at it, but it is a different mindset. Even the people who've been trained in France and know what they should do, there aren't enough people like that to make it all work together. So the Chinese do a lot of that. They don't give blank checks. When they do this they bring their own workmen in and it's actually work. They have their own agenda for this. And they did some public housing, what was going to be...and of course it was always embarrassing because they'd have big ceremonies to inaugurate these things and you know, I'm kind of looking around or looking up. I decided that – I guess I didn't really decide, I just did this – that we didn't have a lot of programs and things but we would work with what we had, these little self-help programs, and we would take an interest.

So I decided everything I was invited to I would go to and I would go to some things that I wasn't invited to if I knew about them and it was – I mean out in the Djiboutian community. There were always dinner parties and that kind of stuff. I had a lot of lunches in the dining room in my little house. People say, "Well what was your house like?" and I say, for people who knew the one in Brussels, "Well it wasn't like the one in Brussels." It looked like a three bedroom crack house in Virginia, It was one floor. It was fine. I'm not complaining at all. It had a beautiful garden right on the sea. The embassy and the Residence are in a compound all together. As I said, this is terrible for the exercise program because it's all on one floor and I walked five hundred yards to my office which is also on one floor.

They always look for the American ambassador. Of course the ambassadors from the Arab countries, they had their own culture there and they could speak Arabic with people, but, as you were saying, I don't think too many of them...In fact, the Libyan used to try to talk to me and he talked to everybody our embassy, he tried to, and he was asking me, he wanted his son to go study oil engineering in Texas or something. He spoke very good English; in fact, I don't think

he spoke French; he spoke English and Arabic. He took long times away. I'm sorry, he was the charge. The Libyan ambassador was quite an attractive man who popped up about every three or four months. He was supposed to be resident there but he hated it so...and he used to say it, quite audibly, at these ceremonies.

I used to laugh and I said to the ambassador who was seated next to me when he first came – that was the Sudanese ambassador who came after me – they always seat you in protocol order. This new Sudanese ambassador, they say you're not supposed to talk to...it's ridiculous, but we're sitting in this convocation waiting for it to start. We were asked for nine o'clock, or whatever it was, and at ten o'clock there's still nothing happening, and I said, "Well, Mr. Ambassador, you're new here but you have to understand there's regular time and then there's Djibouti time," and he laughed. He always used to laugh and say that. Also, the Libyan ambassador then at one of these functions was saying, "Oh, what do we have to stand around out in this sun again for?" The only things that started on time in Djibouti were the French military ceremonies, and there were a lot of them, which was nice. They respected the...and I liked that, having come from this experience in Brussels with all this. It was very nice. They did it basically for something to do there and to keep the troops active because there wasn't a lot to do. We had the usual Armistice Day and Memorial Day. Every French battalion or regiment there had some date that they were in a battle that they commemorated. One was Cinco de Mayo, the fifth of May, in Mexico with Maximilian.

Q: Yes, this was of course very important for the French. What was it the wooden hand or something?

SCHERMERHORN: Yes and whenever there was a change of command. The generals changed every two years and the colonels they all change every two years. They always had a very formal change of command ceremony and invited...those started on time. Sometimes the guest of honor was high-ranking; General Zachariah or the prime minister. Also, it was important because they either had them at night or very early in the morning, like six o'clock in the morning, before the heat of the day. I'm sorry; I'm wandering a little bit here.

Q: No, it gives a flavor for a place that's not well known and I think it's interesting to capture this.

What about the French ambassador? I would've thought the French ambassador would've been important. Talk a little bit about the French relationship there.

SCHERMERHORN: After I called on the dean he was the next person I called on. As I said, he was a former military officer and I didn't know a lot about the...but he gave me his view on the status of the Afar dissident group and what it was doing – the whole scene – and who would succeed President Gouled, the eighty-three year old, and so forth. The president had as his; he called him his chef de cabinet, somebody who was usually referred to as his nephew Ismail Omar. The president and his wife had no children; again, something quite unusual in that part of the world. That's another issue. The president had only one wife; most of the Somali Muslims don't have multiple wives. That's not a thing they do. That's an Arab thing somehow.

Ismail Omar was in his fifties and he was one of those people that people love to hate because as the chef de cabinet he'd also been the liaison to the police force and the "intelligence service," whatever that was there. He had started as – they used to say somewhat disparagingly, some of the French – basically an informant to the police. I don't know if he was actually, literally, the nephew, but he was a member of the family. In his role as chef de cabinet I called on him because he was the person you called on there, and in this first period when the president was gone I called on all the cabinet ministers and everything, and I think that was a little unusual in the sense that I'm not sure that all the – I mean the European ambassadors would do this but I'm not sure the other ambassadors did that, they would pay much attention to these people. They had a big cabinet because again it was part of the power sharing. You give this clan so many and that one so many and whatnot. I'd call on Ishmael and we spoke French. I was there only a couple of months when Kofi Annan came through and...

Q: Kofi Annan being?

SCHERMERHORN: The first African UN secretary general.

Q: Yes, from Ghana.

SCHERMERHORN: He had with him Ambassador Sanu who was an Algerian who had been in the political directorate at the UN and had been very involved in Somalia in the UN UNSOM period. I think it was a dinner for him, or maybe it was for DOV or FAO – one of the UN people – so I was next to Ishmael and we chatted in French. I had been there about – when did we have the strike on Sudan – six months and we got this cable at night and we call and inform them. Of course, the cable was already on the news that we had done this, that we were supposed to call and explain. Anyway, so I had to find him at eleven o'clock at night and I had the number and I called. So I started in French and I said something and I said, "Non, on se parlera en français, Monsieur Chef de Cabinet?" I was stuck for a word there, and he says, "Never mind, I'll say it in English.", and that was the first time I knew that he spoke English. It turned out that he spoke five languages. After he became president later he went to Europe he was on television from Europe in Paris speaking French, in Rome speaking Italian; he spoke Arabic, Somalia, English – fairly good English, not perfect, and a couple of other things. that's because he had been born in Dire Dawa, this city in Ethiopia, which was the railhead there. And when the railroad was a condominium administered by Djibouti and Ethiopia they had the administrative offices in Dire Dawa and his father had worked for the railroad. So he had gone up there and there had been a French lycée there in those days; I don't believe there is now. So that's where he got the French and the English because it was the Ethiopian and the Italian and whatever. So that was kind of amusing, although I continued to speak to him in French or whatever, sometimes both, but that was unusual. Most Djiboutians in the government had no English whatsoever.

Q: In any place that's been a formal French colony or protectorate they don't let go easily and so the power center is often – the French ambassador is usually quite a powerful figure? How did you find this in Djibouti at that time and the relationship with France?

SCHERMERHORN: Well France announced in the spring of '97 that they were going to reduce their presence in Djibouti, phased over a period. They had had something like 3200 troops and

they were going to, phased over two years, take it down to about 2700. So that's a twenty percent reduction. Now this has an important impact on the economy because the families were sent; they had two-year tours and at least the officers families went. So there was an economy built up to support them. Some of it was owned by Djiboutians and some of it by other French people. For example, there were three French lady hairdressers in town. But it had a more economic impact than that for the Djiboutians. Of course the Djiboutians were quite concerned about this. But what was even more important than reducing the numbers, they also were going to change the way in which they assigned people. The officers were going to continue with two-year tours accompanied, but the men were now going to come on rotations of six months unaccompanied. So that was going to make a big difference, not only the reduction, but a significant, or so it appeared, a significant reduction in spending for this economy.

I think the reason this ambassador had been sent there is because he had this military background and he was supposed to be negotiating this. So he was not entirely popular, but he also apparently, I found out later – it wasn't apparent immediately – that he wasn't that popular with the military either. I don't know whether they saw him as a renegade or what, one of their own who was not seconded by the foreign office to do the dirty work so to speak, and he was a bit of an abrupt personality; he wasn't that sympathetic a personality. I could see there was some sort of friction there, I think, with his colonels and the general. So this was a period of difficulty for the Djiboutians. They didn't know where this was going and what was going to happen. This was also the period when there was a lot of speculation as to what would the eighty-three year old president be doing, what was going to happen. Who would run for president, would he designate a successor, would it be Ismail or the chef de cabinet?

The French ambassador was leaving in the summer of '98. He'd been there since '96. So he had a farewell. Oh no, actually that's not how it happened. He'd only been there a year and a half. On Bastille Day, French National Day, in '98 he got up and he made a short speech and he said, "This is also my farewell. I'm leaving." This was a big surprise. Nobody knew this. So after people at this thing asked they said, "Oh he's going to Bahrain," and then he left. One of his daughters had come to Djibouti and was going to spend a year teaching as a French cooperant, that's like the Peace Corps except they get paid a lot of money which our Peace Corps people don't. So Sophie had to find a place to live because they weren't going to be there any longer and so after we saw her at one point in the spring we said, "Where's your father?" and she said, "Well, he's in Paris; he's not going to Bahrain." So there was something that went on there. I never learned what it was but he didn't get another embassy and I think he didn't get anything. I don't know whether it was because whatever he negotiated wasn't really what the French thought they wanted once they did it, or whether the military just said no. Bahrain was important for the military too. Whatever it was, it didn't have a happy ending exactly. He did however, do what they set out which was to get the agreement to reduce the numbers and so on.

Now this was supposed to be phased, so it wouldn't have an immediate impact. Actually, he explained to me when we went and talked, because I went and talked to him, he said, "Some people say it's a big aim, but you have to understand that the enlisted men, a lot of them don't come on accompanied tours anyway." Like Legionnaires aren't married or their families having young children and they choose to stay there and they can go back every four or five months and visit their family. It's not actually quite as Draconian as you might think, but clearly the trend of

the French presence was down. I remember the French number two when I was there, he was getting ready to leave and he used to pontificate about how the French would be out of there in no time and the future of Djibouti was with Ethiopia whether they liked it or not and so on. I didn't hear that from other people though.

Q: But unlike our people who served in Francophone Africa into the West where the French were sort of suspicious of the Americans and this was our chase garde or something like that, here the French didn't have any great proprietary feeling about this place?

SCHERMERHORN: They did. As I say, it's a love/hate...they were under the same strictures, I think, that our budgetary problems caused us in the mid '90s. They were told to look at ways to reduce expenses and they had had a military presence in Chad and that was basically finished or about to be finished. They still had some troops somewhere in West Africa – Senegal, I think, or Cote D'Ivoire, but not much. I was led to understand that the biggest concentration of French military outside of France was in Djibouti with this three thousand, give or take. Again, people would say, "Oh yes, French; that's where the French Foreign Legion is," but the structure wasn't just the legion; it was a military encampment of five or six components. The commanding general was an air force general typically and there was an air wing with its own colonel with eight mirages at the airport, the military airport which was immediately contiguous to the civilian airport, so it was basically one airport. There was an engineering battalion but that was a battalion that was decommissioned while I was there; that was another ceremony. There was the regular army detail, or the regular army. Each of these components was about five hundred or so with the commander, the five colonels. And then they had a hospital which had its own commanding general. There were actually three generals in Djibouti but two of them were medical service generals, the commander of the medical services for the whole military contingent and the director of the hospital. There was a naval attaché or something, but there were no navy people permanently there but the admiral of the Indian Ocean used to sail his flagship in about every six or eight weeks and he would invite you on board for lunch which was a great treat because it was the best restaurant in Djibouti. They were really very nice to us.

The French were very hospitable and immediately invited me everywhere, as they did every American ambassador. That wasn't specific to me. We were included, and actually in a way I think they kind of liked the fact that it was a woman. They had an Ethiopian ambassador with her beautiful friends and they always had two women; and there were usually more men around because the wives either weren't there or temporarily...it balanced their tables, as they said. There were a certain number of Djiboutian couples who ate and entertained in the French manner too. It wasn't limited to French; and there were some other nationalities. There was an international community and it included Djiboutians, the ones who had been educated in France and had connections. And there were a number of them. This businessman, Said Aleh Kubesh, and his wife was actually a French citizen. So there was that kind of social life. They knew a lot of things so you learned a lot about what was going on in Djibouti and what was going on in the business community and so on by going to this.

Q: Lange, let me go through my list maybe. In the first place, I saw on TV the other day that the – I'm not sure if you mentioned the figure, but the French really have a considerable force in Djibouti, don't they? Because that's their main strategic African reserve, isn't it?

SCHERMERHORN: Yes. The numbers have been coming down slowly from a high point of whatever it was, five thousand or something like that. In 1997 or so they had 3200 and there was a commitment then to take it down by about twenty percent to 2700 by the end of 2000, which they had begun to do. Then when the Eritrean-Ethiopian war broke out they actually augmented it a bit with some additional air assets and so forth. So they stopped the ratcheting down for a bit, but this was constantly going down. However, at this point it is, so I'm told, the largest concentration of French troops outside of France because they no longer have very many, if any at all, in Chad and there are some in West Africa, Senegal, whatever, but not as many. I think all of their numbers are down worldwide, as ours are, after NATO in Europe going down, but that's still the biggest. Though, it's not just the Foreign Legion, as maybe we talked about before; it's a mix of troops.

Q: Well let's talk about the EU. EU is sort of gaining its clout and all. Did the European Union as an organization play any role in Djibouti?

SCHERMERHORN: The European Union had a branch office of its representation in Addis Ababa. In other words, the accredited European Union representative to Djibouti was the man in Addis. They had an office with one EU member representative in Djibouti which was to administer the aid projects or whatever. It was vacant when I arrived and then a few months after I got there it was a Brit who came, but one who had been in New Caledonia and other places and spoke excellent French. They didn't play much of a political role; like I said, it was purely an aid operation. It was so lopsided in a sense that the French, of course, were the first among equals there in terms of their embassy and their representation. It was their turf so to speak, so there wasn't a political element. The other EU member states their representatives for the most part, in Addis, were accredited. In the case of Italy it was their ambassador in Yemen who was accredited. I don't know why that...I think they thought their interests in Addis were probably sufficient that they didn't want to dilute that presence by...also the German representative in Yemen was accredited, but otherwise it was the Danes and whatnot.

Q: Well let's talk about Ethiopia and Eritrea because you had a nice little war going on there, didn't you?

SCHERMERHORN: Being in Djibouti was like being the referee at the net in a tennis match watching them lob...I used to call it the war of the press releases because the embassies of the two countries every morning they would be delivering press releases which were diatribes against the other one until the embassy in Eritrea closed because they accused Djibouti of not being impartial.

Q: So tell me, when you arrived what was the state of relations with Eritrea and Ethiopia?

SCHERMERHORN: Well it seemed that everything was going along swimmingly. I wasn't aware of any problems. Apparently something came out that in the previous, at some point in '97 there had been some economic actions taken by Eritrea which were annoying to the Ethiopians, having to do with the exchange rate of the currency and a few other things there. On the surface it didn't seem it would be something that would erupt in any kind of violence or anything. So I

think most people were taken by surprise, including probably a lot of the residents – the Ethiopians and Eritreans themselves – when this broke out. It certainly took, I think, the United States by surprise. Nobody was expecting that kind of activity, as I said. There were apparently some issues between the two that had dwelled. From '93 when Eritrea was established as an independent state with the complete agreement and so forth of Ethiopia, it was lauded at that time as a very amicable way to arrange these things and so forth. So no one expected that the cousins who would basically... The Tigrean regime in Addis and Isais, the president of Eritrea... I mean they had fought together to oust Mengistu from power in Ethiopia, so no one thought that they would have a falling out.

Q: How did this impact on you? Did people take it seriously when it first happened?

SCHERMERHORN: Oh yes. I think they did in Washington. I think it was on a Thursday when it happened; it was the end of the week. I was talking to the office director on the phone and he said, "Well, the assistant secretary is going to take a trip to the area and see if they can talk to people and so on, and I've been tapped to go with them," and I said, "Well, isn't this something that EGAT ought to look into?" EGAT is the regional organization of which both Eritrea and Ethiopia and Djibouti and four other countries are members. They had a division that was reconciliation and peacekeeping and so on – not physical peacekeeping in terms of assets, but reconciliation. Then he said, "Well, we'll let you know once we're on the road whether there's any role for this," and I said, "Well it seems to me like we're trying to encourage the organization to be more robust in its actions and so forth."

Well I didn't hear anything right away. So I did ask to go and I called and asked for an appointment with the president. They didn't tell me to do that; I just decided I'd go see what he thought. I had this meeting and I think he was taken by surprise too and he said at one point, "Well, if they don't settle this very soon, it will go on for a very long time," which, in fact, is what happened. You know if they don't, in the next few days, do something. I asked if he was going to take a role, both as the senior statesman among the EGAT countries and because the EGAT secretariat was there and he said something about he had been on the telephone to both of them. This is a man who was in his eighties now, and of course the other two were fifty-something who perhaps didn't have as much respect for him as they should have. So he was prepared to play a role and so forth and I went back and reported what he'd said. But I didn't hear any more and they didn't push to involve EGAT. Both the NSC, Gail Smith and the assistant secretary in the State Department, with later Tony Lake as the national security adviser, basically played the role themselves and didn't look to any kind of international organization or regional organization to do much in it.

Q: Was this atypical?

SCHERMERHORN: I can't answer that because I didn't observe. Of course this was '98 and the assistant secretary for African affairs had only been in office since the summer of '97.

Q: Susan Rice, was that?

SCHERMERHORN: Yes. The Africa director in the National Security Council, Gail Smith, had firsthand personal knowledge of these actors. In her previous career, whatever it was, I'm not sure, it was with an NGO (Non-governmental organization) or something, it was a part of the world that she had been in and she did actually know both Malis and Isais personally. So I think that militated in favor of taking a more personal and less institutional approach.

Q: It smacks of let's get in there and do something.

SCHERMERHORN: This is where something, in terms of aid and humanitarian assistance in the administration's stated policy of we want to encourage regional organizations to be...we want to help strengthen them, we want to encourage them to play more active roles, this whole thing didn't play into that stated policy at all. AID was funding some activities in the EGAT secretariat to strengthen the apparatus, the institution itself, so that it could take a bigger role in these things. Of course, at various stages along the way in the Clinton administration they said, "We encourage regional organizations; we think they're the way to go for dispute resolution and for cooperation on economic development and a whole range of issues." So this was a little bit of a – I don't know what the right word is – but it really was sort of don't do as we say.

Q: From what I've heard it just sort of smacks of some people want to get their hands on things and want to get out and do something rather than do it by formula.

SCHERMERHORN: There's certainly a role for personal diplomacy and I'm a believer in that too, but you have to also look at the whole picture and use the institutional arrangements when it made sense to do that – or at least force the people you are trying to work with to at least recognize the existence of those institutional arrangements. As I said, I think there were some very personal relationships here which skewed the methodology that they used.

Q: From your perspective when you heard about this, what was the thing about?

SCHERMERHORN: Well that was the first thing. They said Eritrean troops had moved in this place called Badme and Ethiopia was saying, "No, it's ours," and Eritreans were saying no. If I understood this correctly, and I'm not sure that this is right at all, but apparently this area called Badme was kind of a no-man's-land; there was nothing there worth anything. It was pretty bleak territory. For some reason Ethiopian settlers had been moving into the area so the Eritreans moved some troops out to say, "hey, wait a minute," and the Ethiopians said, "No, no," by one treaty from 1890-something, "this is ours." The problem was that apparently the line of demarcation was not absolutely clear from back at the end of the nineteenth century when some of the treaty with Italy and so forth laid down some boundaries there, but it was a little murky as to...

Q: Did you get involved?

SCHERMERHORN: As I said, right in the beginning I called on the president of Djibouti because of EGAT and because it was Djibouti and because he was the senior statesman I said that. It's fascinating. Nobody even acknowledged that we talked to him and I never got anything back from the office director after that that there might be a role for EGAT; because he

understood that too, that that was something to take into consideration. Then whatever happened with the people who got caught up with it, that didn't...

Q: Did you get involved in any support or missions or anything like that?

SCHERMERHORN: No, because Tony Lake made a stop in Djibouti once on one of his shuttle missions and I said, "Well, should we arrange a meeting with you?" and the answer was no, they didn't want to talk to...and I felt like this was really not very good either. Here's this senior statesman who you think if he's going to drop in...It was a little bizarre actually because the answer was, "Well, no, he's been in a lot of African countries but he's never been in Djibouti so he wants to touch down..." So I didn't make any arrangements and I didn't even want to tell them if he was just going to be at the airport. So then they come there and then he looks around and he says, "Oh, I'd like to drive around town," so we did that and everything. I didn't want to do that because if we had time to drive around town, we had time to call on somebody as a courtesy, but we didn't do that. The reason for that was, very early in the process when they'd been working on the shuttle the U.S. negotiators – the assistant secretary and [inaudible] – believed that there had been a leak from somebody; I don't know from where they thought it came; and so they were playing it very close to the vest and not talking at all, even to people in the two concerned embassies all that much.

However, as I said, we had the war of the press releases in Djibouti. It was fascinating because after a while, every day from the Ethiopian embassy there would be three or four a day and it would be this rhetorical denunciation of these aggressors who had moved into their territory and the language was...I mean the only political rhetoric people in that part of the world know is from all their Socialist masters. There were things like the Tigrean People's Politburo and stuff. These are our great democratic friends but they haven't been able to shed the language of what went before in the '70s and '80s there, so it was kind of amusing. The language of denunciation that you use, the venomous kind of rhetoric, is not something we're accustomed to dealing in. So that was a bit amazing.

The second thing was, you know, after you read a couple of these and then you realized that they were basically all the same. Then you looked at it again and you realized they were the same; you could've just changed the date from one year ago and one month ago. The point is they never changed their positions. They both were totally inflexible in this and still are.

Q: Did you get involved with refugees coming through?

SCHERMERHORN: Refugees were not coming into Djibouti there. That was not an issue.

Q: So you weren't feeling at all that you were going to get...

SCHERMERHORN: No. There was an issue about whether the Ethiopians might cross Djiboutian territory to get to the lower part of Eritrea, and whether the Djiboutians would allow them to do that because the port of Massawa, of Saab, was down here not far from...and the easiest way to get to that port and block it off completely would've been to cross a little bit of Djiboutian territory. Some people said, oh yes, that did happen, but others said, no, it didn't

happen. So I don't know. That was one of the reasons, that possibility. Some of the language that Djibouti used that caused Eritrea to say they were not being impartial. They were about to assume the presidency of EGAT and they said it's particularly inappropriate if you're the president of the regional organization, but it had some interesting effects.

They had two EGAT summits of heads of states a year. One is always in Djibouti at the secretariat and the other rotates among the different capitols. The executive secretary of EGAT at that time was an Eritrean and the minute the war started – and there were EGAT meetings in Addis that he had normally gone to – the first time he asked for a visa to go to a meeting in Addis after the war started the Ethiopian embassy in Djibouti said they'd refer it to Addis and he never got an answer. So effectively what they did was paralyze the organization by not allowing him to do his job. And he was not a political man; he was an agronomist and he was being very scrupulous about not taking...so that was not a good thing. You had another reason to try to say you have to work with a regional organization because when you've got an Ethiopia, which is sort of the 800 pound gorilla in that organization, if they want to sabotage it from within easily, they can do it unless people call them to book for this. So the executive secretary had a hard time. And they played this game. He applied in the same way which is a staff member with the EGAT secretariat went over with the passport and they said now we have to work for it. And then they kept saying, "Well, we haven't heard from Addis." And then finally some members of the EGAT donors asked in Addis, "What about Dr. Tutestay's visa?" and they said, "Oh, we don't know. We've never gotten an application." So they were playing this game, which wasn't nice.

Then there was a summit where the foreign minister in Addis, the session was supposed to open at nine in the morning or something and he didn't get there because he was waiting to come down – he had an Ethiopian government plane – he was waiting to see if the foreign minister from Eritrea was going to show up because if he was then he was going to come because he didn't want to leave the chair vacant. On the other hand, he didn't want to go there if he didn't have to. So they were playing all these games with it. Actually, he waited until he heard the guy was on the ground and then of course they had to delay the opening because he didn't actually...he led that at nine o'clock and got there at whatever it was, ten or something. That was the kind of nonsense that went on, but at least the organization didn't dissolve. They didn't say, "We're withdrawing from the organization;" they just kind of ignored it. But at least they didn't dismantle the thing on the basis of...

Q: Did Susan Rice come out to your place at all?

SCHERMERHORN: She came through Addis, then to Asmara, but she didn't come to Djibouti.

Q: Well then moving on to the bombs at our embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, that obviously caught you by surprise, but what did you do then?

SCHERMERHORN: Well it was actually a Friday morning, which in Djibouti is the weekend – Islamic country – and the phone rang and it was somebody from Washington calling and saying, "Have you seen this?" and then I turned on the television. It was already on the television; if I'd had it on I would've seen it already. This was like noon or one o'clock and it had happened at nine or whatever it was in the morning. So immediately they wanted to know if anything was

going on in Djibouti and as far as I knew the answer was no, but I called the head of the police, General Yasin, and said this has happened and “Would you consider extra activity?” and so forth and so on. So we did all that and had a country team meeting right away to talk about it and see what we needed to do in the embassy and then calling the American community and all those things you do when you have a problem like that. General Yasin was very cooperative.

We have a compound that one side is facing on the water with a beach in front, but there’s a fence.

The fourth side borders on a road that goes right up the side and across from the entrance from the embassy you can see stores and residential buildings which are mostly vacant now. Anyway, he said yes to this and that, that he would do this, and he was really very cooperative. He went through all this and he said, “Well, you know, you’ve got the vacant lot there,” and then the French general was one place removed on the other side of this vacant lot and he had a patrol that always went around with French soldiers. The ocean, yes, and the [inaudible], and finally I said, “Well, yes, but what about the building in front of the street?” and he gave this smile and he said, “Oh, that’s alright. We know what goes on in there.” It was amusing because they could actually watch what was going on in the embassy from there anyway.

Q: What was going on in there?

SCHERMERHORN: No, I mean they had some people who were observing what was going on in the embassy, I’m sure. Anyway, they were very cooperative with that and did a lot of good things and so forth. Again, this is with an intelligence service and a police and so forth that we used to give some little assistance to in the mid ‘90s and then when various elements left the embassy and it was downsized, that kind of assistance and cooperation was no longer offered. They would’ve loved to have some help with it but I wasn’t authorized to offer them anything. That was right at the time and then in weeks following they asked every embassy what we thought we needed and asked us to do certain inventories and surveys. You know, things like putting Mylar on the windows, which we’d already done and so on.

Of course a lot of the embassies who did not have Marine Security Guards because one of the fallouts of the budgetary crunch of the mid ‘90s was that they no longer had universality of presence of Marine Security Guards and Djibouti was one of the ones where they had left shortly before I got there. I said they left in ‘97. I’m not sure that was...in some ways, in a country as small as Djibouti, having them is maybe more of a magnet than a deterrent. But in any case, that was not going to happen. That was not something that was in the power.

I was not too concerned about Djibouti. Obviously, it’s a place that has a lot of holes if one chose to try to take advantage of that, but I also thought that if there were bad guys coming through, that is a port of entry and they wouldn’t want to do anything right on the ground in Djibouti because that would endanger any access they might have. One of the things I remember back in the Department they were saying, “What can you do in the embassy to cover information about how to deal with terrorism and all this stuff?” There was a whole list of topics and I say, no, no, no. When they take your embassy down to four officers including the ambassador and you have no military or intelligence assets or anything, there’s not much you can do to figure out who’s in

the back of the mosque cooking up something. But I said that I was a little surprised that we hadn't paid more attention in Djibouti because there was a fictionalized work set in Djibouti.

Q: One of the problems you mentioned, Yemen, is just across the water from you. Was there a Yemeni community in Djibouti?

SCHERMERHORN: Yes.

Q: Yemen has been the source of a lot of trouble and I was wondering was this of concern to us, the Yemeni community in Djibouti?

SCHERMERHORN: No. Maybe it should've been but it...it was a Yemeni community, but with long ties in Djibouti. Ambassador Shelker was originally Yemeni.

Q: The Yemenis have been exploiting their people for hundreds of years and it was natural to have a Yemeni establishment which would also give maybe scope to the more radical Yemenis to play around there.

SCHERMERHORN: I think that General Yasin was a pretty shrewd guy and I think the Djiboutians, my belief was they had a pretty good handle on what was going on. I mean if there were people there that we didn't like it was for reasons that were important to them. I'm not saying there were people there; I don't know. I think they did have a pretty good handle on it. And in that culture people, if they're foreigners, they stand out. I mean not just European, but even from the local...they can recognize Somali clans by the accent, the way the speak Somali. They have ways of intuiting and knowing what's going on that we can't really fathom.

Q: Did the attack on the World Trade Center in New York or by the al-Qaeda thing on September 11, 2001, were you there?

SCHERMERHORN: No, I wasn't there. I left in November of 2000.

Q: Well let's talk about Somalia because you talk about while you were in Djibouti about...because you were kind of the Somali observer, weren't you?

SCHERMERHORN: In 1992 when everybody pulled out of Mogadishu, the embassies and the UN agencies and the NGOs and so forth, all removed themselves to Nairobi. In 1991 the Somalilanders had said, "We're going to be independent," up there and then they had to work out some issues among themselves, until '95 when they had an all-clan conference and they put together a government headed by Muhammad Ibrahim Igal, who had been prime minister of the Republic of Somalia in 1961 to '69. In fact, he was on a trip abroad when Siad Barre staged his coup d'etat. Actually, when I first learned I was going to Djibouti I didn't focus on Somalia that much and I didn't know a great deal about it. I knew something because I'd been interested in it, but not a lot. But anyway, in the course of my preparations to go there somebody said, "Well, people from the embassy in Djibouti have gone there," and I asked them, "Does that mean may I go there as ambassador?" and the answer was yes. I don't think the person who gave me the answer really thought about it very much, because at that point it was considered safe although

the travel advisory issued by the State Department is focused on the lowest common denominator in security, which in the case of Mogadishu it was not very safe. It said as a country Somalia is considered one that they issue a travel advisory and you shouldn't go and so forth; but, in fact, for that portion of it in northwest Somalia...

Q: This was at one point kind of known as British Somaliland.

SCHERMERHORN: Yes, that was a colonial moniker. Then I got into this very soon after I got there because I arrived at the end of January and a week or two later Mohammad Igal was coming back from a trip to Europe and he was coming Air France to Djibouti and then going...and so they wanted to meet me and so I had dinner with his foreign minister and whatever – they used these titles – so before I'd even been to Somaliland I met him right there. He was actually coming because there was an EGAT summit in early March of 1998 in Djibouti and there was something afoot between the Djiboutian chef de cabinet and to see if they could see Igal because the chair for Somalia had not been filled by anyone for a long time. In the event they were not able to bring this off, for whatever reasons, with the other members, so, that didn't happen but that was the reason he was hanging around.

Of course, I got the pitch from Igal about independence, recognition for Somaliland; and their thesis is that British Somaliland was granted independence by Britain, and Italian Somalia by Italy, in the same month, June 1960, but four or five days apart. The two Somalias agreed to merge and create itself as the Republic of Somalia. In other words, the Republic of Somalia is not a colonial creation. It didn't exist in that. This was an important issue because under OAU (Organization of African Unity) resolutions dating from 1962 were, they say, the sanctity of the colonial borders; and that was an attempt by the OAU not to let people keep peeling off and creating all sorts of problems. The Somalilanders say, yes, that's alright but we were never the colonial border anyway so there isn't any reason why we can't reassert our independence. Then they cite examples like the United Arab Republic that voluntary came together and dissolved and the fact that Eritrea was granted independence without regard to this OAU issue and so on, although there are some technical issues that are different there. Also, at this time people were beginning to talk openly about independence for southern Sudan, which of course would be a violation of this OAU resolution if it were to come about.

They had a lawyer write a good brief, so you could make a legal case for that, that it doesn't fit the model that the OAU was talking about; however, nobody in the international community has bought that yet, so...but, this is something they keep pitching; they pitched it when I was there two weeks ago.

Q: Can't they just declare it?

SCHERMERHORN: Well, they've declared their independence, but if nobody recognizes them as independent... See, they've done that. Then some lawyers say, "Well, it wasn't mutually agreed to, this dissolution;" this is people responding to the UAR, and they said, "Yes, but there was nobody home in the south to deliver this message, nobody to negotiate with." Basically they say when those people in the south get their act together, if in fact that ever happens, and then we

might be willing to talk about getting together again. And they say, “We’re being held hostage by the various factions in the south to come to some accommodation,” and so on.

Q: Was there any interest in the AF bureau to this?

SCHERMERHORN: Somalia is one of those issues that here, when I go it’s ’98, and the Clinton administration came into office with this awful thing that happened before they really knew where Somalia was. They kind of there it was in October of ’93 and they’d only been...so people would say things like, “I don’t want to hear the word Somalia.” In other words, they were just hoping it would go away or at least there wouldn’t be any issue that would be so overriding that it would rise up and smack them in the face. So, there wasn’t any inclination to do anything proactive to help the situation. The only thing that was going on is that various people in the international community, not just Americans, the Italians have a great interest in there and various diplomats in Nairobi. These various faction leaders, or warlords, as the press likes to call them, would go around and it was sort of warlord tourism; they’d go and talk to various people and make the same old statements. They didn’t really advance any dialogue nor do anything very creative or constructive. Each one would be saying why they should be the person that should be supported by the international community to do something. So, that wasn’t a very constructive dialogue over four or five years. The Italians were more interested in seeing something happen.

We had an AID program here at one point. Somalis were saying to me, when they had this big conference, “Why has the U.S. abandoned us?” and I said, “Well, we’ve been spending \$26 million a year for the last four or five years, so I don’t think we’re exactly abandoning you. The issue is that \$23 million of that was food assistance administered by OFDA,” the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, humanitarian food aid. It’s not development assistance. So, the development assistance budget was like \$3 million, out of which the overhead for the people who constitute these officials of AID who work on Somalia came. So that’s not anything really. So in that sense they were right, but technically we weren’t abandoning them, we were spending money. At one level the food assistance impedes a solution instead of...it’s a necessary thing if you want to put off starvation but the politics of food distribution – some of the people who contract to distribute it were misappropriating it or using it, or just the fact that the contract provided funds to buy guns. It’s the apple pie and motherhood; you can’t say you’re against humanitarian food assistance, but in situations like that it sometimes has some unanticipated consequences, shall we say.

Q: Were there any other countries that were trying to get involved in Somalia?

SCHERMERHORN: Italy. Well, there’s this whole organization in Nairobi called the SACB, the Somalia Aid Coordinating Board, and that was put together when they realized all these NGOs and agencies and embassies and so forth had moved themselves to Nairobi, but a lot of them, especially the NGOs, were doing their own thing without coordinating it. So they built this mechanism and they have a rotating chair, which currently is the Dane because the Nordics do per capita more aid there, but it’s all pretty small stuff. It’s not the big infrastructure projects that you would need to actually get the economy going again.

Q: In Djibouti were there borders where you had – I've heard about the Danakili or something – various tribes crossing back and forth into Somaliland or something like that. Was this a problem?

SCHERMERHORN: This whole area, this is what it's hard for us to grasp because we deal in national borders and there the majority of the population is nomadic. They follow their camels and their sheep around and they don't say, "Gee, I just crossed this thorn bush and now I'm in Ethiopia," or "I'm in Djibouti," or whatever it is. So it's a very fluid border, and this again is a problem when you're talking about aid. We had no aid mission in Djibouti – it was one of the ones that fell by the wayside in 1993 when AID said we could no longer have universality because we don't have enough program money. So they're doing HIV programs in Ethiopia and I'm saying, "How can you say..." The Ethiopian truck drivers who come to the port, and they have all the contracts for driving, are the ones who are bringing HIV up to Djibouti, so how can you say it stops here and you're not going to do anything. This is not a rational approach to these things but this is the way AID operates; they find it very difficult to do multi-country projects.

They had a program in the beginning of the Clinton administration which was a very good concept but there wasn't a lot that actually came out of it, and that was called GAGI, the Greater Horn of Africa Initiative: meaning that this is a nomadic, porous border and these are transcendent issues and you need to approach them cosmically. But they only have missions that operate on a bilateral basis. They used to say to me, "Well, yes, you don't have a program but perhaps we can do something under GHAI. So tell us what it is." So then I'd go and say, "Well how about doing a little (this, that and the other thing)?" and they'd say "Oh, that's a good idea, but of course we can't actually implement it because we don't have a mission there." So it was a totally circular... I found it a bit cynical. I don't know whether they meant it to be cynical but that's how I interpreted it after a while when they'd just keep running you around the bush on this.

Q: Was our embassy in Nairobi basically picking up what was happening in the warlord torn part?

SCHERMERHORN: I'm sorry, I digressed a bit there. I said they all moved to Nairobi and we have a position in the political section at the -02 level which is called the Somalia watcher and we also had another one that was called the Sudan watcher when we moved the embassy from there. Basically, they talked to the people in the south, but the people in Somaliland, their natural orientation is not to go to Nairobi; they don't even go to Mogadishu. So they would come to Djibouti for consular work; there were some American dual citizens and especially as things began to be organized there, a lot of Somalis of the diaspora came back and they'd want absentee ballots if they were voting. So, there was that issue and then it was simply that they came out through Djibouti much more. You asked about the tribes; you mentioned Danakil. That's an older name for the Afars. Geographically it's called the Danakil Depression, the end of the Great Rift Valley there. However, the Danakili are actually Afars, which are not ethnic Somalis. So about thirty percent of the population now in Djibouti are Afar and they're in the north part near the northern part of Ethiopia and the rest of them are Somalis and the majority of the Somalis are from the Issa clan, which is there and also partly in Somaliland although the majority clan in Somaliland is Isaaq – it's a different thing.

You had some clan rivalries there but you also had a number of Issas and Isaaqs... Well, in the time of the British they developed two boarding schools in little hill stations modeled on British boy schools; and those were the two schools where anybody who was educated in Somaliland at the secondary level has gone there, and that prepared them very well for universities in the U.K. or the U.S. or so on. Then there are some of those people who actually either originally came from Somaliland or were in Djibouti but their parents sent them to this school. So sometimes when you sort of scratch a Djiboutian who is speaking French and you find out they do speak English, it's because they're actually Isaaqs from there. It gets a little complicated. You have to know them for a long time before they tell you that because they've assimilated by learning French and being more...so that's one of the problems.

Issas and Isaaqs for the most part are not found in the rest of Somalia. Some of the other clans now have moved around a bit and it's a long, devolved story about...and that's part of the problem in the south now; there's land claims because some from the central part of Somalia had gone down to areas of the south where the land is more fertile and basically appropriated it and one of the problems of reconciliation in the south now is how to adjudicate these claims, or do you adjudicate them and if so, how.

Q: There has been a certain migration from Somali areas to the United States and we're living within a few miles of sort of a Somali settlement right here in Arlington and Fairfax county. Were these from the old Italian Somaliland area or were they from Somaliland?

SCHERMERHORN: Some of them are from Somaliland but most of them are from the south because they fled what became Siad Barre's increasingly repressive regime. Even the worst of dictators sometimes does a few things in the beginning in their reign or regime that are okay. One of the things Siad Barre did was he held a referendum on selecting an alphabet so they could actually have a written Somali language, which up until 1973 there was not one; the vote was for the Roman alphabet as opposed to Arabic script. And there were a few things, but he got increasingly megalomaniac or whatever.

Q: What is the Somali language? Is it Arabic?

SCHERMERHORN: No, it's a Chasidic language, I think it's called. They know some Arabic though because of reading the Koran.

Q: You went into Somaliland then?

SCHERMERHORN: There was a little twin-engine plane hired by the UN to take UN agency people and it was based in Djibouti. It wasn't the whole time I was there; it was taken away. In Hargeisa they had UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) because there is still a big refugee community in the Ogaden portion of Ethiopia; there are two refugee camps of Somalis, many of them from Somaliland, others from further down. There were also two refugee camps still operating in Djibouti with Somalis and Ethiopians. The Ethiopians have now been sent back. Yes, that was a big problem for Djibouti; there were Ethiopians who claimed they were refugees from Mengistu, but of course he's long gone now but they haven't gone back. The

Somalis are beginning to repatriate some 2500 Somalis, but we're talking about much larger numbers in Ethiopia – 20,000 to 30,000.

Q: What sort of a presence did Ethiopia have in Djibouti?

SCHERMERHORN: Well it had an embassy and next to the French embassy it was important because it's the big neighbor. Of course, a great portion of the traffic through the port is destined for Ethiopia because it's landlocked, and especially after May of '98 when the Eritrean ports were not used any longer. Even if the Eritrean ports were used they were good for the northern part of Ethiopia, but for that whole southern part you need... And of course when Mogadishu was a functioning port and Kismayo, the port of Mogadishu, but those are not really working to the capacity that they once had either, and won't be probably for a long time. So, Djibouti is really the access point so that's important. The Ethiopians had a big embassy and they were there.

There was no daylight between Ethiopia and Djibouti in the beginning when this war started, in fact to the point where the Eritreans were complaining about this, that it should have been impartial. The response of the Djiboutians to that is the Eritreans are welcome to use the port if they want; we're not saying they can't – which is true, they weren't saying, "You can't do that." That wasn't exactly what the Eritreans had in mind. When the war started the eighty-three year old President Gouled was still in office and there was an election set for the spring of '99 and he had said he was not going to run; he was eighty-three and he'd had a good career. His nephew was his chef de cabinet and he was in his early fifties. Anyway, the idea was he was the heir apparent and he was going to run, but who was going to oppose him. He was working very closely with the Ethiopians. In fact, the nephew, who had been born in Dire Dawa, which is in Ethiopia, because in the heyday of the railroad which goes from the port of Djibouti up to Addis, Dire Dawa is roughly halfway up in Ethiopia, and a lot of the management jobs of the railroad used to be in Dire Dawa and there was a French lycée there. That's no longer how it works, but anyway; and apparently the father of the chef de cabinet had worked for the railroad in Dire Dawa and that's why he learned his French in the lycée there. He's now the president of Djibouti and he speaks Amharic, Somali, Arabic, Italian, English and French.

Q: Were there any other relations or episodes that we haven't covered about your time in Djibouti?

SCHERMERHORN: Well, there are quite a few things. I can talk a little more about Somaliland. I asked if I could go there and so I met the president immediately because he was in Djibouti and then I went there in May of '98 and this was a little game; they knew if they said oh, it means the U.S. had recognized us if the ambassador from Djibouti comes here, but I couldn't come there and we would repudiate that. But they knew that the more people who came, the... so they were very anxious to get not only Americans, but anybody who would come. Of course when you're an ambassador you have to ask permission to leave and go and so I always asked and I always got permission. In one sense it was probably encouraging them a bit. I went for reasons; when I went in May there was a conference that was going on and the consul went to do the consular work. We had a little self-help money for Somaliland, \$25,000, and we administered that from the embassy in Djibouti, as well as some DHR money, Democracy and Human Rights money – a little pot of money for that \$25,000. These were not government to government; these were local

NGO type things that we would do that way. So various people in the embassy went for various functions and then we'd have a meeting with the American community there, such as it was, and so on when we did that.

Every time you went, what was fascinating about it is to see how this area was really functioning with the help of the Diaspora. One of the problems of not having recognition is that the World Bank and the IMF (International Monetary Fund) wouldn't do anything there. The UN agencies did. There was no banking system, so that's why you had things like al-Barakat, which has featured now post 9/11 as possibly a conduit for money to terrorists. It's the system they devised to have money transfers in the absence of any banking system. This is not only in Somaliland, this is all of Somalia. There were like five different telephone companies and you go in some office or a hotel and they have three or four telephones on the desk because they didn't have connectivity; so you'd have to have a phone for the three or four...but it was better than not having any and it was cheaper.

You have to understand, the whole city of Hargeisa was basically destroyed by the Somali Air Force; it turned against their own people and that's why they're so adamant about not wanting to join the south again and so forth. If you talk to some Somalilanders in the government, they'll tell you everybody is adamantly opposed to joining the south and if you talk to people in the south they say, "No, there are only a few diehards who don't want to come in with us." The truth is somewhere in between. It's not monolithic either way. It's one of those situations where politically it's impossible for a politician in Somaliland who wants a high office to say he's looking to accommodate with the south.

Q: Well then what else was going on?

SCHERMERHORN: Did we talk about the American community?

Q: Not really.

SCHERMERHORN: There is a little American community in Djibouti. Mostly missionaries and they do either educational or health. They're not proselytizing because they're not in that area.

Q: I was going to say in the Islamic world missionaries don't seem to get anywhere.

SCHERMERHORN: Yes. They're permitted to function as long as they're not actively proselytizing. One woman had put together an Afar dictionary. The Afar language is not the same as Somali so there had never been a written dictionary. Another one was a midwife who was working with the local hospital and another group taught English classes. I'd say there were like thirty, with their children, at any given moment. Sometimes they went off on their sabbaticals and then they would come back. There were like twenty or thirty people like that. The pilot of this little UN plane, when we had it there, was a contractor with an American company. So there were a few people like that. We opened the swimming pool on Friday afternoon for them and had parties for the children. So we tried to keep the doors open to all of this.

There was a UN family of agencies in Djibouti. The UNDP (United Nations Development Program) rep, the senior person of course; the UNHCR, the refugees; WHO (World Health Organization); UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund); and WFP (World Food Program) because that was very important not only for Djibouti, but when they had famine in Ethiopia the port of Djibouti was where the food came through. They actually had more to do with making it work for Ethiopia than... In fact, when we had drought in '99 and so forth, AID was very forward leaning on this and they didn't want to have a problem; they wanted to be ahead of the curve on this, which they were, and they got it organized to bring in all for Ethiopia. This is this issue of the borders; it doesn't stop at the border. I'm saying, "But there's drought in Djibouti. They have the same problem," and the head of OFDA, of foreign disaster assistance, wanted to come to look at the port of Djibouti to make sure that it was going to work for Ethiopia and I said, "Well you can come but only if you let a couple of sacks of grain fall off that lorry before it leaves Djibouti." This is not right. Then, they said, "You didn't say anything about it," and I said, "Yes I did. I have three cables asking for the declaration you have to make." Nobody pays any attention to this. Anyway, the guy did come, Hugh Parmer, and he did then allocate something for Djibouti. He wanted to go and talk to me about the port and I said, "Are you going to go and tell them that you're only interested in this because of what you can do for Ethiopia?" This is the mindset of this. It's very difficult. You have to beat them over the head.

Same thing with there's an organization called FEWS (Famine Early Warning System) and it's something that is a contractor to AID and they have an office in Nairobi. This, again, started after the famine in the '80s when they decided they needed to be able to anticipate these things more skillfully and with longer lead time than had been the case before. It's a lot of scientific indicators, but it's not simply rainfall – that's an obvious one – but they get into secondary and tertiary indicators like they measure the weight of the animals going to market and whether they're the right size, they've gotten nourishment and all. They have a whole bunch of things. They also had a bulletin [laughs] and in the summer of '98 one comes across my desk and it's got a nice map of that section of Africa showing the EGAT countries because FEWS is operating in Nairobi with USAID for the EGAT countries.

All the countries are shaded that are in this – Sudan and Ethiopia – and then there's this little blob that doesn't have any shading and it's Djibouti, and I'm looking at this and I called the fellow up and I said, "Djibouti isn't shaded. Does that mean you don't do anything about Djibouti?" and he said, "Yes, that's right." And I said, "Well how can you call this the Horn of Africa that you're dealing with? That is the Horn of Africa." and he said, "Well it wasn't in our contract with AID," and this was because AID didn't have a mission there. I said, "Well, it doesn't make any sense. These borders are porous. You can't have this initiative for everything around it and it doesn't apply here." So he kind of laughed and actually he happened to have in his office when I called somebody from their office from Washington, so we got on the phone. So I had to complain about this. I said it's not rational. So there was a lot of to'ing and fro'ing and I finally said, "I wish you would come to Djibouti and look around here," and so the guy did come up. He spent three days and we showed him Djibouti's scientific institute and all these things. So he said, "Well that's very interesting. Now we're supposed to be looking for signs of impending famine. Here it's like it's a chronic condition in Djibouti." I said, "Yes, that's right." So they're not interested. I said I could understand that if our AID people were responding to the fact that it's a chronic condition; they're not, they're only responding when it pops up as a

problem. So it really kind of gets to you after a while, but at least they did...and even AID was embarrassed that they had not marked it. I said, "How can you call it the Horn of Africa project when it's not..."

I think I talked about General Zinni and CENTCOM. As I said, because they had taken away everything in the mid '90s – not only from Djibouti, but from some of the other smaller countries – the only thing we had was a little bit of international military education and training money, IMET; we had \$100,000 a year which is the cost for two students. It was not money that ever popped up in Djibouti. They coasted out a couple of military exercises; these are what they call humanitarian. They do things called vet clinics where they come and they inoculate the goats and everything and this is good for where we are. They would cost those out like at \$300,000, but again, because the people who did it came on commercial air and they coasted their time or their salary, it was not money that actually did anything tangible that you could see in Djibouti other than whatever these people did in the course of the exercise. So we're not really talking about any kind of assistance other than the \$25,000 of self-help.

General Zinni was very good and he came four times, in the AORs they call it – areas of responsibility – and I had some ideas about things I hoped they would try to do and he was very responsive. Not big things, but ratcheting up the level of exercises a bit and doing some special humanitarian activities and doing a port call. We hadn't had a port call since 1994 in Djibouti. Now this is the major port in the area. We had a bunkering contract so that ships came in and refueled for two to three hours and then left again; but they hadn't actually had an official port call and we finally got one of those in April of 2000. One of the reasons we weren't getting these: the admiral, apparently, and other naval people were very interested in beefing up Aden which was coming on stream as this modern port that had been constructed there and so they were trying to get everything to go there – in fact, even to the point of canceling the bunkering contract for the refueling for some of these ships. We were told that they were going to cancel this like three or four days before, "Oh, we're going to cancel this," and I said, "Please don't do that. This is the only thing,"

I thought the whole idea was we wanted options. And they said...this was green-eye shade stuff, the Defense security – whatever that acronym is; it's in Fairfax out here. They cost out what the refueling costs are in the places they do it and they said, "Well, it's more expensive than it is in Aden," because the management of Aden was given a preferential rate when the new port opened in order to get people there. I said, "Even if it is more expensive you want to have options, right?" and there was a lot of putzing around.

Q: Was this before the Cole was attacked?

SCHERMERHORN: Yes, this was before the Cole. This was the end of '99 they were going to cancel this thing. So we bitched and moaned and said all this and they said, "Well, okay. We'll give another contract but not right now," or something like that. Then of course the Cole happened and now, of course, Djibouti, after absolutely ignoring the whole thing, now they're interested again. This is the problem; we're very changeable, in and out...

Q: You better explain for somebody what the situation was with the USS Cole.

SCHERMERHORN: Well, the USS Cole was a U.S. naval ship that was calling in Aden port. They had some kind of floating pier or whatever it was; so it wasn't actually anchored close to shore, it was off out in the bay and a small boat did a suicide mission with bombs and blew a big hole in the Cole. It wasn't sufficient to sink it but it did kill seventeen sailors and a number of wounded. It was clearly a terrorist operation. And this was after looking at this port and saying they've designed it in a way that is going to prevent this kind of thing from happening because it's not going to be right close to shore and everything. That was a very, very unexpected event; it was the second week of October in 2000.

The French have a military hospital in Djibouti and so they sent their medevac plane with six doctors from the hospital over to Aden right away because the American embassy in Yemen is in Sanaa, not in Aden. There was only one military attaché or something on the ground in Aden at the time this happened and they had to get everything down there. So the French just sort of did this and they went and the doctors did triage, looked around and said, "We're going to take these eleven back to Djibouti and operate because your medevac plane hasn't even left Germany yet and it'll be nine hours flight here and two hours on the ground, nine hours back and we don't think these eleven will make it if they have to wait that long." So they brought them back and operated; all eleven of them. After twelve hours in Djibouti we had a plane come, they were able to be taken out and go back to Germany and they were absolutely wonderful. They have two French medical generals; the head of the hospital and the head of the medical services, plus all these doctors, and they did a fantastic job and they were so cooperative and so wonderful on the ground. You know, there's a lot of complaining about the French being very difficult to deal with and so on, but when you're working on the ground with them they're terrific. So that was very, very good.

Q: So Aden, the bloom was a little bit off the rose, wasn't it, as far as...

SCHERMERHORN: See this happened just as I was leaving. It doesn't take any great mental capacity to know that Djibouti is... People used to say, "Well it's small and so we're not interested," and I'd say, "It doesn't matter if it's small. As the real estate agents say, 'location, location, location.'" but we just had people who didn't want to pay any attention to that.

Q: What else do you have on your list?

SCHERMERHORN: Just to emphasize how useful Djibouti is as a platform: when we had the floods in Mozambique in the winter of 2001 and we did a massive airlift of assets and personnel down there to help. They were coming from Germany and some were coming from the U.S. to Germany. So they had to have one stop and Djibouti airport was it, so our poor little major who was the only military officer there was busy doing all this. In the course of a month we had two or three flights a day down there. The Djiboutians were very cooperative with all of this.

There was a policy issue, which is a very interesting one also: when I got there I found that there was a back issue about paying landing fees at the airport. A policy that somehow had been clarified or enunciated around '94 was that military planes or U.S. government planes that we don't pay landing fees on state to state as a reciprocal thing; but of course that's a bit of a phony

argument. A country like Djibouti doesn't have anything to reciprocate with, nothing that they'd get any benefit from. So we were not paying landing fees at the airport for any of this. Every time they would come, they never refused us but they would present the documents and the army major would sign the part of it that we could pay for and the other was under protest. What they were saying, there were also certain fees we could pay but they didn't disaggregate this in the bill, the landing fees from the other thing, so we weren't paying really anything much at all except the refueling, and the airport management would come and complain about this.

Our claim was that if it were a private airport we would pay, but we said, no, it's a parastatal field, which is true – it was under their Ministry of Transportation. They then said, "Well yes it is, but we don't get any funding from the ministry. We're supposed to be self-financing so we not really a parastatal." This is what the lawyers get into, and then of course to complicate it even more, we had been paying these fees back in the period of the Gulf War. We had a lot of traffic, so it was lucrative; it was good for them. Then at some point in '94, as I said, the lawyers determined that okay; we can take the stance that we don't need to pay this. It wasn't only in Djibouti; almost every country in Africa had this issue. We had run up a big tab here and we weren't paying. At one point the management at the airport used to say, "Well we'd like to say you can't use it," but of course the president of the country wouldn't have done that because that would've been a policy earthquake, but it was an irritant. Then they said, "Can't we get some help with the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration)?" and so I went back and asked about that and the answer was, "No. The FAA doesn't give help unless American carriers come in," and of course there were no American carriers going to Djibouti airport. I said, "Well there aren't any American carriers but there are a hell of a lot of U.S. military airplanes. Either the military or the FAA ought to be interested in helping the airport." They wouldn't do that either. Sometimes we don't seem to know where we're going.

We did solve the landing fees problem though because I had our economic officer write a number of cables and we went back and we asked them to get the documentation. You know, you claim that you're not a government organization; show us the charter that we can send back that you have to be self-sufficient. Finally we wrote this and I said, "Look, I think we can make a good case here," and we did. Just after I left they came back and said, "Yes, we'll pay the landing fees." They had to disaggregate the bills but they'd gotten a new computer and we helped them figure out how to do that. It was only fair, that was an issue that we got a little help for.

The question of an election in Djibouti – I started to tell you about that – which was very interesting. Of course, when you're there the opposition politicians always want to come in and talk to you. I use the plural advisedly because there were a lot of opposition politicians representing themselves basically; political parties are not well advanced. They would come in and I used to hear people talking outside and they'd say, "Well, you know, they're all so fragmented? How are they going to do anything?" and finally I got tired of listening to this myself and I'd say, "Well, you know, this is all very interesting, but you know, this one was in the other day and now you're here and somebody else wants to come next week. If you don't work together – if you're not a unified opposition – you're complaining, but..." They'd say, "Well, how are we going to counter the government?" and I said, "Well, you have to be a political party. You have to be a unified opposition."

Well this went on for a while and then about six weeks before the election I saw on my calendar there was a deputation and they were all coming in together and they came in and they said, “We’ve agreed. We got together this week and we have a charter. We’re the unified opposition and this is our candidate,” and they pointed to one of them, and that’s what they did. They didn’t do it because I said that; there were other people telling them that too, but they did this and so they actually had a horse race for an election. The chef de cabinet, he was going to run; he did get a little nervous at this. As long as they were fragmented he knew there was no chance. However, when they actually looked like they were going to cooperate that put him on his mettle and he organized the campaign. He actually offered to debate the guy, who actually declined, and they gave him television time and they let them have rallies. The president also had an election manifesto, his vision for Djibouti, and they had a press attaché and the foreign press. They ran the thing and it was a big improvement over previous elections. It wasn’t perfect, but of course they never are. Ours aren’t perfect either, right?

Actually, the chef de cabinet did win but it was with seventy-four percent of the vote. This was at the same moment when these great bastions of democracy in Africa – Meles in Addis is running and getting ninety-six percent of the votes; Mubarak in Egypt is getting ninety-seven percent; somebody in West Africa is getting whatever. They didn’t get any credit for this at all and even the international observers – we tried to get election observers and that wasn’t going to work. Finally it did work; we didn’t have American ones there but we stimulated the UN. We worked with them to say, “Look, we need to have some kind of observers.” So it ended up being the Arab League and the Islamic conference and the OAU, which was okay; those were all local. They were very complimentary and this really worked. It actually worked out to the president’s advantage because he had to do something that looked like it was...and then he did and it worked out.

Then there was another very important thing – there were so many things going on there: they had had this dissident activity with the Afar minority. They had a little shooting war in ’93 and ’94 to early ’95 and then there was a truce. Most of the Afar dissidents came back and were given some jobs in the government. However, a minority of them stayed out in the cold and their leader, a man called Ahmed Dini, went in exile in Paris. He left and went to Paris; and periodically there would be missives and there would be some shootings, or whatever, and this dissident group would claim responsibility maybe for them. In the winter of 2000, in February, Ahmed Dini comes back from Paris. So he’s been back about two weeks or so and I said, “Please call him up and ask if he would like to talk to me because I would be very pleased to meet him.” So he did come to the embassy, and of course I knew the government would know because they knew everybody who came in – but that’s okay.

So we had this interesting conversation. I said, “Why did you decide to come back now? Why not two years ago or two years in the future or never?” He said something quite profound actually. He had beautiful French, in his seventies – not a young fellow – and I thought I was going to see some wild-eyed radical, the way he’d been depicted to me, but he was a very thoughtful looking intellectual character. He said, “Well, it’s clear that neither side can prevail; neither the government nor we Afar minorities here. That’s a situation that’s not good for anybody in Djibouti. If the government can’t prevail and they’re at a standstill, they can’t get on

with doing things that need to be done here. So it's in everybody's interest to bury this hatchet." He didn't use that word, but that's the gist of it. He said, "For Somalis and Afars both, our future is not with Ethiopia. What we need to do is establish a stable platform here in Djibouti for the whole region. And therefore I've decided I'm going to come back and make my peace and work to cooperate." What he meant by that, they still had to go into power-sharing negotiations because what the Afars wanted was basically to devolve the government to the local districts, but Djibouti is so small that you can't do much of that.

However, the primary issue they were interested in was devolving the justice system so that everybody didn't have to come into Djibouti city, that these four district seats could have...they began those negotiations which were very slow and went on and on, at the same time that this Somalia reconciliation that the president launched was beginning. That's another whole issue too. As I said, Somali reconciliation is a very important issue and I should devote a separate issue to that. Also, as I said, when the president first took office, President Ismail Omar as he's called, in May of '99 there was virtually no daylight between Ethiopia. They were all very cozy together talking about their future together and all of this. Then the president goes off to his first UN General Assembly four months later to New York in September of '99 and he devotes his maiden speech there to launching an initiative for Somalia reconciliation.

He says, "It's time; the Somali people have suffered too much and we've gone for ten years without any progress on this. The time seems right now. People are tired; they're ready to take a further step and we Djiboutians are well placed by both by ethnicity and geography to stimulate this process but we're a small country and we can't do it by ourselves. Therefore, we solicit the moral, psychological and material support of the international community." And he said, "We will do our part and then the Somalis must do their part; and if those two things happen then the international community must do its part." So then he steps down from the podium and they all were laughing. Everybody applauds and so forth and the Security Council gives a resolution: yes, everybody is for peace; nobody is going to say no. So he launches into this activity which becomes all-consuming over the next year. This is not something that Ethiopia was really very enthused about. That's another whole set of issues which I won't talk about now about why that's true. So that put him a little out of step with Ethiopia. Then Ahmed Dini in the middle of all this comes back in the winter. Then in April of 2000, again when this process is going on, a consultation within Somalia, within Djibouti, and with people in the Diaspora, constant focus groups and meetings preparatory to a big gathering; this is all going on and all the ministers are very involved. Then the president announces that he's signed a management contract with the port's authority of Dubai for a twenty year management contract for the port of Djibouti. Again, he hasn't consulted anybody in Djibouti about this, understandably. But it was probably a brilliant thing for him to have done.

The port is the only income generating asset in Djibouti; there's nothing else. It's a parastatal and the government is controlling it. It's the trough that everybody feeds at. And they're not reinvesting the money that they need to reinvest to upgrade it and modernize it and expand it and do all those things that are necessary if it's going to survive. But as long as it is in the government's domain it's very hard for the president to say no to people because he's using it too. This is how they find everything that's going on. So the ministers are not going to be happy. A lot of people are not going to be happy here. The employees in the port are not going to be

happy because there's a lot of featherbedding. So they know if it's privatized that basically there'll be unemployment, at least initially until they build it up. Then, of course the third and probably most important party that is not happy with this are the Ethiopians because they were operating through the port under an agreement signed in 1995 which was on very favorable terms for Ethiopia – very low costs in tariffs and all of that.

Now why such an agreement was signed in 1995 on terms that were so preferential for Ethiopia, I don't know, but they were. I think at that point when the two Eritrean ports were still on that Djibouti thought it would offer lower prices and attract more business but it turned out to be that it was too good a deal and they were losing money on it. The president says he's going to give the management, including setting tariff structures and all of that, and he doesn't consult beforehand because if he did everybody would say, No, don't do that, but it is a brilliant thing. The port's authority of Dubai at that point was operating Dubai port, Beirut port, Jeddah container port, and another port in Oman. So this was going to be their fifth port in the area. And the operations manager for all of this happened to be an American who was a thirty-year veteran of the Merchant Marine and very efficient and so forth; and the team was international. They put in a Belgian who spoke both French and English as the resident manager to do this. This turns out to be a good thing but of course Ethiopia at this point is getting very annoyed. So you begin to see daylight here between them. He's gone off on his own bat and done some things that the Ethiopians are not happy with.

Again, this is all going on in the light of the Somalia initiative which many, many observers said, "Oh, it's just another attempt and it's not going anywhere again," and so forth. And I said after watching this and talking to people, "Well no, this is different this time for a lot of reasons. It's much more inclusive; it's much more far-reaching; it's predicated on a different basis than previous attempts," and so on. I said, "They're very determined. There will be a result. The issue is not whether there will be a result. The issue is whether it will be a viable and a durable result. There are certain things that people in the international community could do now to try to ensure that it is viable and durable." But again, we couldn't get anybody interested in this. But the whole process is fascinating and it's a subject of a whole separate thing.

So here we have a new president in Djibouti, thirty years younger, and an activist. He's doing things; he's looking ahead. He has a vision for Djibouti; he's not just letting it stand there. However, he's running a great risk of making a very dangerous enemy of Ethiopia which if it's goaded enough to the point...some people have said, "Oh, the only future of Djibouti if the French ever leave is with Ethiopia. The Ethiopians would move in and do it." I think what we've seen in the last two or three years: the United States needs a place like that when we need it. We don't always need it, but when we need it, we need it. So I think for the international community and for NATO allies and so forth, it's not in anybody's interest to see Djibouti be subsumed less than one of the other countries in the area. It is a platform, as Ahmed Dini said, that's useful to people and if you let the Ethiopians have too much sway they will run over it if they could.

At one point the French were going through what we were going through in the mid '90s and saying we've got to reduce government costs. That's when they began to ratchet down the presence. And there were French people who were saying, "Well, you know, it's not too long before we'll be out of here too." I think maybe in the last couple of years now there's been some

revisionist thinking and people say yes, there's a cost involved in being in a place like this, but it's an essential cost because of their other interests.

Q: Was the Central Command looking at this sort of thing, do you think?

SCHERMERHORN: Well, I don't know. I used to talk about those things with General Zinni. As I said, I was saying, "I thought we wanted options." A question which the U.S., as far as that goes, hasn't gone into is what we would do if the French said Look; we can't bankroll this operation anymore. We're picking up our marbles and leaving. I don't think they're ever going to do that; I shouldn't say "ever." There might've been some movement in that direction three or four years ago but I think it's probably nothing now, but that's always a possibility. Is this something that's important enough to have some kind of NATO presence, whether it's the U.S. or some other European country? I don't know.

Q: While you were doing this did you ever run across our old Saigon colleague Larry Pope? Was he political adviser to Zinni at the time?

SCHERMERHORN: When I went to Djibouti in January I went by Europe, of course, and I went via Brussels. General Zinni was making a trip to the AOR but not to Djibouti at that point. When I was talking to Larry he said, "We're going to be in Brussels," and I said, "Well I'm going to be there." So I actually met General Zinni for the first time in Brussels and we talked, and Larry was with him. Larry came once with him but the other three times Larry didn't come so I didn't actually see him on the ground that much, but we used to talk.

Q: Was there a community of interest by telephone, fax, e-mail, or something between you and the ambassador in Asmara or Addis Ababa or Nairobi?

SCHERMERHORN: Well we didn't have classified e-mail and some of the others did. Yes, there was some discussion. The embassy in Addis was extremely prolific. You'd look at the cables in the morning and there would be twenty long conversations. In fact, they finally said back in the African bureau that we didn't need quite so much detail. In Eritrea they had some difficulties there because of course when the war started that was more difficult for that embassy that they drew down their staff and they also in Addis drew down some of the staff. But in Eritrea there was a gap between ambassadors for a while. Yes, we used to try to talk but, you know. The phone connections weren't always that good either.

Q: Anything else?

SCHERMERHORN: The French community there was very good. I had this rather amusing...as I said, we didn't have any USIS programs there and when USIS left various embassies in 1993 and 1994 they were more organized. They left a memorandum of understanding with the post about what USIS programs were still accessible without actually having a presence there. Their memo had something like twenty different programs on it. In the case of Djibouti, they said we could continue to access two programs. One, we could buy books from their list. If we didn't have an allocation for their budget, we had to find the money from somewhere to do that. And

we could nominate people for international visitor's programs without any guaranteed numbers of positions and we did do that a little bit. So that wasn't much of anything.

They were always begging me to teach English there. Here's Djibouti, this Francophone hole in the Anglophone donut, and what they really wanted, they knew that they needed English. They had Arabic and French and if they had the English they could try to position themselves as a service industry using the port and various things, and just to get on in the world, go to universities that were Anglophone. And I said, "No, USIS doesn't do that unless the programs are self-sufficient." In other words, you have to charge money for it so that it pays for itself. I mean this is ridiculous in a place as poor as Djibouti. And then the head of the Alliance Française came to me and he said, "I've been teaching some courses in English at the Alliance because my ambassador here," the French ambassador, "wanted me to do this." Well the French ambassador who wanted him to do this was a somewhat unusual person. It was his second career. He'd been an army officer and he was an Arabist. He understood that they needed some other strings to their bow, and also I think the French, even though they said they weren't leaving, they knew that they needed to expand the opportunities for people there in whatever way they could. And he said, "But, you know, I was doing it this year but my principals in Paris got on to me and said I can't do it anymore." Well of course that would be like USIS teaching French. He said, "But I can make the building available to you for the same thing if you will pay the teachers," and I went back and said, "Can we do that anyway?" We're not talking about big, big bucks here. And the answer was, "How are we going to get the money to do this?" I don't think there's any place in the world where the director of the Alliance Française...this is really...

Actually, somebody who had read our MPP...we had this management program plan that we had to do every year and we put all these things in it all the time and nobody would ever...well, we can't do it because we don't have the money. Then I said, "Well, you have to read the beginning of it, the rationale about why it's important to do something here," which is what I said: location, location, location. Then, you have the fact that you can't isolate Djibouti in this nomadic, porous border region of the world and say this little place, nothing around it impacts on it. Of course it does. So, there were anomalies like this that you laugh when you hear about it, but the director...so what we did, and I said to my people I wanted them to go out and be seen, to do things, be encouraging; always be present in the donors...and even stimulate. They didn't always have donor's coordination meetings and we used to organize some of those. The UN people came and went and it wasn't always that...and of course it was a little embarrassing because we never had anything to put on the table except our encouragement to the others to put something on the table. Anyway, this was appreciated and I said we'd go out and we'd do things and we did a lot with the self-help and I had some wonderful people in the embassy who were doing things like teaching sewing classes to women. And it wasn't so much that we did big things, but we were expressing an interest so people on the street knew that the Americans were sympathetic. And even the American community said there had been periods there when there hadn't been much visibility from the embassy and they appreciated that we were...we were not doing much, but we were maximizing what little we did have there to do.

For example, one of the things is that my admin officer actually started a school. It was going to be a bilingual English/French school. She kept it going for a year and a half and she left and when she left I worked very hard to keep it going but I couldn't get anybody else and I knew that

when I left that nobody in the embassy was going to be working on that. I don't know if it's still going. She said, you know, in America the parents have to run the schools; you have to do these things and so on. We did actually get a grant from the overseas schools for \$10,000. This is a little difficult because when the admin officer there – she had a child in the school; that was sort of her purpose in starting it – but of course they like to see American children and because there hadn't been any school like that the missionary children usually went to the French school; but one of the reasons to do this is it was hard to recruit people to Djibouti; if they had children they said, Well, there aren't any schools, which of course I used to laugh at that. I said, "Of course there are schools. They happen to be French speaking schools here." But if you didn't want to do that...some parents look at that as an opportunity, but there are some who don't. The idea of having this school was to make it slightly more attractive to getting recruits from Foreign Service people to go there too. But I don't know how that's prospering. But it took a lot of work and we did things like that.

I don't know. When I left I had a meeting with the president, as you do – your farewell call – and I got up to leave and he escorted me out in the anteroom and then he beckons to this flunky who is standing there, who pops up and he's got a little pillow and he's got a little box on it. So the president gives me a medal. I knew that some ambassadors got medals when they left, but it made my jaw really drop, like the Chinese ambassador who had been there for four years who didn't speak English, French or Arabic or anything – he had to go around with a minder; he got a medal, but that's because the Chinese do a lot of bricks and mortar. They were building some things. They don't create jobs because they bring in Chinese to do it all, but at least there's a building standing where there wasn't one before. I clearly was surprised and when I got back to the embassy my DCM said, "Oh yes, well I thought you'd get a medal," and I said, "Well I didn't think I'd get a medal because not all the ambassadors got them and we don't do anything here. At least the Chinese do something." So when I came back to Washington I called on the Djiboutian ambassador to say the president was very kind when I left and I had a good meeting. So he says to me, "Well, you know, you're the first American ambassador we've ever given one to." Now I don't know if that's true or whether he was just...I think it was. He's been here since 1986 so he knows. And so I was pleased. And then he said to me, "Do you remember what I said to you before you left for Djibouti?" and I said, "Yes, Mr. Ambassador. You said, 'just make a difference,'" and he smiled at me and he said, "Yes, you did." As you can tell from this, I was somewhat frustrated by my own government's lack of attention and interest, but this was nice.

End of reader