NIGER

COUNTRY READER
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MERCER COOK
Ambassador
Niger (1961-1964)

Ambassador Cook was born and raised in Washington D.C. and educated at Amherst College and the Universities of Paris and Brown. During his career as a professor of romance languages, the Ambassador served on the faculties of Atlanta University, the University of Haiti and Howard University. In 1961 he was appointed US Ambassador to Niger, where he served until May, 1964. That year he was appointed Ambassador to Senegal and Gambia, residing at Dakar, where he served until July, 1966. Ambassador Cook died in 1987. The Ambassador was interviewed in 1981 by Ruth Stutts Njiiri.

Q: What were your first impressions of Niger, Senegal, and The Gambia?

COOK: Well, first of all, I think we should ... remember that I was never a resident ambassador in The Gambia. Gambia geographically is really a little country. At that time, in 1955, they had a population of 300,000 people, and geographically it's within the realm of Senegal, really. Many of the people speak the same language, Wolof, and the Wolof that's spoken in Dakar can be understood in Bathurst. So I was never a resident there. I was simply ... on call and I guess I went to The Gambia about, only about three times during the year that I was ... ah, fulfilling that or trying to fulfill that obligation.

Niger? I was the first U.S. resident Ambassador to Niamey, the capital, and it was a poor country. It was a country that very few people over here knew about. A large country the size of California and Texas combined; that's a lot of land. And when I got the notice of the nomination, I was in Paris, and they said in the message that there was a man, a sort of a specialist, who could brief me on Niger. So I went to the U.S. Embassy in Paris and I saw a Randy Kidder, who was political officer, and I said, "I was told that you could brief me on Niger." He said, "Well," he said, "I spent a night in the airport at Niamey and I visited the museum in Niamey. So, I guess that would qualify me as an expert on ... (laughs) ... on Niger." So there wasn't too much information about Niger.

It was, as I say, it's a country, at that time the population was about three or four million. It's a landlocked country bordered by such countries as Libya and Chad and Dahomey, which is now Benin, and very little rain, very little moisture, even though the Niger River flows through a part of the country. It's a poor country. Its money came from, at that time, almost exclusively from peanuts, although there were possibilities for cattle and in the north-the Nigeriens --I'd better use the French term there to keep from confusing it with the big country, Nigeria, which, of course, is another neighbor of Niger.
The people of Niger ... of Niger ... the Nigeriens, suspected that the French had found something valuable in the north. Later on it turned out to be uranium. Ah ... but it was ... a desperately poor country, but a friendly country, hospitable. There was so much poverty, really, and the people were so generous and so hospitable that you reached a point where you would never admire anything in their homes or huts, because if you admired it, perhaps the next day they would send it to you as a gift.

Another idea of the poverty of Niger, and there was lots of illness, medical facilities were almost nonexistent. There were a number of, well, in Niamey, the capital, there was an American Baptist group that had a small clinic. Elsewhere in the country they had a leprosarium. But my

wife who had, who was a former social worker, and I went there shortly after our arrival in Niamey and we found a long line of people, would-be patients, and we went in and the nurse in charge was desperate; she was almost frantic. She said, "We've just given away our last aspirin tablet and we won't get anymore until the end of the month." Well, the social worker, my wife, immediately got to work and she did a tremendous job. I'm sure she was a better ambassador than I was. She raised something like $30,000 worth of medical supplies from different groups, white and black, in the United States, and that I think was one of my warmest memories of what I had been able to contribute to that, to that country.

My job, I suppose I should go on from there, my job, particularly, was to get to know the people and to see what I could do, if anything, to alleviate some of that poverty, and, obviously, the first place to which I should turn was AID. We made very little progress. And I guess if ever the time comes when anyone would care to go through my ... communications to the State Department from Niger or from Senegal, either for that matter, they would find the word AID a sort of a leit motif; it runs through all those communications to the Department. I won't quote figures here; I've got a list of some of them.

But the thing the Nigeriens really wanted was a bridge, a bridge across the Niger River at Niamey. And my harping on that became, as a member of the White House staff under Kennedy told me later, became a cause celebre. It was something that was turned down and turned down, again and again. And remember now, all the millions that we were putting into foreign aid. And this was something, a project that would only cost two million, two million dollars. And with all the billions that you read about in the papers nowadays, you wonder if two million was not a pittance.

And at the last part of my stay in Niger, the AID people finally saw the light and they built this bridge, or rather they lent the ... oh, by that time the bridge cost three million, because it had taken so long and everything was inflated.

And the Nigeriens promptly named the bridge the John F. Kennedy Bridge, which I think -- well, that's another beautiful memory -- and you see, one of the things that worried us most, when I say us I mean the American blacks, was that there was some question as to whether a black ambassador would have the same entree and the same kind of accomplishment potential that a white American ambassador would have. This was mentioned in newspapers. This was ... and it didn't apply only to Africa; it even went to a country like Haiti. I remember after I had been on a lecture tour to Haiti for the State Department, came back and the man in the Department said to me, an official said, "Listen, you know, we would like to appoint a black American librarian at our Cultural Center." He said, "Do you think the Haitians would accept it?" I said, "Would they accept him?" I said, "Well, the American Ambassador they speak the most of and have the highest regard for was Frederick Douglass, a black man in this country." It was under John F. Kennedy that a definite effort was made to break the roadblock that had stopped blacks from being appointed to positions in the Foreign Service, even in Africa and even in Haiti. And as some of you probably know, there have since been two black ambassadors to Haiti. I'll stop and let you tell me where I am and where I should go from here.

Q: Why don't you just carry on as you want and anything you've left out, I'll pick up on.

COOK: Well, my stay in Niger lasted three years, and maybe three and a half, from '61 through '64. And when I got ready to come on home leave, before the end of the three years, the President of Niger, Hamani Diori, or Diori Hamani, wrote a letter to President Kennedy asking him, pleading with him to let me come back. I have a copy of that letter here, but I won't bother to translate the pertinent paragraph, unless you think it would be germane. I might add for the ... the sake of unity that the same thing happened at the end of my sojourn in Senegal. President Senghor wrote President Johnson asking, regretting that I had resigned, that I had retired, and asking that my tour of duty be renewed.

Well, I came home on leave from Niger and the State Department asked me to be, or rather, the State Department, under President Kennedy, asked me to be a member of the delegation -- Alternate Delegate to the General Assembly of the U.N., under Adlai Stevenson.

Of course, I was thrilled to accept, to get away from the AID issue for a few minutes, and I went to that. Personally, I did not accomplish very much. There wasn't very much that I could do, although I have letters in my files attesting to the work that I did. I was on the one or two items such as the Korean issue, that terrible Arab-Israeli issue. I remember Ralph Bunche, my old colleague, saying, "Don't go overboard on that issue." He said, "You know, there's a lot of argument on both sides," and such issues. But there was very little about black Africa that really played an important role in that particular General Assembly.

The important thing that happened, of course, was on November 22, 1963: the assassination of John F. Kennedy. This was a terrible blow to us and it was a terrible blow to black Africans. I remember coming out of the lunchroom that day when the word had just come over that President Kennedy had been shot in Dallas. And when I got outside, there was an ambassador from an African country, who will remain nameless, who had been, had a reputation of being anti-U.S., anti-American, and tears were streaming down his face. And he said to me, "Just see what they are doing to us." In other words, Kennedy had Africans, just as he had Afro-Americans, feeling that this was the dawn of a new day, and he was helping that dawn come to light. After a few months, I wrote the widow and sent her excerpts from communications, from correspondence that we had had from people in Niger about Kennedy's death. Can I read some of these?

Here's a letter from a lady in Niamey, an African lady, Nigerien, and I translate just a sentence or two. "The purpose of this letter is to present to you and your husband" -- this was written to my wife -- "our sincere condolences. The day that that sad event transpired, I thought about you all night, wondering if this would change your return to Niger. We wish peaceful rest, repose for the soul of President Kennedy, who is for us, we blacks. And if you have an opportunity, you will kindly present my sympathy to … the sympathy of a Nigerien to her who was the First Lady in the United States."

Niger is an Islamic country, but the Niger Government requested two masses. And all of the top officials attended these masses. And this is from the Bishop of Niamey. He says, "Father Ryon has already given you our condolences on the occasion of President Kennedy's death. I insist on telling you how affected we have been in our thoughts and in our prayers by this mourning

which strikes a great people, a great nation, and the entire world. President Kennedy marks the world, or, marked his place in the world by his spirit of peace, of justice and collaboration, and his work will continue for the good of us all."

From Mali's Ambassador to Niger: "Facing the tragic news of the premature death of the greatest statesman in the world both by his mind, his intelligence and his young dynamism, President Kennedy, who has fallen on the field of universal honor, disappeared to the regret of all humanity. And so we beg you to receive and to transmit to the aggrieved members of your diplomatic family the sorrowful condolences of the Mali Embassy in Niger."

And so it goes. The letter goes on; these comments go on for several pages more. This, of course, was a terrible blow to us. Well, I went back to Niger after my tour of duty at the General Assembly and ... my tour continued for another year or so.

There were one or two things that occurred that were not too pleasant. They had nothing to do with the way the Nigeriens or even the French accepted me. I think the French were at first a little suspicious for the United States to have an embassy in Niger. They felt that this was an attempt on our part to lure the Nigeriens from their former French colonial masters, and that we would come in with all kinds of aid of AID. You see, they didn't know the problem as I did and ... but the fact that I was a former teacher of French literature, and French language and French culture, certainly reacted to my advantage.

But the difficulty, if I can call it a difficulty, came from an American Senator from the state of Louisiana. And he came to Niger and I knew of the gentleman's background and of his feeling racially. And so I arranged for members of my staff to take him around, and, of course, he promptly put his foot in his mouth. There was a Jewish member of my small staff and I said to him, "Would you be kind enough to take the Senator and show him the sights in town?" I didn't want to embarrass the Senator by having him to break bread with me at the table. And so this young man took the Senator around and showed him what few sights there were in Niamey. It was a little town you know, only about twenty-five to thirty thousand people, and about two stoplights in town, at which the few automobiles would stop and the many camels would also stop when the light was red. But he was showing the Senator around and they came to our Cultural Center -- small Cultural Center which had recently been opened -- and the Senator asked, "Who built that?" And the young man from my staff replied, "Oh, the Lebanese, a Lebanese firm." And whereupon the Senator said, "Oh, yes, they're just like the Jews in our country, aren't they?" Well, it wasn't a very tactful remark to make.

The President did not see the ... Senator but he did have one of the Ministers to talk with the Senator, a very, very, very unhappy meeting. The Senator met the complete staff of the Embassy. Of course, I was there to introduce him since no bread was to be broken at the time, and the Senator, incidentally, told one member of my staff, he said, "You know, my father owned a plantation and when he died the Negroes cried." And my comment was, not to the Senator but to the member of the staff who relayed this to me, I said, "Yes, but it's possible to cry for joy as well."

At any rate, we had this little meeting of the staff and here was this Senator who had never been to Niger, who knew nothing of our problems, who sat there and tried to dictate what we should and should not do. Should we really subscribe to the New York Times which cost the State Department too much money? You know, one subscription to the New York Times. Well, at any rate the staff backed me up. That was the most disagreeable experience I had during my time in Niger.

One highlight of my tour there was the visit of a man named Franklin Williams, a black American who later became Ambassador, U.S. Ambassador, and is now president of the Phelps-Stokes Fund. I had trouble convincing the head of the Peace Corps that we needed a Peace Corps in Niger. This is the kind of country that a Peace Corps should be serving. And I asked Sargent Shriver, the head of the Peace Corps, before I left Washington, if we could have a Peace Corps. Now I said to myself, well, if I put the number low then I had more chance of getting it. So Mr. Shriver said, how many Peace Corps volunteers could we use? I said, "We'd like to start with six." Well, I was turned down. There was no possibility of it, as you know. They wanted, they wanted big, large groups to make more impact I suppose, since ... to be more helpful to the country but, at any rate, I thought if we would start small, but finally we got six.

Mr. Williams, Franklin Williams, came down, I forget exactly what his title was, but he came down and it was thanks to him that the project continued. Not only did it continue but the last time I went to Niger, there were something like one hundred Peace Corps volunteers there doing all kinds of useful things, and ... I believe that it was one of the most successful projects in West Africa of the Peace Corps.

Well, as I say, there were many other things. Culturally Niger did not offer many opportunities, but we did have a lecture at the high school, which was the highest educational institution at that time. They since have a university, a budding university. Ah, but Saunders Redding, as you know, a black American author, lectured at the high school, and, on the lighter side, we had an evening with Cozy Cole and his orchestra. Very successful. We had two evenings with him, as a matter of fact. Both packed to the doors, standing room only and thoroughly enjoyed, particularly because Cozy Cole was a drummer and the Nigeriens as Africans, you know, pride themselves on their drumming. The drums are everywhere and they seemed to recognize every beat of Cozy Cole as something that really came from Africa, and it probably did.

What else can I say about Niger? I can say only that the people were wonderful. The president of the country, who has since been overthrown, the president of the National Assembly, who was the one distinguished scholar and writer in Niger, were wonderful people. We had visits, of course, from Governor Williams, who was then Assistant Secretary of African Affairs at the Department of State. He paid several visits to the country. And for Niger's independence celebration, President Kennedy sent a delegation headed by Arthur Goldberg, who was then Secretary of Labor, and including two of my former friends: one a former student, Frank Montero, and another a former colleague at Atlanta University, Samuel Nabrit.

Here I mention something that happened during the independence celebration. Secretary Goldberg was received by President Diori Hamani, and I was there to translate. One of the first things that Secretary Goldberg said was, "Mr. President, my President would like to see you. He

has to see so many people he doesn't want to see and you're one person he wants to see." Diori was such a friendly person, giving no government any trouble, really, and Diori's eyes lighted up at this invitation. And when he left the office, I asked Mr. Goldberg, I said, "Did President Kennedy authorize you to invite President Diori?" "Oh, no!" was Goldberg's answer. "But I'm sure that when I get back he will back me up." Well, no invitation came. And to give you ... enable you to appreciate the kind of man Diori was, he never mentioned it to me after that invitation, which had made him so happy, deliriously happy.

That's the sort of thing that came to us. So you see the difficulties that we had in Niger came more from Washington, from AID, from the Senator. And as a matter of fact, Secretary Goldberg was decorated by the Niger Government after he left. Well, I'm all mixed up now so I don't know where, can you sort of ...

Q: Yes. You covered quite a bit. I wanted to go back and talk a little bit more about U.S. presence in Niger, Senegal and The Gambia. You were fortunate to serve in the early days of independence of these countries. Can you talk a little bit about the U.S. Government's attitude towards these countries?

COOK: I think the U.S. Government, I think they must have had, as I look at the AID disbursements, they must have had some kind of, of system that would relegate these countries to a position, I don't want to say inferior, but there, there were more, obviously, more countries, some countries that were larger or more important to U.S. interests than these smaller countries.

When you think of Nigeria, which at that time, I think, had a population of over fifty million people, and compare it with Senegal with its four million, Niger with its three or four million, The Gambia with three hundred thousand, you do not expect them to occupy the same rank as a country like Nigeria, as a ... well, at the time, as a country like Ethiopia (Haile Selassie was still in charge there) or as a number of other African countries, but the United States wanted to be a presence there.

When I got to Niger, the only Americans were these missionaries whom I mentioned earlier. That was not true in Senegal. I mean the U.S. had had a consulate in Dakar for years but they never had a resident consul or ambassador in Niamey. So there was really no comparison. The American Consulates, the U.S. Consulate in Dakar, was just changed into an Embassy -- could I go back to Niger for a minute?

There's one very nice thing that happened that I failed to include, because I'm not speaking from notes. Or, let's say, I have the notes here, but I'm not following them. In the cable offering me the post in Niger, the statement was made that there is no residence for an Ambassador. But you would be put up in a hotel until we could build a residence or unless you could find some housing, private housing.

So my wife and I were put up at the Grand Hotel. It was grand in name only. But it was the best public accommodation that Niger had to offer. We had two rooms in the Grand Hotel and we stayed there one month, two months, as long as five months, which, of course, hampered us a bit, because it made entertainment somewhat more difficult than it would have been ordinarily. And

President Diori said, “Listen, I have a villa that is not being used. Why don’t you take it?” In the meantime, nothing happened on the residence which was supposed to be built, although I think they had bought the land. And Diori said, “This will be free of charge.” I said, “No, I can’t accept it on that basis.” I said, “Would you permit us to pay for certain remodeling to be done on the villa?” And he said, “Well, all right. You can do that,” he said, “but no rental.”

And so we stayed there for the rest of our tour in Niger. When I went back to Niger to see the opening of the John F. Kennedy Bridge, we had a beautiful new Embassy, complete with swimming pool and so forth, so it takes time for those things. But I mention this incident to show what kind of person was at the head of the Government and how happy he was to see one of his “congeners” is his French word, appointed to his country by the United States Government.

I have another story that I must tell you, and this again takes me back. I was in the State Department for briefing before I went to Niger. And I got a message one day that Niger’s Ambassador to the United States was coming in. He had an appointment with Chester Bowles, who was then Under Secretary of State, but before he went to see Chester Bowles, he would like to talk with me. And this tall, Nigerien, Issoufou Saidou Djermakoye, strode into the office, first of all to tell me how happy his President, whom I had met just briefly a year or two before, and the president of the National Assembly, how delighted they were that I was to be coming to Niger. And then he went on to tell me that he and his wife and son had just had a grievous experience. They had been driving to Washington from New York on Route 40 at that time; this is 1961. Route 40 was noted because despite the law, many of the places on the roadside would not serve blacks.

Well, Ambassador Djermakoye had stopped in this little restaurant and had been refused service. And he was coming to tell Chester Bowles about it and see if the State Department couldn’t do something about that situation. Well, by then it was time to go to see the Under Secretary. Do you know that Ambassador Djermakoye spent one-half hour talking to Chester Bowles about everything except that incident?

And as we left Chester Bowles’ office, I said to Djermakoye, “Why didn’t you mention the affront on Route 40?” He said, “This was not the right time. I had to let him know how happy we were that you are coming to be the U.S. Ambassador to Niger.” There again I think you begin to feel -- Well, Djermakoye now is on the staff of the U.N., in New York, but he still has that same lovable character, and that’s my story up to there. Now where do I go from here?

CECIL S. RICHARDSON
Economic Officer
Niamey (1962-1965)

Cecil Richardson was born in New York in 1926, and graduated from Queen’s College. He served in the US Army from 1944 to 1947, and overseas from 1951 to 1952. Entering the Foreign Service in 1956, he was stationed in Dakar, Saigon,

Lagos, Niamey, Paris, Accra, Brussels, Quito, Tehran, Lima, St. Paolo and Bahamas. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on August 5, 2003.

RICHARDSON: Okay, so having gone to Lagos on a direct transfer, I was eligible for home leave after a year. I came back here to Washington and I went around trying to promote an assignment in the Maghreb, that is to say Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco. I was particularly keen on Algeria because flying one night out of Kano, Nigeria. We went across the Sahara and passed over Algiers in the dark, and its great harbor. There are roads around the lights like three strings of pearls, that's what they look like, the lights, the streetlights around the harbor. I fell in love with the place from 10,000 feet up. [Laughter]. And I wanted to get there. Well, PER remembered that I was interested in it. So I was home, at my in-laws and the phone rings and Jeff Frederick is on the phone and he said Cy, we remembered that you wanted a French-speaking post. Well, I hadn't asked for a French-speaking post, I asked for something in the Maghreb. Well, he had conveniently forgot that and he said so I think you'll be pleased to know you don't have to go back to Lagos, you're going to Niamey, which was not the Maghreb. Okay so I had shipped my Volkswagen from Saigon to Lagos and had driven it there for a year. I went back to Lagos, got in my car, and drove to Niamey.

Q: Niamey being the capital of … ?

RICHARDSON: Niger.

Q: Niger.

RICHARDSON: Nigeria's northern neighbor. Do you want to hear about Niger?

Q: Oh, absolutely! You were probably in Niger from '62 to ...

RICHARDSON: '65.

Q: Three years.

RICHARDSON: Well, it would have been late '62 to March of '65.

Q: Okay, two and a half years.

RICHARDSON: Yes. Yes, I had been in Dakar which is on the edge of the Sahara, but still you can get some green. You have to drive out of town to get to the desert. I'd been in Lagos, I'd been in Saigon, these are, you know, lush with green. They are moist and green and lush. I drive in from Lagos and the country is getting drier and drier as I go in and then I arrive in Niamey and I had never seen anything as dry as that in my life, having no familiarity with the American Southwest. I went into a deep funk and my wife who had been there several years before when she traveled with my secretary was exclaiming: "Wow, hey, this has changed. It certainly looks a lot better than it did when I was here before!" And I'm thinking what is this woman talking about, I've never seen anything so ghastly in my life. Well, I was in a deep funk for three days, literally, then I threw it off and made more friends there than at any of my posts except maybe Paris and

Saigon. What I did there, I think I was called the FSO general, I did everything. I was the only junior officer.

Q: Well, do you remember who the ambassador was?

RICHARDSON: Yes. The last one was, I'll work backwards, the last one was Robert Ryan, who had been Admin. Counselor in Paris. And his predecessor was a noted, by this time I guess we were African-American, Academic, named Mercer Cook, who later was ambassador in Senegal, so those were my ambassadors.

Q: Well now, what was the sort of the political situation, economic situation in Niger?

RICHARDSON: Well there really wasn't much. Exports to the United States consisted of a small quantity of very fine goatskin so my commercial work was not very heavy. There was one party and on the political side the guys who the French had been bringing along during the last years of the colonial period, they were in position and the French were there as their advisors so they simply switched roles, switched offices. Now the French were still very important and very jealous of their position and viewed us, so I thought in Niger than when I was in Dakar, with less suspicion of our intentions because I think we'd made it clear by that time that we were quite content in letting them run the show. We weren't interested in taking over their empire. So there was a more relaxed atmosphere.

But they were still covering the gap in the budget and still had advisors at every minister's elbow. I'll give you an instance: I, this is also sociological. My wife and I were at the swimming pool which was operated by the French Army as was the hospital. There was a Colonel Bremer who was in charge of the hospital. One day, across the pool, I could see a Frenchwoman with her two children, who obviously had an African father. There were a whole bunch of Frenchwomen and their children on that side, but it was as if there was a "cordon sanitaire" around this woman. No one was talking to her, they were nattering among themselves but no one talked to this woman, and no one came any closer than like the wall there ...

Q: About 3 or 4 feet.

RICHARDSON: Yes, so this "cordon sanitaire" around her and none of the children were playing with her children. I got a little annoyed at that and said to my wife, "Why don't you go over and talk to her? No one is talking to her." So my wife went in the water, came out on the other side and said a couple of words to her and the woman looked so happy to have somebody talk to her and in no time at all the children were climbing all over my wife's lap. Well, it turned out this woman was a neighbor on the next street and her husband was in the Office of the Budget, which was fine because for some reason that year I was responsible for reporting on the budget, so we became friends. We exchanged dinners, you know. And I told him I was interested in the budget so he took me in one day to meet the "Director of the Budget Nationale" who didn't have a clue as to what the budget was all about. You know, I chatted with him for a little while and I said, "I see, I see." He says, it's all here. It's all in the budget, it couldn't be more clear. I explained this to my friend and he says "I bet you need a little more information." My friend, this man whose wife, my wife had befriended.

Q: You say your friend took you down...

RICHARDSON: Yes he took me down the hall to this cubbyhole where this little Frenchman was sitting who could tell me everything about the budget. So the French were still very, very strong there. I went through 180 degrees. I went from being in the pit of despair the first three days, thinking they must hate me in Washington to positively enjoying the place. And it was, you want me to tell war stories. One of the nicest things that happened to me was a day I spent with the African pharmacist, the name will come to me, it isn't important. He was Dahomian originally and he told me his life story or his story as a boy, and it was, not word for word, but an absolute parallel to this book I had read called "L'Enfant Noir," about the author, who also came out of a remote village, but he was a bright young boy and somebody recognized that he was bright and saw that he went to school and the big thing was that when he left the schooling that was available to him in his area, he traveled to the capital, to Dakar, to go to high school. Well, this Dahomian, that was the story of his life, too, and the trepidation with which he was leaving the village to go to the big city. That was a thrilling story and he also had an absolutely beautiful daughter.

Q: Well, then did you get any official visits from anybody while you were there?

RICHARDSON: Yes, official, we, I know we had an inspection, but not Congress, I don't think congress had yet discovered Niger. But, if I can back up I did have a notable visitor, I was control officer for Vice President Gore's father when he came to Lagos.

Q: Senator Gore of Tennessee.

RICHARDSON: Yes, yes.

Q: Albert Gore.

RICHARDSON: Albert Gore. He was a very pleasant, very undemanding gentlemen. He came through for a very short time. So we, I don't remember any notable visitors in Niger.

Q: Was there any reflection of the problems that were beginning to develop in Algeria? How far along the independence movement had gotten in Algeria?

RICHARDSON: Well, that was past. When I left Niger, I went out of Africa by way of Algeria, driving to Algiers, and this would have been in the first year after independence, so they must have gotten independence in late '63 or '64.

Q: Yes, I wasn't sure.

RICHARDSON: Yes. So, things were fairly tranquil in Algiers, in fact, very tranquil.

Q: Did, in Niger, was there a tribal situation, so many you know the North is more Muslim and the South, course Niger is right in ...

RICHARDSON: Well, Niger is all Muslim so its, your Peule, Fulani, and other divisions like that, but there's nothing divided on religious grounds. There were all Muslims. Diore was the president. He had represented Niger in the colonial legislature before independence. Diore used to come to Dakar regularly. So they all inherited their positions with independence.

Q: Did you have much chance to travel around?

RICHARDSON: There?

Q: Yes.

RICHARDSON: Oh, yes. Peace Corps had come in several years before. And you had the people crossing the Sahara going south. This is where they would come out, in Niamey. I met a number of them ... adventurers.

Q: But, what was the town or city of Niamey like?

RICHARDSON: Oh, when I would drive my wife to shop on a Saturday morning, I always thought that Tombstone, Arizona must have looked like this in about 1890. And I had the feeling that I should be tying up a horse rather than parking a Volkswagen. My butcher literally had the false front that you see in the Western movies. That was my butcher shop. So there should have been a hitching post.

Q: [Laughter]. Did you find that there were, how about social life? Was there much mixing?

RICHARDSON: Not so much with the Nigerians because they were much more reserved, not hostile, not hostile. But, they did not live the way the Europeans and the Americans did. By that time we had air conditioning and things like that. But there were African diplomats from other countries. One of the most amusing and delightful people I knew then was a Malian who was there as a representative of some UN organization. He was very Westernized and I marveled at his sense of humor. Then there was the Chargé d'Affaires of Nigeria, very charming young man. So we had those kinds of ... And who else was there? ... Many Israelis were there, very good.

Q: How about the Soviets, were they doing anything?

RICHARDSON: Yes, we used to play volleyball with them, and I'm trying to remember where we used to play volleyball with the Soviets. I remember playing volleyball with the Israelis. I don't think, the Soviets weren't represented there, no. Egyptians were there. The Egyptian Ambassador lived in Lagos, but he came up very frequently. I would have him to dinner when he came up. You know, I'm trying to remember because there was a question, where we would play volleyball with the Soviets. It was with the Lebanese compound.

Q: Yes. [Laughter]. Ah, well you were at 12 posts ...

RICHARDSON: Something like that 11 or 12 posts.

Q: Well, you left Niger when?

RICHARDSON: In March, early March 1965, yes.

ROBERT J. RYAN SR.
Ambassador
Niger (1964-1968)

Ambassador Robert J. Ryan, Sr. was born in Hatfield, Massachusetts in 1914. He joined the Foreign Service in 1937. His career included positions in Washington, DC and Paris, and an ambassadorship to Niger. Ambassador Ryan was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1991.

Q: *You then left Paris and became Ambassador to Niger. How did that job come about?*

RYAN: Well, it came about, I think, because at the time Bill Crockett was Under Secretary of State and there were moves to try to provide a way for people who were not in the political and economic cone to have ambassadorships. This included USIA and other avenues as well. I was one of the people who was in the administrative area that was put on a list to be considered for ambassador. Ultimately it was Niamey. Originally it was to be Sierra Leone. But because I had some French, another Foreign Service Officer who didn't have French and had a lot of political influence got the Sierra Leone assignment and they gave me Niamey. It worked all right. I didn't mind it at all. It was a very rewarding and interesting assignment. I was the second ambassador and we were still developing the Embassy.

When I went there the Ambassador Residence was a small house that had been occupied by one of the officials of the city of Niamey and consisted of two bedroom and a long entrance way that we made into a dining room and a living room. The Department had built on an area as a separate kitchen. But it was most inadequate for an Ambassador's Residence.

One of the jobs I had was to work with FBO in developing plans to build a new Embassy Residence and Chancery. That took up a considerable amount of time. Among other things because you started to run into money problems in the FBO account. Secondly, because the Department found that it had to give a job to an architect who was from Wayne Hayes' district. He ran the FBO as his own little private fiefdom. This guy came out and asked to visit the French Residence, which we let him do and then it developed that what he did was design a scaled down version of the French Residence. We had a whale of a time making changes in plans. Ultimately we had to accept what we thought were not the best plans at all because if we went much further we felt we would irritate the architect and that would irritate Hayes and that would create problems for the Department. So we went along with it.

The government of Niger donated, I forget how many acres in a desirable part of town on which to construct the Ambassador's Residence and the Chancery. Joe Palmer came out for a visit and

we laid the cornerstone for the Embassy and the Chancery and then the construction took place. My successor, Ambassador Adams, was the first Ambassador to move into it. It is a very comfortable residence as is the Chancery and I think it has worked out reasonably well. But some of us thought the design of the building should have been different.

Another important element was building a bridge. The nation of Niger had no bridge across the Niger River. Earlier there had been discussions between Ambassador Mercer Cook and others about constructing the bridge. So the idea and plans with AID for loaning the government of Niger the money with which to construct the bridge were in place before I went out there. But then when I arrived, again because of money problems and AID having difficulties questions started being raised about whether the bridge should be put up or not.

I remember some of the AID people coming out and making a study indicating that the roads that would be connected carried very little traffic, certainly not enough to justify a bridge. Well, I had to go to Washington a couple of times. We finally got it settled and we proceeded with the signing of the bridge agreement. Then there was trouble finding a contractor to come out and build the bridge. Ultimately the bridge was finished. Not in my time, during Ambassador Ross McClelland's time. However, I had the privilege of going back and participating in the dedication ceremony.

On the subject that it was the first bridge across the Niger River, it was interesting to note that they had a big party at the Palace that night and we were returning back to Ambassador McClelland's residence about midnight and had to pass the bridge. It was mobbed with people just walking back and forth. It was the first time they had a chance to do anything like that. The bridge made a difference to Niger because it opened up the area across the river. As I have gone back a couple of times I notice that the area has developed. There is a college there now as well as some government building. It also provides a better link to what was Upper Volta because the only way you could get across the river if you wanted to get to Upper Volta when I was there was via a ferry boat.

Q: *What were the American interests in Niger?*

RYAN: They were the same as they were in a lot of the developing countries: (a) having an American presence, (b) the desire of the developing countries to get away from the heavy French influence and in the instance of Niger the heavy British influence. The fact that the United States felt that its best interests were in establishing embassies to help these countries establish themselves in ways that would be favorable to us and obviously you had at that time the Cold War and the communist confrontation. The desire was to be in every country in a way that would minimize the possibilities of a new influential communist presence. But I think these countries wanted our presence. They wanted our aid and our expertise.

During the time I was there we enjoyed very, very friendly relations with Niger. We had a Peace Corps program of about 140 people. We had a very active AID program in a variety of fields. We had USIA and, of course, we had the normal political, economic and consular functions. I know at the time those embassies were created we discussed whether we needed just an embassy with an ambassador accredited to two or three other countries. I was one at the time who thought

that that was the way we should go. We earlier talked about Loy Henderson. Well, he was one who felt that we ought to go ahead with an embassy in every one of the countries. Looking at it now I think it was a wise decision. We would have weakened our position in Africa if we hadn't done it.

Niger went through a couple of periods of drought where we had to send out some special sorghum. They went through a period when a communist backed group of Nigerians tried to overthrow Diori. Actually they tried to assassination him at a prayer meeting. They missed him but killed some other people. The result of that assassination attempt meant that for months and months he didn't go out of the Palace. He feared for his life.

Q: *How did you deal with him? Was he your main point of contact?*

RYAN: I dealt with him, with the Foreign Minister and the other appropriate ministers for specific problems. If there was something in the health field I would deal with the Minister of Health. For example, the World Health Organization and AID were to inaugurate their smallpox, measles vaccination campaign in Africa designed to eradicate both diseases over a period of years. Niger was one of the first countries to do it. The government went along with organizing the arrangements, providing certain personnel and logistical support for the vaccination teams. Diori felt these things were important and readily agreed to support such efforts. He liked very much having the Peace Corps and gave it very strong support. He felt they were an example for the Nigerian youth. Here are young people with an education who want to work in the government. They come from comfortable families but are willing to come out and help others.

The Peace Corps supported the efforts of AID and the government of Niger to improve agriculture. We hit upon the idea that emanated with our land grant colleges of setting up six young farmers' agricultural centers around the country that would be centers for training the young people on better farming methods. Ultimately it was hoped they would serve as research centers, etc. The idea was that the government of Niger provided the land. AID provided the money to put up the buildings that were needed; money to buy the equipment and financed an American director. The government of Niger financed a counterpart for the American director with the idea that after three years they would take over the school and the American director would leave. We used Peace Corps volunteers to help train. Then we recruited the students from the villages. The parents of the students had to agree to give each student a plot of land when he was graduated that he could use for his own. The government of Niger agreed to loan the students money to buy oxen, a plough, cart and some other implements.

That really worked. These youngsters went back to their villages and quickly showed that these new methods paid. They were able to hire themselves out to other farmers, which was the multiplier effect we were looking for.

Q: *Did you find yourself up against the French? Did they look upon you as competitors?*

RYAN: Well, it was mixed. I had good relations with the French Ambassador. I never tried to do anything behind his back. We did irritate them on occasion with what we were doing, although in

some respects I think they liked the idea of the United States financing things that needed to be done.

One example that stands in my mind, the Peace Corps volunteers learned the local, tribal languages. Some of them were pretty fluent. From that a couple of them started developing some language training books which never existed before. They started having classes. The French didn't like that. I remember the French Ambassador objected to that. He felt they should be taught French and not given an opportunity to fall back on their own language. We didn't agree and went on with that. He got quite irritated that we were moving in that direction.

The French had a program called Volontaire d'Progres [phonetic] which was patterned after the Peace Corps. When our Peace Corps volunteers started arriving speaking the local tribal languages, in a couple of years the French arrived doing the same thing.

The French Embassy was the dominant embassy. The Ambassador was the Dean. He had the closest relationship with the President.

One of the things I found was that there was too much dispersion among the various embassies. When I got there you didn't know what the Germans were doing, or the Israelis were doing and they didn't really understand what we were doing. In some instances the Nigerians were playing us off against each other. Then, as I later got into the UN, you had four or five UN agencies in Niger, each of whom operated separately. There needed to be some coordinating mechanism. to bring all these things together. We never succeeded in doing it in other than an informal way, but I think it represented some of the duplication of effort that can take place in the third world if you don't have an appropriate coordinating mechanism handling all these various Peace Corps and AID type of undertakings.

RICHARD S. THOMPSON
Economic Officer
Niamey (1965-1967)

Richard Sackett Thompson was born in 1933 in Pullman, Washington. He graduated from Washington State University in 1955, after studying for one year at the Institute of Political Studies in Paris, France. He was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University and obtained a master's degree from Georgetown University in 1980. He spent two years in the U.S. Army in 1958-1960. In addition to Algeria, Mr. Thompson served with the Foreign Service in Aruba, Nigeria, France, Vietnam, and Greece. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on February 25, 1994.

Q: You went to Niger, to Niamey, where you served from 1965-67. What was the situation in Niger and what were our interests at the time?

THOMPSON: Niger was very peaceful. I think in all of those small countries in West Africa you have a similar situation. In 1960 when it became independent, the US had to make decisions whether to put embassies in every little country or not. The French had hoped for two large countries with roughly eight provinces each. You would have had a French West Africa and a French Equatorial Africa. But the units within them were given a chance to opt for independence and every last one of them did. So Dakar might be the Vienna of West Africa. Dakar had big public buildings because it was supposed to be the head of a vast country in that part of Africa. Instead it was the capital of one small country. We decided, in view of the competition with the communists for influence around the world, we had to have an embassy in every country. I think Loy Henderson had a large role in making that decision. It was because of that that Aruba was closed in an attempt to find the resources to open all these new embassies.

So, if you looked at the embassies in Niger, there were only countries which had some specific reason to be there. You had the French because they were the Mother country. You had the United States to keep the communists out. You had Taiwan, the Republic of China, to keep the Mainland Chinese out. You had the West Germans to keep the East Germans out. And then you had the neighboring African countries. That's it. So there was a relatively small number of embassies. You knew everyone in the diplomatic corps.

I think the US had this broader political interest. It is a country of modest resources and I am sure with a swollen population they are having a difficult time economically now just feeding their people. There were 3 million when I was there and I think it is 6 or 7 million people now. A very fragile ecology based on the...during the rainy season you can raise sorghum and millet, especially along the Niger River. Some areas are suitable as pastureland for livestock. The French had started some peanut industry, but all very modest.

One interest I might comment on is that of human rights. At that time the US had really not discovered human rights as an aspect of its policy that it should at least try to apply more or less around the world. Of course, to start with the French had rigged the 1960 election so that it would bring out the winner they wanted. Everywhere except in Guinea, where Sekou Toure was so powerful the French were unable to get their man in. In Niger they had rigged the election of a man, who already had a certain respect because he was a schoolteacher and had taught many of the educated people of the country. So he became president.

Q: Who was that?

THOMPSON: Hamani Diori. Jibo Bakeri, the mayor of Niamey, was the head of the opposition party. Since independence there had been various uprisings, I don't know quite why, that the government would put down. Every morning I drove a couple of blocks from my house to the embassy and passed a building that had been built to be the new police station, but instead had become a prison for several dozen political prisoners. The building had narrow vertical windows with no glass so that you could let the sun in and keep the prisoners from getting out. So you could see these shadowy figures through these vertical slits and realize there were people in there with probably no trial or no cause. But we were just not thinking about things like that in those days.

The president was an earnest man and seemed dedicated to the development of his country. I think he was a good man. He was trying to learn English. So he had an English class every Sunday morning at eleven, I think it was, he had English classes all week but on Sunday it was open house for any Americans who wanted to come. So any Peace Corps volunteer in the country who was in town on Sunday morning was asked to automatically come by the palace. And I attended sometimes too. Every now and then...we didn't have much tourism in Niger...some Britisher who happened to be at the main hotel would find himself invited to the presidential palace so that the president could get to hear a number of American and British accents. He was trying to get out from under French domination by studying English. We had a few AID projects of various sorts trying to see what could be done in the way of well digging and improved crops, etc.

I think our interest was mainly trying to keep them out from under communist domination, which is a rather negative goal.

Q: What was your job there?

THOMPSON: Well, I was number three although later a fourth person came. Technically I was the economic officer. You had the ambassador and the DCM and then the third officer, who was me, who handled economic reporting, quite a bit of political reporting, and what consular work there was which was mainly issuing visas for officials to visit the States.

Q: How was it dealing with the government at your level?

THOMPSON: It was very friendly and pretty relaxed. As I recall the dealings they were all generally quite easy. There were no big visa and immigration problems with local officials. In the AID area we were giving them stuff and they were glad to receive it with a smile. Generally they voted with us in the UN. If we were voting with France, they were voting with us because France was the country that had the dominant influence.

Q: How did you find the French influence there?

THOMPSON: Well, the French had a very strong influence. Most government ministries still had a French conseiller technique, technical advisor, who in some cases still ran the ministry in effect. They had removed the conseiller technique from their police organization, so they had gotten out from under the French somewhat in that area. First there was a currency zone which recently dissolved a few months ago. There was a currency zone of French West Africa which was backed by France, another good reason to remain on the good side of France. So, French influence was still very strong. A program the government had to make people literate in their local languages--there was Djerma, Hausa, Fulani, three or four of the main languages. The government had a program to make them literate in their own languages and our Peace Corps volunteers to some degree were involved in this. The French didn't like this, they wanted the people to become literate in French and nothing else. They thought it was a waste of time for these people to become literate in a language which didn't have any literature for them to read anyway if they could read it. The government felt that simple instructions on hygiene and simple crop agriculture could be written in the local language and understood and acted upon, so they

thought it was useful to have instruction in local languages. The French were unhappy that we were working with the government in this area.

Of course, when the French ran the country very few people got any education. As in their other colonies, even at the elementary level there was relatively little schooling.

Q: Did you find at your level in dealing with the French that they sort of brushed you aside or kept you at arm's length?

THOMPSON: No, on the contrary. The French and American Ambassadors apparently wanted to keep on good terms with each other and they entertained each other and discussed programs between themselves, etc. So we had friendly relations with the French embassy. Of course, it was a relatively small European colony in an African country, so there was some tendency for cultural reasons for the diplomatic corps to stay on good terms with each other. So we had very good relations with the French.

Q: While you were there the ambassador was Robert Ryan?

THOMPSON: Yes, all the time I was there. Robert J. Ryan.

Q: How did he operate?

THOMPSON: He was really a top-notch person and operated with great good sense. He was an example of...there was always the issue within the State Department of whether people who specialized in the administrative area could become ambassadors. Bob Ryan had come up as an administrative officer. He was certainly an effective ambassador and was an example that you could rise through the administrative ranks and become an ambassador. Our neighboring country was Upper Volta, the capital being Ouagadougou. I have been to Ouagadougou and Timbuktu which shows the advantages of the Foreign Service. In that country the ambassador was Tom Estes who had previously been deputy assistant secretary of State in charge of building the new State Department building which I think began in 1957 and parts started to be opened in 1960, roughly speaking. His reward for doing a good job on that was to be named ambassador to Upper Volta, now Burkina Faso. So in these two neighboring, somewhat isolated, landlocked African countries, you had the two ambassadors who were examples of how you could get to be an ambassador through the administrative ranks.

That is putting Robert Ryan in a larger context. He was a very able man. He traveled around the country. Let me mention the traveling. That was great fun because when he was ambassador he would be received around the country in these mud forts like in the movie "Beau Geste." Zinder is one of the main towns of Niger, recalling "Fort Zinderneuf" of "Beau Geste". When I traveled with the ambassador, as we approached a town there would be a line of camels and horsemen on both sides in sort of imitation coats of armor because centuries before the knights had come down across the desert and conquered the tribes on the southern edge here, so they still had some elements of European coats of armor in what they would wear. Helmets over their heads and chain mail skirts, etc. and everything brightly colored. So you would have these people on both sides forming a hedge of honor, as they say in French, an honor guard on both sides as you came

to the gate of the mud fort. There the prefect would greet you. So the ambassador and I would have to get out of the car a little before we actually got to the gate and walk forward and be greeted and ushered inside, etc. You would have a Griot shouting, "Vive l'ambassadeur, vive l'ambassadeur" as you approached, which added a festiveness to the occasion. So traveling with the ambassador was quite fun. And Bob Ryan had skin problems. He had very fair skin and had to wear a straw hat all the time, so he would be carrying out these ceremonies wearing a straw hat so his skin would not be affected. He carried out these important representational duties with some personal cost, I think. I really liked him very much. He is still very active in public affairs and is living in Florida.

Q: This was early Peace Corps. How did you feel they were doing?

THOMPSON: We had an excellent program due in large part to an excellent director, C. Payne Lucas, who is now the head of an organization called "AfriCare" which tries to improve technical assistance to African countries. There were a hundred and some Peace Corps volunteers, but he saw that the problem with our programs in a number of countries was we simply would be put into education. While I was there the Peace Corps in Nigeria almost went on strike, and Jack Vaughn, the head of the Peace Corps, had to come out and curtail the strike. The problem with the Peace Corps volunteers in Nigeria was they got no respect. They were all Rodney Dangerfields. From the point of view of their students they were low paid and rode bicycles so were obviously an inferior type of teacher. Their fellow teachers, who got paid much more and had mopeds, looked down on the volunteers for the same reasons. The volunteers thought they were doing great things for somebody, but they were just cheap teachers from the point of view of the government of Nigeria and not performing any special function at all. So they were very unhappy and were striking for more money and mopeds.

Q: Mopeds being motor scooters as opposed to a bicycle you pump yourself.

THOMPSON: Yes. The Nigerian teachers got more money and had better quarters and rode mopeds. So you could see the social situation that made the Peace Corps volunteers unhappy.

Now in Niger, our director saw the problems of this sort of thing and had our people working on programs very directly related to the people, which were really helpful. There was the literacy project, they dug wells, which everybody liked in such an arid climate. One very large program was trying to establish rural cooperatives because the local farmers, so to speak, were under the thumb of the local moneylenders who charged usurious rates from them and were also the only source of seed and farm implements. So they were trying to establish cooperatives across the country which would get the farmer independent of this. Money would be loaned at fair rates and you would have access to seed and tools and the few simple things they did need at a fair price. So, they were monopoly busters around the country and working directly with the people and their Niger counterparts. These people were living in mud huts where you have large spiders around the walls, and geckos running across the walls as well as making a lot of noise, and they had one tiny little gas operated refrigerator which might make one tray of ice a day or cool off a precious can of Coke or something. They were living in very poor conditions around the country and I visited a lot of them. But they believed in their work and were happy. So they were much

worse off in a sense than the people in Nigeria, but they were happy because they had a good program. C. Payne Lucas was an inspiring leader and we had a great Peace Corps program.

Q: When you left Niger, what was your feeling towards whither Niger at that time?

THOMPSON: I just didn't see anything there that you could develop. The one hope they had, which was realized in only a very small way, was that uranium would be mined. There were uranium deposits in the northern part of the country and this is something that they thought might save them economically and provide a big boost. I sent a message on these reports to Washington and to Paris and asked Paris if they knew anything because the French were very closed mouth about this. We got no response from our science attaché in Paris except the annual report of the French Atomic Commission which seemed to indicate that the French had uranium coming out of their ears. But there was no direct response from anybody. Shortly after I left it was announced that there was a big uranium strike up there and I think it was recently closed down. But perhaps for a couple of decades they got some budgetary support from the French and a relatively small number of jobs. But it didn't make any major difference in their economy. It is a problem that I see not only there but in many other underdeveloped countries. There is really nothing there to develop. Internally we have a somewhat similar problem with Appalachia, my ancestors come from West Virginia, but there, of course, the younger people simply go elsewhere and leave a relatively small population up in the mountains. To a considerable degree that has happened in West Africa. There has been a lot of movement among countries which eventually creates political problems as people flee the countries where there isn't anything. Along the coast you have some substantial agriculture and Nigeria has oil, but I never could see how you could develop Niger. This shows the artificiality of political boundaries. I am not sure they really surrounded any viable economic entity.

SAMUEL C. ADAMS JR.
Ambassador
Niger (1968-1969)

Ambassador Samuel Clifford Adams, Jr. was born in Houston, Texas in 1920. He received his Bachelor's Degree from Fisk University in 1945, his Master's in 1947, and his PhD from the University of Chicago in 1952He served in the US Army from 1944 to 1946. His postings include Saigon, Phnom Penh, London, Lagos, Bamako, and Rabat, with an Ambassadorship to Niger. He was interviewed by William J. Cunningham on February 2, 2000.

Q: Well, it was a massive coordinating operation then. After Morocco, you were named ambassador to Niger in 1968. You were there about a year.

ADAMS: Yes. That was a political thing.

Q: It was? This was 1968, Lyndon Johnson's last year as president. Did you ever have anything to do with Lyndon Johnson?

ADAMS: I had contact with all of them at one point, and there should be pictures of us when I was sitting down with a group of Negroes who were supposed to be benefitting from his program, whatever it was.

Q: Well, there was the civil rights movement, the Great Society, and all that sort of thing. After all, you were from Texas and Johnson, a president of the United States, was from Texas.

ADAMS: My career had nothing to do with Texas.

Q: You don't think so.

ADAMS: It had to do with the politics of things.

Q: How did your tour in Niger work out for you?

ADAMS: It was a good one.

Q: Were there any significant developments during that period of time?

ADAMS: It's hard to remember all these places.

Q: Donald Easum said one time you had something to do with getting truck convoys going to bring needed food supplies up there. Niger is a landlocked country with no access to the sea.

ADAMS: What's this other fellow's name that was in the Cameroons?

Q: Do you mean Hoffacker?

ADAMS: Yes, do you know him?

Q: Yes, I do.

ADAMS: He must have a first-hand recollection of this era.

Q: Yes, he would.

ADAMS: He was a very reliable person.

JOHN A. BUCHE
Deputy Chief of Mission
Niamey (1973-1975)

Born and raised in Indiana, Mr. Burch studied at St. Meinrad Seminary, Purdue University and the University of Tubingen, Germany. After service in the US

Army, he joined the Foreign Service, where he served primarily in African countries, including Ethiopia, Malawi, Niger and Zambia. Other assignments took Mr. Buche to Canada, Germany, Austria and Switzerland as well as to the State Department in Washington. He was an Amharic language specialist.

Q: *Where did you go?*

BUCHE: I came back to the Foreign Service Institute to study French, since I was assigned to Niamey, Niger, as DCM.

Q: *So you took French for what, six months?*

BUCHE: No, I took it for four months.

Q: *So you were going to Niger, and you were in Niger from when to when?*

BUCHE: From January 1973 to July 1975.

Q: *Now who was ambassador there when you were there?*

BUCHE: My first ambassador was Ross or Roswell McClelland.

Q: *It was Roswell...*

BUCHE: Yes, but we called him "Ross". He was there for about six months. I was told that there would be a hiatus between McClellan and the new ambassador, whoever that was to be, and I would be in charge for several months. Ambassador McClellan had spent three years there, and this was his last assignment before retiring. His wife was not well. He was trying to keep things on an even keel. He recognized that Niger was not a country of any strategic interest to us. It was, however, important to the French. We had a Peace Corps program of about forty volunteers and a small AID program. We would periodically offer to send a Nigerien army officer to the US for six months training. Our policy was based on the reality that Niger was a former French colony and the French pretty much controlled things. They had advisors in all the ministries, and French commercial interests had a lock on the economy. French military and police advisers were found in every major unit. The French-equivalent of the Peace Corps had *Cooperants* throughout the country. The French Embassy was the center of control, and the French Ambassador was the focal point.

Niger still had its first generation leadership. President Hamani Diori had been in power since independence. There had been some attempts to overthrow him, but he (with French assistance) had put them all down. Niger was a terribly poor country, absolutely impoverished. When I arrived, the drought was raging. There was starvation among the nomads in the northern reaches of Niger, and food shortages throughout the country.

Q: *This is the Sahel*.

BUCHE: The Sahel, yes. Under the best of circumstances, the nomads in the north of the country were poor, but during a drought period they lost their animals and some lost their lives. Many of them were eventually able to get down to wherever camps were set up by the Red Cross and others humanitarian groups. Some of them waited too long before moving south, and it was just too late.

Regarding the politics and economics of Niger, we were interested in following what was happening, but we did not have important interests at stake. There were some medium-grade deposits of uranium in the north, and a French company was exploiting them. This was not France's only source of uranium - it was *a* source - and they were interested in that. There was some drilling for oil or gas, but that was not successful. There were some minor finds of other minerals, but not of a commercial nature. The French felt that they had to keep the country going since it had been part of their empire at one time. They were more interested in what was happening further south, because the Côte d'Ivoire was really much more important economically and politically to Paris.

Nigeria was interested in Niger for security and economic reasons. They did not want the people of Niger to come into Nigeria looking for jobs. Also they did not want any of Niger's periodic tribal squabbles to move southward or their own Hausa or Fulani people to move northward into Niger. Nigeria was not willing to put much money into helping Niger, but tried to be a good neighbor during the drought by facilitating the transit of emergency food. Nigeria was experiencing an economic boom because of oil profits, and so the Lagos harbor was jammed with ships offloading goods for local consumption. As a result of heavy international pressure, the Nigerian Government gave some priority to emergency food shipments for Niger. The Canadian Government was interested in Niger and other French-speaking Sahelian countries because of the language issue. The Province of Quebec had an assistance program whose main goal was to build a road across the Sahel to link Chad, Niger, Mali, Haute Volta, (now Burkina Faso), Mauritania, and Senegal. The road was called "the Unity Road." No one was interested in stirring up things. It was a quiet time politically for my first year.

Q: *How about Libya?*

BUCHE: Libya tried, but it was so far away. Libya bordered Niger on the northeast, but there was a lot of desert between Libya and any population centers in Niger. Libya at the time seemed more interested in stirring up problems with its other neighboring states. We heard stories about Libya sending rifles to the Tuaregs in northern Niger and trying to stir up a rebellion against Diori. We had no way of checking out the stories, so we asked the French Ambassador. He said that Libya was trying to foment trouble in Niger's north, but the situation was under control. He also told us that the situation in Chad was more precarious, but was containable. The French Ambassador confirmed that the French Foreign Legion (based in Chad) had seen action in that country against Libyan-supported rebels.

Q: *Did the French have to bring in the Foreign Legion from time to time into Niger?*

BUCHE: No, not during my time there. I do not recall that the Foreign Legion was ever used in Niger since independence in 1960. The French had a couple of hundred of their own troops in

Niger to help train. I imagine these troops could be used to protect the Embassy and French citizens, if necessary. The interesting thing is that when the coup took place in April 1994, the French remained neutral. They did not take action to protect Diori. Since the Nigerien military maintained public order, there was no need for the French soldiers to become active.

Q: *Were you there when the coup took place?*

BUCHE: Yes, I was the chargé. Ross McClellan left as planned in July of 1973, and I took over expecting to be in charge for the customary month or two. I remained in charge until June 1994, since the ambassador for whom we had obtained an *agrément* was retained by Kissinger for his own staff.

Q: *Who was that?*

BUCHE: He was eventually made Ambassador to Athens.

Q: *Stearns?*

BUCHE: Yes, it was Monteagle Stearns. He was to come to Niger, and I looked forward very much to working with him. He had a wonderful reputation.

Q: *Well, how did the coup take place, and why?*

BUCHE: There were many reasons for the coup. The drought had become worse and worse. More people were dying. Many of the embassies, the UN organizations, and private groups were trying to get permission to do things on their own, to deliver food, medicines, fodder, shelter, and other necessities. The Nigerien Government was reluctant to allow USAID, Caritas, the Quebec Group, Lutheran World Relief, or other organizations to go very far outside of the major cities to distribute food directly to the people in need or to set up emergency shelters or clinics. The Government wanted everything done through the Nigerien Red Cross or the Political Party. In a few cases, external donors could work through the Nigerien Army. In theory, this was understandable and acceptable, but in reality the Red Cross and the Party did not have the logistical capability to do this. Also these entities were stealing substantial amounts. There was a standoff between the international community and the Niger Government. We were able to do certain things, such as airdrops, but were not allowed to take our USAID-donated trucks with our PL-480 food out into the countryside and assist the starving nomads. The US military decided not to send planes to Niger for airdrops, so we worked with the Belgian Air Force. The French Air Force did not need or want any help. The Belgians made about twenty airdrops over a three-week period. I went on a few of these. When we saw bands of nomads, we would swoop down and kick out a big bladder of water, a pallet of high-energy biscuits, dried fruits, and powdered milk, plus some hay for the animals, if there were any still surviving. Airdrops of food, fodder, and water are an inefficient way to deliver such necessities, especially when there are possibilities of using small aircraft as spotters and directing trucks to the targets. Because of the Nigerien Government restrictions on surface deliveries, airdrops were the only alternative to reaching the nomads in the north.

The Nigerien Army wanted to do more, but was largely kept out of the food distribution. Diori was playing politics with the drought. He wanted to use the two organizations he trusted and controlled, the Red Cross (Madame Diori was President) and his political party in order to gain credit for relieving the suffering and deprivation. He did not trust the military beyond the generals. He certainly did not want the colonels and majors to gain any publicity or goodwill from the people for bringing food. Observers could see that food was not reaching the people most in need, the nomads and the small rural hamlets. The diplomatic community and the international humanitarian groups met frequently under the aegis of the UN Development Program Representative, Sandy Rotival, (a dynamic American married to an equally dynamic French wife, Edith) to discuss what we could do. Our interventions with Diori and his Ministers had little effect. They promised us that they were aware of the problems and would improve the distribution channels if we would give them even more trucks, more food, more money, and more technical assistance. It was clear that Diori was more interested in control than in meeting the needs of the suffering and dying people. We were prevented from taking steps that would have saved lives. That is one reason we used airdrops, despite their high cost. At least some people were saved.

The Nigerien Army finally took action. On Easter Monday morning in April 1974, a battalion of soldiers stormed the Palace and arrested Diori. Madame Diori was killed resisting arrest. All the cabinet ministers and the top politicians were put under house arrest, as were the generals. About a dozen soldiers lost their lives, so it was not a particularly bloody coup. The people of Niger were delighted to see Diori ousted. He was losing support even before the drought, but his handling of that catastrophe vitiated whatever good will remained. His wife's greed and venality were well known. She was widely detested, and the strong feelings against Madame Diori also hurt the President.

I had seen the French Ambassador on Good Friday and said there were rumors that something serious was going on. I told him I happened to notice that there was three machine gun emplacements at the Palace that I had not noticed a week earlier. He was enigmatic. He replied, "I think things are under control. I am not going to be here for the holidays." He told me he was going camping with his family for the holidays.

Around four in the morning, I heard what I first thought were fireworks, and my first reaction was this is an odd time to have fireworks. I wondered whether it was a custom in Niger to have fireworks on Easter Monday morning. Then I realized those noises were machine guns and mortars. I flung open the shutters, and a tank went past the house. I assumed this was a coup attempt. I tried to phone, but the line was dead. There was no backup radio in my residence. Only the residences of the Ambassador and the AID Mission Director had radios. The tank was now parked in front of our gate. I asked the crew to please move, since I wanted to go to the Embassy. There were several roadblocks, but I got through to the Embassy. There was no one there, and the telephones were all dead. I needed the communications officer, so that I could send a cable to Washington alerting them to the coup. I did not have access to the communications vault where the cipher machines and the radios were kept. I decided to drive to his house, about two miles away. Just as I was leaving the Embassy compound, I saw him approaching. What a professional Joseph Acquavilla was! He knew he was needed at the Embassy, and managed to get through. I listened to the local radio to learn what had happened. The coup was successful, and there were

communiques and martial music. I drafted a short cable summarizing what we knew. Joe then informed me that our landline with the local PTT was blocked. We could not send a cable. Our communications equipment at Embassy Niamey was not so sophisticated in those days. We did all our own encoding and decoding, but we had to use a landline from the Embassy to the Nigerien Post, Telephone, and Telegraph Office to transmit our telegrams.

Since we could not send a cable, we used our radio to call up the Consulate at Kaduna, Nigeria. I explained to the Consul that a coup had taken place in Niger; we had no way of communicating with Washington; and would he send a cable to the Department. I read him my draft. We had to use Kaduna for the rest of the day to transmit bits of information, as we began to piece together what had happened. Since we were without telephones, we had to go around in our cars (through the checkpoints) to try to make contact with people who might know more than what was being broadcast on the local radio. I found the Taiwanese Ambassador to be well informed. Ironically, he knew his Embassy's days were numbered because the Government of Taiwan had such close links with deposed President Diori. It was widely assumed that Taiwan was putting money into Diori's personal off-shore banking account. The French Ambassador was not to be reached, but I finally tracked down his DCM. He told me he also wanted to go camping over the holidays, but the Ambassador insisted he stay in town. The DCM admitted the Embassy was not surprised by the recent event. I then realized why the French Ambassador wanted to be on a camping trip in the desert, and thus theoretically unreachable by telephone from the Palace. He made sure to be out of town, so that Diori could not call upon him to have the French military rescue him. That was my reading. When I next saw the Ambassador, he smiled when I said, "Now I know why you were out of town for the holidays."

There were a few casualties on both sides, not many. The most important casualty was Madame Diori, who was considered the "dragon lady." She was universally detested by almost anyone who came in contact with her, whether it was the diplomatic corps, the NGOs, the UN, or her own people. She was rapacious and greedy. She was also audacious. She would notice a ring, a brooch, or a necklace on a woman at a party or reception, and ask to "borrow" it for a while. Nigeriens were dreadfully afraid of her, and so they would acquiesce. Of course, they learned never to wear anything of value after that to events where she might be present. Even some wives of diplomats and UN officials were asked. Some did not really know what to do; they were so astounded that the wife of the President would ask them for a piece of jewelry they were wearing. They would give it to her, expecting she would give it back. In some cases she did, if the husband made an issue of it with the Foreign Minister or the President.

The soldiers who fought their way into the Palace arrested the President, and then they went after her. They shot her many times. The soldiers claimed that she fired at them first. She may have.

Order was restored in Niamey. The tanks left the streets, and the checkpoints were removed. The Government announced that relations would go on as before, except for the Chinese. Taiwan was out, and the Beijing Government was to come in. The new Government was wary of Libya and kept a distance from Qadhafi. Although Qadhafi sent a delegation soon after the coup, the Libyans did not open up an embassy. Most foreign governments began recognizing the new Nigerien Government within days. At the time of the coup, the U.S. Government had been debating what our recognition policy should be when a government is ousted by non-democratic

means. Should we withhold recognition even if the new government is firmly in control, or should we be realistic and state that recognition is not a seal of approval, but an acknowledgment of political realities. The Kissinger doctrine of *Realpolitik* prevailed. I received a cable to convey our recognition after about a week.

Q: *Who took over?*

BUCHE: A Lt. Colonel named Kountche. He was in the second tier of the military hierarchy. He and a small group of majors, captains, and lieutenants planned the coup and carried it off successfully. One unit seized the national radio station; one took over the PTT; another unit went to the police headquarters; other units went to the Army Headquarters and various military installations in Niamey to neutralize their rescue attempts. The message of the *Putschistes* to potentially loyalist units was: "You don't have to join us, but don't fight us, and we'll take good care of you." Several generals who were close to Diori decided it was not to their interest to risk their lives defending their friend and chief, so they just surrendered and were put under house arrest and eventually were discharged and given a pension.

About three weeks after the coup, Douglas Heck came to Niamey as the new American Ambassador. He was accompanied by his wife, Ernie. He had been DCM in Teheran. Ernie was a career Foreign Service Officer. Doug and Ernie were in Paris for Easter and were scheduled to arrive in Niamey, the Tuesday after Easter. Because of the coup, they were asked by the Department to return to Washington.

The coup did not change significantly the daily life of many people in Niamey, but for the people in the countryside, it turned out to be the event that saved many of their lives. Kountche called the embassies, UN, and relief groups together on the second or third day of the new regime to announce they were free to distribute food and other necessities anywhere in the country. They had only to inform the Army where they were going so there could be some coordination. He offered to put the Army at the disposal of the relief groups if they needed extra hands. Kountche said the reason that he had overthrown Diori was that the former President no longer cared for the welfare of the country, was hindering the relief efforts, and had allowed relief food to be stolen by his wife and his Party supporters. The Army had seized warehouses that were the private property of Madame Diori, and opened them for the public to see. They contained trucks, medicines, and bags of wheat and rice with the logos from the UN, from the Common Market, and Japan. Madame Diori was said to have already sold tons of grain for her private gain, and from what was in the warehouses, she was planning to sell more. People could wander through, and journalists were encouraged to film and to write about what they were seeing. Madame Diori was not in the same league with Imelda Marcos. She did not have 800 pairs of shoes, but she had several hundred *boubous*, the traditional dress, and much jewelry. In another clever gesture by the new Government, people were invited to reclaim jewelry taken from them. I do not know how many people actually got their pieces back, but I assume some were reclaimed, particularly if they had some sort of proof.

Q: *Something engraved on it?*

BUCHE: Yes, a name, initials, a proof of purchase from a store, or some evidence of a previous attempt to get the jewelry back. It was a great PR gesture. The Kountche Government did not have to worry about a backlash of sympathy for Diori and the old guard. They were thoroughly discredited. Diori was eventually released from house arrest in Zinder and allowed to go to the Côte d'Ivoire, where he was given asylum by Houphouet Boigny. Within several years of the coup, the new crowd was emulating the ways of their predecessors. Bribes and theft of public property, politically-motivated arrests, judicial decisions, promotions, firings, contract awards, etc. were the norm, just as they had been under Diori.

Within months of the coup, the relief operations were running so well that the donor countries and the UN began planning for the long-term. What could they do to mitigate the damage and suffering from the next drought in the Sahel. The enormous costs to the donors of the relief operations were key factors. A decision was made, pushed by the UN as well as by the French, to do something structurally for the Sahel that would enable the countries of the Sahel to withstand future droughts. When people began adding up how much money it cost to buy grain in the donor countries and transport it through the ports of West Africa northward or from Algeria southward to the intended recipients, they were willing to invest money in potential long-term solutions. The USG spent several hundred million dollars for the Sahel drought-relief efforts. Our relief programs for Niger were varied. AID purchased twelve, large ten-wheeler Berliet trucks in Algeria, filled them with grain and drove them southward across the desert to make distributions from that direction. We also rented trucks to bring the grain from Lagos and Abidjan ports. It was enormously costly. Government officials, scientists, and economists began meeting in conferences to discuss solutions for the long term. Some of the principal ideas were to develop drought-resistant sorghum (the staple crop in the Sahel), deeper wells, campaigns aimed at encouraging better use of the limited grazing areas, better weather forecasting, expanded agricultural surveillance, better communications and more clinics in the countryside. It was decided to set up a voluntary Sahel Fund to cover the costs of the programs.

Washington was interested in doing something, so there was money available. Television had had its impact on America and Western Europe. CNN and others networks had shown wrenching images of starving babies, mothers trying to nurse their babies, but having no milk, skeletons and cadavers by the roadside. There were frequent visits by TV crews from all over the world to the Sahel. NBC, CBS, and CNN came from the US to Niger. The TV news accounts often made the Diori Government angry. The President complained to me that CNN came to Niger looking for starving babies, and did not want to film the camps on the edges of the major cities where some of the nomads were being assisted. We suggested to the TV crews that they might want to take some footage of the camps. They would shoot some scenes, but would not use that portion in the final product. They preferred the dramatic scenes of suffering and death from the northern reaches.

There was a ground swell of sympathy in the United States. We got a cable from the Department saying that Mrs. Nixon wanted to come out to the area and that she would be bringing a contingent of nearly 200 to show the US sympathy for the starving people of the Sahel. What was the Government's and the Embassy's opinion on this? I went to the Palace and posed the question to President Diori. He asked how many would be in the First Lady's party. When I told him about 200, he was silent. Finally, he answered *Qua faire*? What can I do? The American

people have given us help, so we should thank the American people through her. She is welcome. Diori added in an aside that her visit would practically shut down the government for days and force numerous UN officials and relief workers from hotels and government guest houses, but Mrs. Nixon was *chaleureusement bienvenue.* I reported our conversation absolutely straight. I was the first to respond to Washington. Most of the other ambassadors and chargés reported similar reactions from their host governments. Her visit will be a heavy burden, but we are a hospitable and grateful nation and we will receive her with dignity. Our Ambassador in Ouagadougou, Don Easom, took a different approach. He sent a short reply saying he did not want to approach the government at this stage since the President would probably respond along the lines of what Diori, Keita (Mali's President), and Senghor (Senegal's President) had said. He offered his own opinion that a visit with such a large retinue would cause great hardship and severe logistical problems for the governments. If Mrs. Nixon wants to come as a gesture of sympathy, she should do so with a much smaller group. We heard nothing for a few days, and then Washington cabled that because of other pressing commitments, Mrs. Nixon could not visit the Sahel.

While I escaped the headaches of a visit by the First Lady, there were other difficult problems I faced as Charge. One involved our Public Affairs Officer. He was in a bar one night and struck up a conversation with a correspondent from one of the French newspapers. Our PAO was asked what he thought about Diori and the Nigerien Government's drought relief efforts. He had never met the correspondent before. Nevertheless, our PAO, instead of ducking the question or speaking in generalities, apparently lambasted the President and the regime. What our PAO did not realize was that the correspondent was a personal friend of Diori and may actually have been on Diori's payroll. Two days later, I was called to the Palace and told by Diori that our PAO had spoken in a way that defamed the Nigerien Government. I was requested to quietly send him back to Washington within two weeks.

I was completely caught off-guard. I knew nothing of the prior conversation, so I told the President I would speak with the officer to hear his side of the story. I spoke with him as soon as I got back to the Embassy. He said it was a very general and nothing personal against Diori. I reported the situation to Washington. My instructions were to go back to Diori and confront him with the PAO's version. I returned to the Palace. I asked the President whether he was positive that the PAO had really said what he was accused of. His reply was that a third person had overheard the conversation. The implication was that it was another Frenchman. Diori gave me an ultimatum. Either withdraw the PAO quietly, or he would declare him persona non grata. I then went back to the Embassy and confronted the PAO with the new information. The PAO backtracked considerably on his version of the conversation. I again reported to Washington. The response was to withdraw the PAO and spare him the humiliation of being PNGed. He received a decent assignment in Washington, so his career was not ruined. Years later, I learned that he had also been declared persona non grata from a country in South East Asia for publicly criticizing the government!

Another source of concern to me (and the Peace Corps Director) was the public behavior of a few of the Peace Corps Volunteers. This encompassed a wide range of individual actions which I found inappropriate and insensitive. Some examples: romantic relationships in public (an absolute no-no in rural Muslim Niger); allegations of sexual relations with students; mini-skirts;

drinking alcohol in public (tolerated in the cities, but scandalous in small towns); and open criticism of the regime (certainly deserved, but not the prerogative of a PCV). There were also examples of irresponsibility by the PCVs in the personal health area: failure to take the anti-malarial tablets on a regular basis, failure to use a condom against STDs; failure to use "the pill" on a regular basis, and for one PCV, the failure to refill her anti-asthma prescription. As a result, there were numerous cases of malaria and STDs, several unwanted pregnancies, and the death of the asthmatic. In most instances, the PCVs had to be evacuated back to the States. In the latter case, not only was her corpse flown back, but the young woman's roommate was so distraught that she, too, had to be evacuated and her PC service terminated. It was the surviving roommate who told us that her friend had run out of her medicine, but made no effort to renew the supply. Several weeks later, a sand storm hit their town; she had an attack and died.

The number of PCVs in Niger at one time was not more than 50, but they caused more concern and anguish than the 450 Volunteers in Ethiopia during my tour there. The Niger group included a higher than usual percentage of immature Volunteers. They should have been selected out while in training or sent home early in their tour in country. The stricken individuals suffered; the Peace Corps had its outstanding record in Niger badly tarnished; and the recipients of the Volunteers' work, the students and the patients at the maternal and child health clinics, were deprived of their services.

As I was leaving the country, the idea of the Sahelian Initiative was in the forefront. There were many workshops and policy discussions on the proposals in Africa, Europe, and the U.S. Governments were determined to launch an attempt to mitigate the effects, costs, and suffering of future droughts. I was a "short-timer" in Niger, so I did not become deeply involved in the medium-to-long-term planning or programming. That was probably wise, since I was quite skeptical of many of the premises of the Initiative. I had a feeling that we could not accomplish much to overcome a century of ecological degradation, unless we and the other Western governments were willing to be quite generous in our funding and the Sahelian governments were willing to enforce onerous, but necessary laws regarding grazing, herd sizes, well drilling and use, etc. The Sahel was becoming drier, and the desert was moving southward. The Sahara was encroaching ever further southward, and there were abundant evidence and measurements to document the phenomenon. It was a question of how far south the desert was going to go, and could man stop the encroachment. *Desertification*, was the word that we were throwing about at the time. People were saying, if we plant millions of trees, we can stop this. The trees were there originally, but they were cut down. There were also abundant grasses and shrubs, but they were overgrazed and eventually failed to regenerate. Many scientists were convinced the Sahel was in a long-term dry cycle. I was not optimistic that man-made policies would be very successful in overcoming what man had done even in the last century to aggravate the delicate ecological balance. I had seen numerous photos of Niger's landscape from the turn of the century into the 1950s. I was amazed at how many trees there had been, but over the years, the nomads and others had cut the trees down. I talked to some people who had lived in Niger for decades: missionary priests, former administrators, retired military, and others. They spoke of how there had been more rainfall, cooler temperatures, and much, much more vegetation thirty or forty years earlier. The meteorological records dating back a century showed that the weather patterns had changed, although there were differences of opinion on how much the cause was man-made and how much was cyclical. The old timers agreed that when the country became independent,

many of the colonial restrictions on cutting trees, drilling wells, and limiting grazing were cast aside. The other Sahelian countries experienced similar reactions. Some of my interlocutors argued that the accelerated ecological degradation of the post-colonial era played a significant role in exacerbating the damage.

I spoke to Ambassador Heck at length on my misgivings that an Initiative would accomplish much because the Sahelian governments were not about to return to the old colonial restrictions. New sorghum varieties, stockpiled emergency food, and reforestation projects would certainly help, but would not be decisive. I told him that we were all being driven by the past disaster and the high costs involved to do something. There was a determination to do something quick to show that we cared. Unless the Sahelian governments were willing to take some draconian steps to curb harmful practices against the ecology, what we did would probably be largely negated. I was pessimistic that the Sahel Initiative would focus on doing what might be effective in the long run. I saw mostly short-term palliatives, namely quick-impact projects. Doug listened to me patiently, but I saw that he was under orders, so I stopped offering my opinion. There was so much interest in Washington, Paris, Bonn, Brussels, the UN, and especially the Sahel. There was going to be enormous money poured into the area. There was talk of a "Marshall Plan" for the Sahel. New proposals were made every day. Universities, NGOs, contractors, think tanks, governmental development agencies, and others got involved. People flew into Niamey to discuss projects and funding. Nigerien officials flew to Paris, New York, Brussels, Ottawa, and to Sahelian capitals for consultations and conferences. People were coming and going. Unlimited funds seemed to be available for travel and conferences. Some of the pilot projects were funded. Officials were upbeat. Western money and technology were going to turn things around in the Sahel! Even if Doug had wanted to take a more gradual approach, he would have been overruled.

We worked well together in the short time we were both in Niamey. He was a dedicated professional, but also had a good way with people. He was respected from the very beginning. Within a few months, Doug was also very popular with a wide circle of friends. I liked him immediately. We became personal friends. Although he is deceased, I am still very close to his wife, who was a professional who had to give up her career while he was ambassador. Just the past year I worked with her on several occasions in connection with refugee issues.

Q: *Yes, I know Ernie very well. We served together in Saigon. We were quite good friends. I had a long interview with Ernie.*

BUCHE: She's a fine person.

Q: *Yes, she was a fine Foreign Service officer.*

BUCHE: Looking back from the perspective of some fifteen-years' distance, I see that hundreds of millions of dollars went into the Sahel. Trees were planted, more wells dug, herds were replenished, storage facilities built, roads constructed, better sorghum varieties developed, weather forecasting improved, and agricultural monitoring stations scattered throughout the area. Some Sahelian government officials and merchants are living much better as the result of the Initiative. The desert is still moving southward, but slower. Nomadic life has been abandoned by

many. Many of the nomads of Niger have died out, gotten jobs, or settled in the *bidonvilles* of Agadès, Niamey, Zinder, or elsewhere.

Q: *Somewhat the same thing happened in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. The Bedu.*

BUCHE: The French and other Europeans have long been fascinated with the nomads of the Sahel. I was intrigued by their life style, but I was not a strong advocate of preserving their *culture* at all costs. The West performed a Herculean task to bring the nomads food, fodder, and water. Despite our efforts, many of them died. They could have moved southward earlier where there was food available. After the first year of the drought, the Niger Government pleaded with the nomads to stay in the south, where they could more easily be assisted if the drought continued. Most of them ignored the Government's pleas or the meteorological warnings of more drought and moved northward in their usual transhumance patterns expecting the rains to come. When the rains again failed, the nomads and their flocks were so weak that they could not reach the southern lands without heavy casualties. The victims were mostly the very old and the very young. When conditions became critical, the old people voluntarily stayed behind to allow the young a better chance of survival. When the water and food were nearly at an end, the adults abandoned the infants and those children who could not keep up with the march. That is how the nomads survived hard times. The camps were largely populated by nomads between the ages of five and fifty. There were, of course, some younger children and older adults, but not many.

It was not politically correct for diplomats to comment that if the nomads had not been so stubborn in following their traditional way of life, many more would have been saved. The journalists, however, had no such compunction, and asked the question frequently of the drought victims in the camps. They said all was in the hands of Allah. Allah wanted them to follow their traditional ways, and so they depended on Allah to take care of them. If drought or other misfortune befell them, that was the will of Allah. There was nothing they could do. They desperately wanted to return to the desert and would do so if they could obtain animals to sustain them. Part of the assistance money from the Sahel Fund went to replenish the herds of the nomads. Some nomads, along with their newly-acquired animals, moved out of the camps and back to their old life. Sahel Fund money also was used to train nomads for a more sedentary life. I later learned that the success rate was low for the adults in this group. They had no previous schooling and were thus not only illiterate, but also ill at ease in the twentieth century. Their children, however, were more successful in adapting to urban life.

Before moving on to speaking about my next assignment, I want to include a few remarks and observations about our social and family life in Niamey. Anike and I found the Nigeriens in Niamey generally pleasant and agreeable. They have a quiet, subtle approach to life. They were a great contrast to their neighbors to the south, the Nigerians. Our circle of friends and acquaintances was mainly Government officials, other diplomats, UN people, and the small American community - Embassy, Peace Corps, and missionaries.

Our children found life in Niger more difficult than Blantyre or Washington. They spent four months at the Cathedral Day School in Washington while Anike and I were learning French at the FSI. They liked the school so much that they did not want to leave at 5 o'clock when we came to take them home. School in Niamey was quite different. John and Christina did not know

French and did not know any of their classmates. Despite the special attention given to them by their teachers (Madame Maouri was especially kind to the children), they had a rough time adjusting. Not only was the weather terribly hot (no air-conditioning in the school), but there were no swings, slides, or toys at the school. The school's recreation area was an large expanse of sand. At recess, the boys played soccer, and the girls watched. Since John had never played soccer before, he was left out. Christina's lack of French at the beginning meant that she could not converse with the other kids. Anike recalls visiting the school one day during the recess and seeing John kneeling on the ground using his shoes as two toy trucks driving through the sand. Our children learned French rapidly and adjusted well. They seemed to forget their school in Washington with its many enjoyable facilities. At least they no longer asked why they could not go back to Cathedral Day School.

Through our children, we got to know some teachers and parents from the French School. As our French conversational ability improved, we expanded our contacts. Without French, there could be little communication with the Nigeriens. I knew of only three Nigerien officials who spoke English. (One was President Diori. He understood English quite well, but hesitated to use the language in official discussions.) Because of the lack of "cultural" facilities and events such as theaters, musical performances, and cinemas, social life centered around traveling performers sponsored by embassies and held in the French, Chinese, American, or German Cultural Centers. The American Community ran a recreation center that included a snack bar, swimming pool, two lighted tennis courts, and an open shed for showing films. Anike was the manager for one year. We were generous about allowing guests to use the facility. An American member could bring up to six guests at a time. Other embassies had similar facilities. There were only a half dozen restaurants catering to the foreign community in Niamey. There were two open-air restaurants, Vietnamese and Middle Eastern, along the Niger River. They were attractive places to visit in the evenings. There were also two discos favored by Westerners. I found the discos too loud, too crowded, and too smoky. After several visits, I stopped going, despite invitations from my diplomatic and UN colleagues to join them after a reception or dinner. Mixing in with the international social circles were former French *colons.* They had lived in Niger or elsewhere in French West Africa for many decades. They often married or lived with local women and had children. They were interesting, intelligent, and skilled in surviving. They flourished under French colonialism, Diori, Kountche, and Kountche's successor. There may still be some living in Niamey today, unless they left for France for better medical care.

Niamey was a fascinating assignment. I found the situation at the Embassy and in the country much more challenging than I had expected. There were more crises than I had imagined would come my way. As Charge for nearly a year, I had to deal with the drought, the PNG episode, the PCV death and other medical problems of the Volunteers, and the coup d'etat, and the aftermath. I was confident I handled the situations in a competent, professional manner. The Desk Officer or his boss, the Office Director, in the Department on many occasions sent letters (an official-informal, as we called them) praising the way I was running the Embassy and responding to the crises. (Since the Nigerien telephone system was useless for communicating much beyond local calls, we were dependent on mail and telegrams.) As my tour of duty came to an end in Niamey, I had every expectation of being promoted by the Department for my excellent performance both in Malawi and Niger. I was shocked when my name did not appear on the promotion list. I wrote to Personnel and asked discreetly why I was not promoted. I also asked for a copy of my

performance evaluation written by the Office Director for West African Affairs. Before Personnel could reply, a long-delayed, unclassified diplomatic pouch arrived at the Embassy with a copy of my evaluation. I knew instantly why I was not on the promotion list. The Office Director had written only one short paragraph about my work as Charge. It was highly complimentary with several nicely-chosen adjectives and adverbs, but there was no detail other than to say I performed magnificently when the Embassy and Niger were under the stress of time drought and a coup d'etat. The evaluator wrote apologetically that he had been named Ambassador to Senegal and in the rush to prepare for confirmation by the Senate and to get to post, he had neglected to do the required "efficiency reports" on the dozen Ambassadors and Charges in his area. When Personnel had reminded him of his neglect, he wrote whatever he could recall while sitting in Embassy Dakar. I was upset that he did not bother to send me his draft and ask whether I could add some details. In those days, there was not much a Foreign Service Officer could do in such circumstances. We were expected to go along without protest with the "System," and if we did, we were told the System would eventually right the wrongs and take care of its own. (The next year, I gained my promotion!)

I left Niamey with a sense of accomplishment. I looked upon my tour there with satisfaction and pride. I was ready for another assignment, this time outside of Africa. I needed a change of continents.

WAYNE WHITE
General Service Officer/Consular Officer
Niamey (1974-1976)

Mr. White was born and raised in Pennsylvania and educated at Penn State, Abington. Entering the Foreign Service in 1973 he served in Nigeria and Haiti before being assigned to the Sinai Field Mission. He subsequently devoted his career in the State Department to Middle Eastern Affairs, serving in senior positions in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research dealing with Arab-Israel, North African and general Arab and Iranian Affairs. Mr. White was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2005.

Q: Well then Niger, you were in Niger from when to when?

WHITE: I was in Niger from June, 1974 to the middle of July, '76.

Q: What was Niger like at the time you got there?

WHITE: It was our first real third world experience. In other words before Niger, the only thing that approached the third world was a week in Istanbul during my European trek, and there is no comparison between Turkey and Niger. It was quite primitive in ways that we could notice right off, the smell, the flies, the heat, the lack of medical facilities. There was one very small French hospital (actually, a clinic). The national hospital you didn't go near — incredibly filthy. As a consular officer, I was there a few times, but you wouldn't use it for medical support. I was

pulling people out of there or steering them away, getting them to the French clinic instead (or out of the country) for meaningful care. A number of casual visitors, desert crossers mainly, got sick and needed assistance on the southern end of their Sahara treks (mainly due to malaria) and didn't know what they were getting into entering Niger. Judging from some reading about Niger I've done long since leaving is that we were there in probably its best time: at least from, say, 1973 to the present — even throwing in the drought. It was under fairly capable and responsible leadership. The army was still highly disciplined and flecked thickly with French seconded personnel all the way down to non-commissioned officers. The small army was still rather spit and polish. The streets were fairly clean. The road net, on which we did a considerable amount of in-country travel, was mainly earthen, but kept nicely graded and maintained — a lot of "washboarding," but very few potholes. If you drove over 60 miles and hour, you skimmed the washboard, you couldn't even feel it. In the city were a number of quality asphalt roads which frankly I wish portions of DC had. There was also a cluster of some nice restaurants, Vietnamese restaurants, things like that. It was our first experience overseas in a country stricken by drought, but still harboring hope. Now, however, Niger has been through very rough patches, bordering on failed state status at times, and trying desperately now to feed over twice the number of people than were there when we were there.

Q: What was your job in Niger?

WHITE: It was interesting actually because I was supposed to have been mainly the GSO, but the GSO was, in my case, also the Consular Officer. And it was great to have another sideline — another window into Niger. When I arrived there was no Pol/Mil Officer. When they found out I was a military buff of sorts, enjoyed rubbing shoulders with the regional Defense Attache people, etc. I became, effectively, Embassy Niamey's version of the Pol/Mil Officer. It was pretty funny, some of the things you would do as "Pol/Mil Officer" in Niger, like, on instructions from Washington for our E & E Plan, prepare maps of all airfields in the country and rate them according to runway length, state of the runway (almost always earthen and not so great), this sort of thing. Crafting maps using colored pencils and tracing paper, things that people now would think are relegated to an elementary school was fun because I always likely mapmaking and was pretty good at it. Anyway, I got to fly around with the Defense Attache folks who were based in Monrovia when they came up on visits. I saw a lot of the country in their new C-12, which, replacing the more durable C-47 previously used, and which was damaged during one of our landings on one of those sub-par dirt airstrips.

The post tripled in size while I was there because of the Sahel Drought Emergency which had been declared in 1973, and for which Niamey was designated the regional USAID headquarters. Many have come to believe since then that there quite possibly was no such thing as the drought emergency. The Sahara was simply expanding once again, and more of Niger (like neighboring Chad) was slowly being absorbed by that great desert. There have been better rainy seasons since the time I was out there, but apparently never like the early 20th Century, and made worse by overpopulation. A country that had a population of 2,000,000 I think in back in the 1930's had well more than 4,000,000 while we were there, and now has something like 8 or 9 million. They could spread out before in the early days in response to droughts; they can't now.

Anyway, returning to the Foreign Service side of this story, I was 24 years old, and found myself supervising between 100 to 120 local employees, many of them guards. About a dozen spoke English. I had French training at FSI. I was pulled out of French training prematurely before I could finish my 20 weeks and get my 3-3 rating, which I was very upset about since that prevented me from getting off language probation. There was supposedly an emergency at post that demanded my urgent presence, 4 weeks ahead of schedule. Here comes the kind of thing that make people leave the Foreign Service: I got to post as fast as possible with Sonia and found that the emergency at post was that the Administrative Officer wanted to go on recreational leave. I was denied my 3-3 for that. I was assured that I could not get a 3-3 in Niger via tutoring by the folks at FSI. I would have to secure an assignment to another Francophone post in order to qualify for the additional language training required to take care of the problem of language probation, at least in French, further postponing my ability to get to the Middle East.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

WHITE: Douglas Heck.

Q: And the DCM?

WHITE: John Buche to start with the first year, and then Jack Davison. Jack went on to become ambassador to at least one and maybe two African posts. One of them was Niger. Doug went on to be ambassador in Nepal.

Q: Well now Doug was a Turkish hand basically wasn't he, and Iran too?

WHITE: Actually, that is an interesting question. We were never all that close to the Heck's. But Doug never really tried to put himself forward in a way that revealed his deepest interests on that score. I know nothing about Turkey, but he served as DCM in Iran under Richard Helms just before coming to Niger. And he had served previously in Nepal, and I really think Doug saw himself primarily as a South Asian expert. In fact, when entered INR, even Iran was still considered "South Asia." That changed during my service with INR, with the Iran portfolio shifting into the core Middle East.

Q: Yeah he was in India too.

WHITE: Yes, in the conversations I had with Doug, he was always talking about India and Nepal, not so much Iran, which I was actually far more interested in considering what some of his experiences under Helms must have been. Perhaps there was some unpleasantness there. Who knows? His wife Ernie Heck was a Foreign Service Officer, who had to take administrative leave or whatever to accompany him to Niger.

Q: I know, we were close friends in Vietnam. Was there much contact with the Nigeriens, the people in Niger or not?

WHITE: That is always an important question to ask. I believe the general answer in my case should be no, and I will tell you why. I had plenty of contact with some of the lowest levels of

society as GSO, as did my wife, Recreation Center Director for awhile and a hire in the Administrative Section a bit later. In other words our gardener was Nigerien, as were most of those at the embassy and ambassador's residence. A scattering of the house guards were Nigerien. And, of course, there was dickering with the ladies at the market in the course of daily shopping, and during one wild evening, with the desert Tuaregs arranged by our one Tuareg guard, who tried to sell me a 12-year old girl! That sort of thing, however, gives one only a rather superficial view. Niger had very low educational and skill levels. So, in the office, for example, I mainly operated through more highly skilled Togolese, Nigerians, and Beninois. Those were the Africans I most often dealt with even down to the level of houseboys. I never had a Nigerien houseboy. Because it became law while I was there, I had to institute the first program in our Administrative Section to begin replacing other Africans with Nigeriens. I brought in a Nigerien to train in our procurement unit, who showed some real promise, but it was a tough slog at times. I persevered with that, however. I really felt sorry for the Nigeriens because there was a sort of Togolese mafia (as we used to jokingly refer to the number of Togolese employees) that comprised much of the embassy's Foreign Service National staff, followed by Nigerians and others from Benin. Even beyond the one Nigerien young man I mentioned, I was trying to break up that Togolese monopoly and move in some Nigeriens at least some of the entry level positions. As a supervisor, I was always trying to balance bringing in more Nigeriens, which pitted lower levels of productivity, against the rising demands of an expanding embassy.

Q: What about you mentioned the hospital facilities were pretty abysmal unless you went to the French hospital.

WHITE: Yes. The French hospital called the Gamcalle Clinic was very small, probably only about 30-40 beds, and fairly primitive by our standards. It was, however, much cleaner than the National Hospital. The National Hospital essentially lived on borrowed doctors, mainly from eastern bloc countries, such as Polish dentists. I remember my last visit there taking an African-American guy, who had crossed the desert, and had contracted malaria rather predictably in Niger, not having been told about taking suppressants by his physician back in California. Almost two weeks to the day upon entering the malarial zone south of the Sahara (the usual time for incubation), he came down with a raging case. He didn't think that people at home would help him out, and so he wanted to go to the cheapest place. I said, "You do not want to go to the National Hospital, no matter what." But to prove my point, I had to take him there, with him shaking with fever. I had had him at my house, but he said, "I can't do this." I said, "Why not. Just stay at my house." We went to one of the wards, and of course it was families living under beds, crude, soiled beds, cooking on the concrete floors in the halls, etc. The nurses' station, if there could be anything called that, was an old desk. It was covered up to about three to four inches with old dressings, half eaten meals, mixed in with new stuff and syringes and scattered cockroaches running around the floor, the desk and the walls.

Q: You mentioned desert Sahara crossing. What is this all about?

WHITE: Oh it was a big phenomenon at the time. In fact, some of the USAID local hires in Niamey in those days were American desert crossers who ran out of money before being able to get home. Doug and Ernie Heck crossed with Carlton Coon, then our DCM in Morocco, while we were there. Doug or Ernie wrote a fascinating 30-odd page account of the crossing. I think it

is becoming interesting again because a route made very dangerous during the 1990's because of Algerian Islamic militants was becoming more safe, but now there reports of more trouble.

Q: Polisario?

WHITE: No, actually Algerian militants, primarily the GSPC.

Q: Fundamentalists.

WHITE: These militants were fighting the old authoritarian regime in Algiers. Desert crossing became very dangerous. But in those days it was a common thing to have the most adventurous kids who had done their European backpacking thing, try to prove how tough they were by doing a desert crossing. And for every three or four I had to take care of as Consular Officer, there would one who would join up with the embassy, which again tripled in size while I was there, on contract. USAID could not supply enough people, and so, USAID was thriving as were we at times off of ex-Peace Corps volunteers, who didn't want to return home and just stayed on, as well as desert crossers, of various types, Canadians, Americans, Brits, male, and female. At one point to show you the sad state of USAID in Niger, in 1975 I suppose, a desert crossing young American woman on contract named Laura, smart as a whip, in her mid-20's with a BA from a good school, was, effectively, the 3rd best program officer in USAID. That wasn't her job description, but she had an office near the USAID director in the main embassy building, supervising personnel, writing reports, and working on major procurement contracts!

Q: What was AID doing there?

WHITE: Oh, various things. There were fishery projects, trying to build fisheries out of ponding from the Niger, in cooperation with the Peace Corps. There was, believe it or not, a forestry project, one thing which I felt was rather bizarre because there was virtually nothing there to work with. But there was a little forest between the airport and the city which USAID had built up over the years. There were various sort of village self help projects throughout the country, water pumps for villages, sanitation projects related to which USAID often would go on the road and check out on long road trips, and bring their vehicles back to Niamey desperately needing the services of my GSO section because they were pretty beaten up. There was even an experimental cloud-seeding project employing an old B-17, but I can't recall whether that was USAID, funded by another country, Niger government, or a combination of same.

We were strapped for American administrative officers because although USAID kept authorizing more GSO positions, up to three more by the spring of 1975, none could be filled because Vietnam was still absorbing the bulk of USAID's people, and nobody but nobody wanted to come to what was regarded as a rather forlorn posting. Then in April-May, 1975, we had a groundswell of USAID personnel applying for every opening in Niger as Vietnam fell and there were RIF's, (terminating people who couldn't find a job to justify their continued USG employment). At that point, I ended up very quickly with three AID officers, all compared to me, ancient. I am 55 now, and I can see all this in greater perspective. None were under the age of 50, none were acclimated very well to the difficult environment in Niger, and, believe it or not, despite coming from francophone Vietnam, none were at all proficient in French. So I became

the French translator for them, which was great because here you are, an FSO-8, and you are acting in some capacities as their supervisor (well, I guess I had become an FSO-7 by mid-tour). My language skill also allowed me to get all of the best stuff to do — anything white collar because it involved interaction & negotiation in French or French paper work. Meanwhile, my seniors were stuck with maintenance, vehicle repair, etc. while I was out working on customs clearances, contracting for real estate, security, and mingling with some senior Nigerien officials (who owned much of the real estate in town and ran security from the very top—even seemingly trivial matters). I can't tell you how many times an outraged 55 year old USAID officer who outranked me by three grades or so came storming into my spacious office with an FSN in tow saying, "You tell him that if he ever does X again…" They could hardly speak a word of French to the staff. It was hilarious at times, terribly frustrating at others, and pretty shocking overall.

Q: I wonder do you feel that it was very effective, what we were doing there?

WHITE: Not in the end, because I didn't think much of what USAID was doing was building up a strong base of Nigerien personnel who, without USAID, could sustain what they were doing. The Peace Corps was working on a variety of things, from the more urban projects like Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) programs to village sanitation and things like that, right down to the level where the proverbial "rubber meets the road," and they could count on some people carrying on after they left, or being replaced by another volunteer picking up from them. The fish farming I mentioned earlier was, in part, a Peace Corps project. In many small ways, here and there, Peace Corps probably left the most enduring, country-wide legacy. And they helped the embassy a lot because Peace Corps was so large, and becoming the regional center for the drought, we had a regional Peace Corps doctor. We had a regional State Dept. nurse, so I helped combine them into a Niamey-based American regional medical clinic. Without Peace Corps, we could have never gotten that together. And we had two terrific Peace Corps doctors in succession during my time in Niger.

Q: Did you get any feel for Ambassador Heck and his relations with the Nigerien government, or was there much going on?

WHITE: I did not really circulate as much as some others in the political sphere. But I got the impression that he was very interested in what was going on—very enthusiastic and highly professional--and was trying to spend as much of his time getting acclimated, going around the country, moving about to get a sense of what was going on — all the way across the country to Lake Chad on one occasion. I got the impression that sometimes he was unhappy with USAID because he could see what I was just telling you about. He didn't think it was having nearly as much impact and that USAID was wasting resources. I can give you a hilarious story about a meeting that relates to this problem. It was a little bit later in my tour, and would involve using foul language (although not by me). Is this allowed?

Q: Oh Absolutely.

WHITE: Anyway, it occurred at a country team meeting. I was present because the Administrative Officer was out of country. It was a meeting mainly to discuss a crisis of sorts over a Nigerien demand for a customs payment related to a shipment of gift grain from the US.

There was something like eight or nine thousand tons of gift grain coming by rail via Togo and at the time sitting at the railhead for loading into trucks. The Nigerien government had recently informed the USAID director that there was over a quarter of a million dollars in customs fees that had to be paid on the gift grain. The USAID Controller attended to brief on the financial situation.

He said he could extract from various funds, enough money to pay the entire amount. I was sitting there thinking: "Is everyone here insane? Customs payments for giving them gift grain?" This sounded like a real scam to line some official pockets. Just about the time I was quietly reaching my private boiling point, DCM Jack Davison shouted, "Fuck 'em!" Doug Heck nodded and said, "Absolutely! Go back and tell them that it's now gift grain for Togo. There will be no customs payments on gift grain to this country. There never has and never will be." The USAID controller and the USAID director got very upset, arguing: "How can we do that? It's not gift grain to Togo; it's tagged for Niger." Doug said, "They don't know that; They don't know how difficult it is to change who gets the grain. Only you and I know that. Just go and tell them: if there is to be a customs charge, there will be no gift grain for Niger this time around." It was very nicely played, and worked like a charm.

But USAID was quite ready to fork over nearly $300,000, which showed just how much was sloshing around in the USAID fiscal bilges. This was typical. State's year end spending in Niger for I believe the year 1975, for roughly the same number of people there as USAID had, was around $15,000. USAID had roughly a quarter of a million, and they were asking me to throw it into any asinine project possible, like paving the entire GSO compound (which was a former Citroen dealership and was quite nicely done in river gravel, thank you) in order to eat up the funds so they would not be cut in the next fiscal year. They came to me, desperate to spend money. But how many air conditioners can you buy for such a small mission — 200, 300? As low man on the proverbial totem pole, and trying to help, I bought as much stuff as I could for the mission to bleed down the USAID money, but I refused to simply waste the final, I don't remember exactly, $150,000. The ambassador supported me, and so did Jack Davidson. The USAID director went ballistic over this and ordered a USAID director's aircraft with the money just to get it obligated, some kind of Cessna or whatever, a used one, I believe. He thought he had cleverly solved his budgetary problem. In the end, it was disallowed by USAID Washington. USAID had money to burn in Niger — hundreds of thousands of dollars for "operations" — while State had to agonize over every hundred bucks.

Q: Was there any sort of political organization going on in Niger at the time?

WHITE: You know you are a mind reader. I was just about to mention the failed coup attempt. There was in April 1976, a Libyan-backed coup attempt to overthrow the president, Colonel Seyni Kountche. Just before my arrival, Kountche had overthrown the sort of lingering post-colonial, pro-French government of Hamadi Diori. That was viewed in Washington as negative because Kountche was considerably more leftist and far less sympathetic toward the U.S. That is when the Soviet mission there was built up hugely, the Chinese replaced the Taiwanese in working on a large riverine rice project, and relations with Israel were broken. So when we arrived, our relations with this government were not all that wonderful. I mean they loved the USAID program, were generally friendly, etc., but relations were a little chilly on the political

level, and the new regime clearly was wary of us. Doug Heck did a great job with the foreign ministry and the president, keeping matters on an even keel despite the Kountche coup.

Anyway in April 1976, two years after he Kountche seized power, there was a rather violent coup attempt against him, initiated by elements of Niger's small army stationed in Niamey. It involved some ethnic elements that were not well represented in the government. Around the capital Djerma was the main tribal and lingual group, but it was a relatively small area centered on Niamey. Outside Niamey were Hausa, Fulani, Tuareg and other lingual and tribal groups. Djerma dominance was much resented in certain circles. The coup involved quite a lot of fighting, but you might be amused by the way first I found out about it. On one of my fairly common pre-dawn visits to the bathroom (my latest attack of amoebic dysentery), I heard Pop, Pop, Pop. I thought: "That sounds very odd." I knew what an automatic weapon sounds like, having been in ROTC. But, well, this was Niger, and I just went back to bed for another hour, but not feeling all that well. So, at the crack of dawn, I went out, found my gardener (who had been an enlisted man in the Nigerien army). I said, "Soumana, what was that machine gun fire?" He said, "Oh, it's hunters in the woods near the airport." I said, "Hunters with a machine gun, and there's no game in that little patch of woods anyway?" In any case, that was the silly information I managed to glean from the Nigerien "street" early that morning. Without any other news or phone calls, Sonia and I (at this time, Sonia was employed at in our Administrative/Consular Section, which was very nice), drove together to work, as usual. Many Nigerians, however, instead of going about their normal business, were standing on sidewalks and other areas along the road watching cars go by — definitely odd, but there had been no other gunfire. This was, however, a clear indication that something was up. So when I reached my office in our downtown compound (only about a 10-minute ride from home), I called the embassy. The move to a spacious, former Citroen dealership had been part of the USAID buildup. The embassy was about five miles away in an area called the diplomatic quarter, but which contained only two embassies, us and the French. This was along a curve in the River Niger and way up on what was called the plateau, say about 70 or 80 feet higher than we were downtown, and there must have been some sort of an acoustic anomaly because between us and the plateau because we still could hear absolutely nothing.

When I finally got through to the embassy, Jack Davidson was under his desk saying, "You can't hear this? It is mortar, machine gun, and rifle fire. They are even near the French embassy. They are within a couple of hundred yards of here. You actually can't hear anything down there? Listen." He held the phone up. I could faintly hear the sound of some shooting over the phone. He said, "Why don't you go down and check out the military camps." There were two large military camps near our home at the other end of the town in the direction of the airport. So probably just like some other adventurous (and often foolhardy) foreign service officers, I got in our little Renault 12, drove Sonia home, and went off to look at the military camps nearby, which faced each other, separated by a desert-like field about 200 meters wide. And there they were — soldiers digging in under concrete wash basins and the like, emplacing machine guns and other light weaponry along the perimeter of the camp, sighting their rifles (they were armed with Belgian FN rifles and probably French machine guns), etc. So there I am, driving along the camp perimeter, taking all this in, waving disarmingly to some of the soldiers, and thinking how interested the embassy will be that this camp is clearly gearing up for combat. I could see some indications that the other camp was doing likewise in the distance. I had heard that the company

housed in one camp was Djerma and the other heavily Fulani. What a great a chance to do some on the spot Pol/Mil reporting. Then a Cascavel rolled out of the camp, blocked the road, rotated its turret, aiming its light cannon at me and my car. The Cascavel is a Brazilian armored vehicle with multiple heavy-duty tires mounting a 37mm cannon in the turret. So I got out and talked to the Cascavel (must have looked pretty funny), telling its crew (well, various apertures that presumably contained Nigerien eyes and ears) that I had simply made a wrong turn on my way to the clinic, slowly walked back to the car, gently turned it around, and left without incident.

Later, in the early afternoon, there was a fire fight between the two camps, with tracers going over our house, which was nearby. In fact, with our house so near the military camps, taking Sonia home probably was not such a great idea. In the course of that same afternoon, a Cascavel pulled almost up to the entrance to our yard while pivoting around in order to secure a better position on the main road to the airport. Anyway, all this ended up as a "coup de force" (failed coup d'etat). The Libyans were behind it, but evidently provided virtually no concrete support. By evening it was all over. The president rallied his forces and crushed the coup plotters and their supporters.

There is another interesting little story related to the coup attempt, however. I was deeply involved in security at the embassy, getting identity cards, building up physical security, and such. I had as one of my major contacts, the Nigerian Director of National Security, the Nigerian equivalent of our CIA and FBI directors combined. He was a very interesting, hard-working, and still fairly young, man. We had had some great conversations — beyond what I needed to have done involving the business at hand during several visits to his office. We really connected. He was arrested as a key conspirator, and executed on the spot. He also happened the best source for the regional CIA officer, who also much regretted his passing. Apparently he was a very honorable man, and one reason why many of the major coup plotters escaped is that he was sending all the para-military, police and military forces in the wrong directions — away from where he thought his compatriots were moving so they could have the best chance of getting away. Finally, someone put two and two together and thought: "Wait a minute here..." The authorities confronted him. He reportedly stood up and said: "Yes I am a conspirator," and that was that. He was shot in the courtyard in front of his headquarters building where I used to park during business calls. It was an exciting — and very sad — time.

Q: Were you aware of Libyans messing around in the area?

WHITE: No, but the embassy did. Little old me in the Admin/Consular section was unaware — even though they had a decent-sized embassy, and I was naturally suspicious. They didn't come to the American Recreation Center, which by the way was right next to our home. We had two horses and a little stable in the back of the house. The stable we inherited in very shoddy condition and I had it all fixed up. I mention the Libyans in the context of the Rec. Center because all sorts of people used to show up at our bingos, even the Soviet ambassador! We had a very Kruschevian Soviet ambassador. He was one of those bear hugging little fireplugs of a man. He had already been an ambassador in a couple of other African posts, and seemed rather undisciplined. He drove himself around in his own Peugeot all over town. His family only visited occasionally from Moscow.

But returning to the coup de force and the Libyans, I learned in embassy country team meetings (because I didn't see it for myself), that the main coup plotter, and I can't remember his name, showed up in the President's Cadillac at the Libyan embassy, stood on the hood thanking the Libyans for all their help, with the Libyans shouting that the fight wasn't over and to please go away. The upshot of the coup was that our erstwhile iffy relations with Colonel Kountche changed dramatically. Doug Heck had a meeting the next day with the president. In a county team meeting shortly after that, Doug was very excited about all this, with the president telling him, "We had it all wrong; you can have what you want if you assist us against further Libyan mischief." Obviously, Doug had been giving them material to scare them about Libyans subversion that had been going in one ear and out the other, doubtless dismissed by the regime as propaganda. Anyway Kountche said, "I'm yours. Anything you want." Unfortunately, it all happened only three months before my departure, so I didn't have much time to enjoy the new Kountche as our good buddy era, although, frankly, at my level, we were doing quite well even before that.

Q: Had the Toyota war started in Chad by this time or not?

WHITE: The only Toyota wars that were going on when I was in Niger involved Toyota's success in aggressively displacing Land Rover as the premier marketer of all-terrain vehicles in the area, in part because Land Rover's marketing operation was just plain arrogant and lazy.

Q: In other words this is before the Libyans started to move into Chad.

WHITE: Absolutely. That happened in my first years in INR. No, aside from the coup attempt, I suppose it was a fairly routine sub-Saharan African experience in Niger, all things said and done.

I have to admit, however, that if you recall what my religious background was, one of my first missions in my career to be quite memorable — in this case in a very sad way — took place during my second weekend in Niger. I was called on Sunday by Doug Heck. He said, "Come over to the residence. It's an emergency. Oh, and bring your wife." So I went over to the residence, and he sat us down and he said, "The most well-known missionary in the country, who had been very close to the pre-Kountche, pro- French president (Hamani Diori, who had been ousted in April of 1974), was now being PNG'd" (in July 1974). The missionary apparently had even flown Diori around the country in his missionary plane once or twice. But the excuse being used to PNG (declare them persona non grata, to be expelled) the missionary and his wife was that they were promoting dangerous and highly-suspect baby feeding programs which were alternatives to breast feeding, running counter to Nigerien custom and posing a health risk (a sham). Anyway, somebody had to travel 90 miles into the bush northeast along the Niger River and inform this missionary and his wife on a Sunday morning that they were being kicked out the country and had one week to settle their affairs, hence the reason to bring Sonia along to help comfort the wife. They had been in country for over 20 years. I had a driver, the best embassy driver, because being so new to the country, we didn't know the way. We had this great Agfa camera that Sonia's father had given her, and it was the only time in Niger we would see a herd of giraffes (on the way to the mission in a rather barren area with a few isolated clumps of trees here and there which wasn't savannah but the more like the edge of the desert). This was a small herd of about 12 or 13, with three young giraffes. I got out of the car and walked toward them

very slowly. I always thought giraffes were very thin and lithe — very light animals. But when the 12 or so of them take off about 50 yards away from me, the ground shook. Then on the way back to Niamey some of them were spread-legged near the road drinking out of puddles — very classic. There had been a little rainstorm which had gone through after we passed by. But anyway that was our first mission: to hand this devastating, mission-ending diplomatic note to a crestfallen missionary and his wife, both of whom took it very well. He admitted, as we sat in their small adobe living room after Sunday services, that they sort of expected it. But, in retrospect, it was ironic for the young man raised as a fundamentalist Presbyterian to be handing this terrible piece of paper to fundamentalist Protestant missionaries in Africa. So there it is: my first diplomatic mission.

ERNESTINE S. HECK
Wife of the Ambassador
Niamey (1974-1976)

Ernestine S. Heck was born in Oregon in 1940. She received her bachelor's degree from Oregon State in 1962. Her career has included positions in Bombay, Saigon, Teheran, Niamey, Katmandu, New Delhi, Colombo, and Madras. Mrs. Heck was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in December 1997.

Q: Well, turning to Niger, you were there from when to when?

HECK: We were there from '74 to '76, and this was the period - as a matter of fact, when we left Washington to go to Niger, because there was this small period in between - the government fell. For the first time there was a coup, which is not such an unusual thing in Africa, but the first time in Niger. The man who had been the president was arrested and was under house arrest for the full time that we were there. The State Department in early '74 had not worked out yet how they had coups, which are not all the unusual in many parts of the world where we go, so they held Doug for about six weeks in France. He happened to get as far as France - what a pity, huh? So he was in Paris while the State Department tried to figure this out, and finally Henry Kissinger decided that we would recognize countries and not governments, so, all right, he could go. So we got there finally at the end of May of 1974. The man who had led the coup, who was a colonel named Kountche, was a very moral, almost Calvinistic, man, and he was probably very good for the country. I did not know Hamani Diori, who was the president before him, who was, as I said, under house arrest for the whole time we were there, but I think that Colonel Kountche, as far as leaders went, was a very good leader for that country at that time.

The problem for Niger in the mid-'70s was that it was, in 1974, in the seventh year of a very bad drought. There were refugee camps everywhere, all the way from Senegal to Chad. Animals had to be killed because nobody could support them, nobody could feed them. People were starving. It was not a good time. As far as Kountche went, he was a good leader, and that sort of Calvinistic streak in him was probably a good thing. Now in the two years that we were there, we had at least one other major coup where some of his people rose against Kountche. It was the first time I had heard close-in shooting. You and I were in Vietnam together, but when

something went bang, it was our something that went bang. It was in the sky and it was ours. All of a sudden there was all this bang-bang stuff in the streets and it wasn't ours. The awful thing was, the man who pulled off the coup, whom I liked and who later was killed in the coup, executed in the coup, did a very stupid thing. Whether he was right or wrong with the coup, I would not be in a position to judge since I was a spouse, but he got tickled by the toys. When he started this coup, the first thing that got to him was the fact that there were Mercedes and he could drive around in these Mercedes and act important, and he did this. Well, the coup came in to haunt him, right? He was dead meat. But as far as Niger went, when we first got there, the drought was terrible. People were allowed to buy two eggs a week. I remember this specifically because we had an aid family who had seven children. Well, you can imagine what two eggs a week do to a family with seven kids. I can work around this, but it was hard. We were in a situation which was very primitive if you were coming from Tehran, for instance. I remember writing a letter to the DCM's wife and asking about things like champagne and what I should order. Then when I got there I realized I had been living in this society which was terribly, terribly elegant, fake maybe, but elegant, and then I went off to Niger. So whether I had a case of champagne or not was probably of very little interest when you were in a place where you could only buy two eggs a week. But it got worse. It was a very poor place. The people were sweet, and I mean that sincerely, but there was not much market for sweet black Africans in 1974. They were being run over by the neighboring countries.

Q: Before you went there, was there any preparation for being an ambassador's wife for Niger?

HECK: Not coming from overseas. Perhaps there was in Washington, because there had been this course which was offered, and I have no idea, but coming out of where I did, no, there was no course at all. And, like I said, it was so different. I had served overseas individually in Bombay and Saigon, and then I had Tehran. Now all of these were very big cities and very sophisticated cities, and I went to this place which was officially 50,000 people. It had one stoplight. I had not even realized I had been through the town when I went through the town when I arrived. The airport was here, the town was in between, and the embassy, American embassy and residence, were on the other side of a long, narrow strip of semi-built-up area, and I really did not know that I had been through town. So it was a big difference. Now I had come from a very small town background.

Q: I was going to say, did this take you back?

HECK: I'm not sure what it took me back to, but it was a far cry from what I had as an adult in the Foreign Service. My predecessor had been - I mean my ambassador, the predecessor of Doug - had been the DCM, before he went to Niger, in Athens, and his entire career had been in Europe. It was probably much more of a shock for him than for us, who had basically spent most of our time in the third world. But the woman who had been the ambassador's wife ahead of me had made a thing of taking the wives, if they came to a social event, into a small den next to the living room and they played children's games. This was how she entertained them, because she had no way of talking to them. I determined I wasn't going to do that. Obviously our backgrounds were different, but this was not going to be my way of doing things. So we made a big effort to entertain together and to have people come in together and give the women as well as the men something to deal with. I think probably the nicest thing that happened in the whole

two years was about a year after we had been and we gave a dance. We hired a band, and we had a dance outside, and the men started to come with their wives, plural. Always before, there would be a wife who (a) spoke French and (b) was the public wife. She would be the one who would be - she was usually the youngest and usually, well, the best educated but also the most Frenchified, you might say, Francophone, and she would come as the wife. You knew that you had really made it, because they no longer treated you like you were absolutely from outside. They began to trust you enough to consider that you might allow the whole family to come, and that was a very nice thing.

Q: Well, now, is Niger almost completely a Muslim country?

HECK: Well, sort of. The Saudi ambassador didn't think it was Muslim at all, and he would tell you at great length why these people just didn't understand what the religion meant, and maybe he was right. Yes, officially, the country was Muslim. All of the accoutrements of being Muslim pertain to this country. Whether these people really understood what Islam was in the sense of what the more conservative Muslims might have thought, I don't know. They didn't seem to think so. Basically it was a country that had been - Niger had not really been colonized until very late in the European influx in Africa, and these people had not become Muslims until very late into the Islamic influence into Africa. The area around Niamey, the capital, had not even been a capital, had not even been a solid city until the late '20s, so we're talking about a very non-educated or new society. When we were there in the mid-'70s, most of government was run either by French - in fact, at one point the Corsican who had been in charge of the secret service was being fired, and he came to our house before he left and he said he just wanted us to know that they had had to give up on us because we spoke too much English on the telephone and they hadn't been able to do our telephone calls, they hadn't been able to translate everything. So you had on one hand the French, who were doing things, and on the other hand you had a lot of people from the coast, from Ghana and Benath, which was Dahomey at that point, and Toto, some Nigerians who had come up and were actually running things. But you had the English-speaking coastal people and you had the French-speaking. It was an interesting juxtaposition.

Q: What about the role of women there? You say there are multiple wives, but were they following Islamic tradition? Were the women secluded and that sort of thing?

HECK: Well, the people who could afford to have more than one wife tended to be businessmen or captains or above in the military, and they tried to keep the system. I'm not quite sure what the word is, Stu, but anyway, that each wife gets the same treatment. Each one has a house, each one has a little garden of her own, and the man is supposed to move from one to the other in a fair and equitable division of his time. Whether it's true or not, I don't know, but we had two daily new programs on radio - there was no television, of course, in those days in Niger - and there was a daily newspaper which was what we would call a tabloid. I would use this. You know, I'm having to entertain all the women. I found this very difficult, because I wasn't particularly interested in clothes and jewelry and kids. Those were the only things that most of them could talk about. So I would say at a dinner party where they would come, "I just read in the Fahel, the newspaper, that your husband, the minister of dah-dah-dah, has been on a tour in eastern Niger and he's gone to X Y Z," and they wouldn't know, because if it wasn't his night to be at their compounds, they didn't know where he was and they didn't even care. It was the hardest job I've

ever done in my life, Stu, and you've known me for enough years to know I'm just not much at talking about jewelry and kids. And I couldn't get any conversations going. It was hard, it was very hard.

Q: Did you try astrology? I've often found that I'm stuck with somebody and I know nothing about astrology, but when worse comes to worst, you'd say, "Well, what sign were you born under?" - and I'm talking about sophisticated ladies.

HECK: No, I didn't. Perhaps I should. I had a job while I was out there. I bought books and - I can't even remember what the organization was called back in the United States, but they wanted to have written records of countries all over the world. So anything that was printed in Niger, I could buy and sell to - it was not the Smithsonian, but it was something, a serious organization. And I would go around and occasionally I would see some of these wives, because a few of them were in fact clerks in various stores. I had a particularly close friend. It was very sad. I remember us having conversations at dinner parties. We had a dining room that held 24, and at one point, perhaps the noisiest dinner that we ever had, my husband made the mistake of asking something about having multiple wives, and there was a wife there who was married to a senior civil servant but not a minister, who burst into a real melancholy mood and it really tore the dinner party apart. But anyway down the street lived a captain who was a minister in the government, an army captain who was a minister in the government. His wife and I became friends, mainly, I guess, because she discovered that I had lived in India and I liked hot food, I liked spices. So she would appear every once in a while with a little jar of something she had concocted which was made out of hot chilis or something. She was divorced from her husband at that point. She had been divorced four times from him. She was the mother of his oldest male child. Therefore, that gave her a special role. He had a very roving eye, and he also was very careful about the Muslim - you know, you can only have four spouses, so he would divorce her and then he would marry her back when he got rid of one of the other three. He always would go back to her because she was the spouse who had produced the first son and, therefore, she had a role in life. Big deal. I mean, this woman, her life was like a yo-yo. She was being torn apart by this. It was particularly hard for me to listen to her as another woman, because without really understanding, I could understand that interpersonal relationships can be really terrible. I have no idea what has happened to her in the next 20 years, if she has been divorced. But Bulama Manga is still going, and he's around there somewhere and he's now into his sixties and maybe he's trying to slow down.

Q: Well, what were American interests, as you all thought of in Niger during this '74 to '76 period?

HECK: None. American interests in Africa had begun at the time of independence for a lot of Africans, about 1960, and it was to have a presence everywhere. American interests in Niger were zip. A little bit later uranium was discovered. Maybe you could make a case for that. There was a period when they were searching for oil in the region, and maybe you could make a case for that. But basically, no, we had no business, we had no interest, but we were everywhere in Africa in the early '70s, every single capital no matter how small, whereas perhaps the British were smarter. They would have a regional ambassador based in a place like Lagos or a major capital on the coast, and he would then be responsible for six or eight countries. Maybe that

made more sense. I've never quite understood it. We had an embassy of nine Americans. There were four times that, five times that, in USAID, but that was when USAID was big and we could afford to be generous in a way that perhaps would be impossible now. We had one person with what today is the USIS, USIA - it was then. In any case, we didn't need to be there. We were there in a way - we sat up on a hill overlooking the Niger, the river. We had six acres on one side of the street, which was the embassy, and six acres on the other side of the street, which was the residence. I had enough fruit and vegetables, I kept the entire American community in Niger going with food. Beside that, we had a nine-hole golf course that we built on the six-acre compound across the street, and we had nothing to do there. It was a mistake. I really think that the United States did not have to be everywhere in the world. This was 23 years before we're speaking, and we certainly didn't need to be there then, but we were.

Q: What about dealing with the wives of AID and the Embassy? Did you find a role there?

HECK: One of my roles, believe it or not - you'd get a kick out of this - was to interpret. If you didn't speak French in Niger, you didn't survive. We had lots of wives who didn't speak French, and I used to do things like take AID wives and their sick dogs to the vet to translate about what was wrong with the dog. I remember that particularly because AID then had - this was 20-some years ago, and we had to quit earlier, but AID people could go on to 65 - so this man was 64 and his wife was five years older, so she was pushing 70 and she didn't speak a word of French. The one thing that mattered to her wasn't her husband; it was this poor little sausage of a dog, and the dog was getting old and he was geriatric and he had problems. I thought to myself, have I come to this? I'm going around the world talking to vets about AID dogs? It made me think about my role in the Foreign Service. But it was a very useful thing, and we had a very close community, as you would expect in a group that small. You either had to survive together or fall apart, so in terms of a working relationship, I think it was probably the closest working relationship that I've ever had in a community, because it was a small one. We all knew that, and we worked very hard at it.

Q: Was there concern about Qadhafi up in Libya? I notice there is a border that looks like it's probably the most desolate part of Africa or something like that, but there is a border.

HECK: There is a border, and it is desolate and, yes, Qadhafi was a real problem. The only real threat that the government of Niger had in the two years we were there was from Libya. It was because they had money and Niger didn't.

They started in maybe '73 by trying to influence the government of Niger by giving them Motts and Koran, and this was something, of course, the Nejaham could not refuse. It was politically correct and every other way correct, but it was frightening. The government of Niger, (certainly Colonel Qadhafi - who, by the way, never changed his rank unlike most military types around government who took over governments, and he did not become a field marshall overnight; he did later get promoted, but it was in the course of things, and he would have gotten promoted anyway) - was concerned about Libya. Libya had all the money, so it was a very dicey sort of proposition for him. While we were there, the Libyans at one point smuggled weapons into the country in the diplomatic pouches. They caused problems that way. It was always something that Niger was concerned about but unable to do much. To the best of my knowledge, they never

really ruined anything, but, yes, they were concerned. While we were there, they did put in all this money for the new mosque and they built up a lot of stuff. They were scary, and there was not much Niger could do about it - a small country. Niger at that time had - it's a large area physically, a huge area, but it had four million people and it had no money, and what do four million people and no money do in the middle of western Africa. So, yes, Libya was a scary thing. The Nigerians were black, but they were Islamic. That made them right there a border country. They were very unlucky. I don't know how else to explain it. When we left, it looked as if they were going to get very rich, because the thing about uranium had just happened. Well, it didn't work. The need for uranium worldwide went down, so twenty years on it's still a poor country. They never really discovered the real big oil. The uranium sort of went bust, because it didn't matter anymore, and there they are. In the Sahara the desert has moved 100 miles south from when we were there. I mean by that, the photographs taken from satellites will show that the real Sahara has moved south at least 100 miles, and even the very richest parts of a country like that are so pathetically borderline. There's just not much.

Q: Was the "Soviet" threat a problem?

HECK: I suspect the Soviets thought of it as the farthest reaches to send people. We had an ambassador, a Soviet ambassador, lovely man, who had spent, as far as I could tell, his entire adult life in west Africa, and he was going nowhere in a hurry. If we had somehow increased our representation, yes, perhaps they would have. One of the funniest stories I can remember from my time there: My husband would get trips back to the United States for various reasons. The U.S. government would pay to send him home. He had gone home at one point, and I don't remember specifically why, but anyway he was on one of those trips back to the United States, and because there was never money for the spouse, the spouse stayed. About five in the morning there was a knock on my door in this big house with this six-acre compound. It was one of the guards. There had been a man at my gate since two a.m. who had wanted to come in, and they had decided not to disturb me until more or less daylight. It was a communications clerk from the Soviet embassy who wanted to defect. Now I was by myself, and this Soviet didn't speak French or English and I didn't speak Russian. It was a very interesting conversation. I knew from listening to my husband that there was a code that you were supposed to use, and it was the name of somebody. I knew what I was supposed to do. I was supposed to, in this case since Doug was not home, call the DCM, the chargé, and say to him Mr. Woop is there to see him, and he would then come over. Now this was after I had already heard from the Corsicans that they weren't really listening to our phones anymore because they couldn't understand us, but I had to rack through my brain and I finally thought of the name, which was a long Russian name, and I called up the then chargé, who later became ambassador there, named Jack Davison. I said to him that Mr. So-and-So was there to see him. Jack did come over and rescue me from having to decide what to do with this poor schmuck who had been outside the door for four hours at that point on what amounted to a dirt road leading to nowhere. The house and the embassy were across the street, and then it went out to a little restaurant and that was it. There was nothing out there, so how he had ever hid - maybe no one came by, I don't know. That was my one experience with the Soviets. The agents came in, the CIA, which was not located there, and they smuggled him out of the country. For all I know, he became the best intelligence person they ever had. I do not know. They never told me. But it all had to do with the fact that the ambassador was having an

affair with his wife, and this was how he was going to get even with the wife. The ambassador was our friend, but I never knew the wife. Interesting story.

JOSEPH C. WILSON IV
General Services Officer
Niamey (1976-1978)

Ambassador Joseph C. Wilson, IV was born in Connecticut in 1949. He attended the University of California at Santa Barbara and after working in a variety of fields joined the Foreign Service in 1976. Wilson has served overseas in Niger, Togo, South Africa, Burundi, the Congo, and as the ambassador to Gabon. He has also worked in the Bureau of African Affairs, as the political advisor to the Commander in Chief, US Armed Forces, Europe, and as the senior director for African Affairs at the National Security Council. Ambassador Wilson was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2001.

Q: So in 1970 you went to Niger?

WILSON: I went to Niger in May of 1976.

Q: So you were there from 1976 till when?

WILSON: 1976 to 1978.

Q: Joe, what was Niger like? What were our interests in Niger in 1976?

WILSON: As I think I mentioned earlier, when we took a look at the post report, we saw pictures of a lot of camels and lot of sand and a lot of sort of adobe-type buildings. For us, it was really the National Geographic experience. I remember flying off to Africa. In those times the Bureau of African Affairs was relatively financially well off; they allowed me, a junior officer, to stop in Dakar and Abidjan on the way to Niger. I had helped in the Bureau with Kissinger's trip to, among other places, Zaire. So I had gotten to know all the people in AF/EX, and they gave me this little travel bonus. I flew into Senegal in one of the old PanAm flights that would start in New York and end in Nairobi, hopscotching across the continent, arriving in Senegal at sun-up. In those days the airport was really quite a ways outside the city -maybe 10 miles outside the city. Since then, the city has grown up around the airport. But we arrived in Dakar as the sun was coming up, and I will never forget driving into the city from the airport and watching the Senegalese in their flowing robes, either doing their prayers or walking majestically across the Sahel into town. They were very striking - tall, very elegant, very dignified-looking people.

That was my first step on African soil, and I fell magically in love with the continent at that moment. We got to Niger in the middle of May, which is really the very hottest time of the year. I remember stepping out of the airplane and feeling like I'd stepped into a furnace; it was very, very warm. Niger at that time was in the throes of the terrible drought of the 1970s. The drought

had been going on for several years, and as a consequence, many of the nomadic tribes - the Tuaregs - had moved into Niamey. You found nomads all over Niamey. The Tuaregs are a much lighter-skinned African in their typically either white or blue native wear. They also a different lifestyle from the natives of Niamey.

I must say Niamey lived up to everything we expected. Our expectations were to have a National Geographic experience, and we certainly had that. There was a wonderful game park about two and a half hours south of Niamey called Park W, where we had some Peace Corps volunteers. We had about 150 Peace Corps volunteers throughout the country. So we could go to the game park. We were able to fly into a desert outpost called Bilma. There was a military base where we later helped rehabilitate the landing strip. I flew here one time with the ambassador and when we disembarked, the provincial administrator was there with a bunch of Land Rovers. We got into our Land Rovers and went charging across the desert to Bilma itself, which is an oasis about 45 minutes away. The rules of the game were that you drove as fast as you could across the sand, à la "The Rat Patrol" - old television program of that time - but you could never pass the provincial administrator's car in which he and the ambassador were riding. They were driving very fast, so it didn't matter. We would come over the top of the sand dunes and sort of launch off down the other side. We got to the oasis. Bilma in addition to being an oasis with enough water to permit some truck gardening, was the site of a number of salt mines. The people who lived there mined the salt in these big, open pits; they would take the salt out and then they would mold it these molds that looked like a missile - some sort of a big shell. Those salt licks would be loaded onto camels, and taken across the desert in caravans down to Nigeria.

Niger at that time was governed by a military colonel. His name was Seyni Kountche. Our ambassador, the first ambassador in my career, was Doug Heck, who later went on to head up the Counterterrorism Office and then ended his career in Kathmandu, Nepal. I arrived in May. On the Fourth of July Bicentennial we held a celebration. I was the lowest man on the totem pole - I was the junior General Services Officer. Because we were having the bicentennial celebration and because it was going to be the first time that the president of the country would attend a national day celebration, all embassy activities were focused on making this a great celebration, including fireworks display. We had to coordinate the fireworks with the local authorities -military authorities. We had an AID officer who was a graduate of the Julliard School in New York and his specialty was music. He was assigned to train the Niger military band on how to play John Philip Sousa marches. I was working with the ambassador to make sure that we the fireworks display went off smoothly and that everything else went fine. I was with the ambassador every day for a couple of hours. We would roam the ambassador's residence and make sure that we had everything in place.

Q: Did you work with Ernie Heck, Ernestine Heck. I've interviewed Ernie. She was a young political officer in Saigon when I was there.

WILSON: Yes, Ernie was there. She was the ambassador's wife. She was on leave without pay doing the ambassadorial duties, and of course we worked very closely with her, as one does with an ambassador's spouse when one is General Services Officer. The residence itself was fairly new at the time. It sat on a hill overlooking the Niger River, and across the river you had these mesas and buttes; the view looked like that of the American Southwest with the river sort of

winding through this stark countryside. So we had the Fourth of July and it was a huge success, and that pretty much made my stay in Niamey. I wouldn't have had to work another day as long as the Hecks were there. The fireworks went off without a hitch. We had designed the launching systems for the fireworks and they all worked just fine. Since you couldn't test the systems we had designed, we put three different types of launchers on each instrument that we built. As I say, it was the first time anybody had ever seen fireworks in Niger; they were launched over the river. The president came. He had a good time. The band played its John Philip Sousa, and it was a big event.

During the time I was in Niamey, because of the drought and because of the aftermath of the collapse of Vietnam, USAID was shifting all of its resources out of Southeast Asia and into Africa which became the new development focus. So during the two years that I was there, we doubled the embassy American staff in size each year, which, for a small capital city like Niamey, was a real explosion in expatriate population. Of course, AID came with everything that is required by projects -vehicles and these big Chevy Suburbans for these little Niger streets. We made a deal with International Harvester which was trying to make inroads into the African market. AID agreed to buy a lot of their Jeep equivalents and they agreed that they would then maintain them. They ended up with all the Jeeps which they didn't maintain and after a couple of years you had these International Harvester carcasses all over the countryside because they didn't last very long in that climate.

We ran a number of very interesting projects. I mentioned earlier we had about 150 Peace Corps volunteers throughout the country doing everything from national park management to maternal/child health care, school, teaching and building. We had projects designed to improve the production of the national crops, which were millet and sorghum, throughout most of the country. We had projects designed to improve the purchasing of the crops, the storage of the crops, the transport of the crops - everything designed to try and eradicate or try and come to grips with what was perceived at the time, and still is, as a sort of chronic underproduction of food. We had projects designed to stop desertification by planting of trees that grew very quickly and anchored the soil in a number of different places. We had well-drilling projects. It was a very interesting time. We dealt with issues that were fundamental to society. At the time I went there, the general conventional wisdom was that the Sahel would not be able to sustain the population that it had, much less the expected population growth. As a couple of people have pointed out, in actual fact in the last 25 or 30 years, it has done reasonably well, perhaps aided by our assistance programs, perhaps aided by the weather, but it has managed to cope by and large with the population growth.

Q: One of the things that I've heard was that by drilling wells, we were changing the migration. Cattle were considered wealth, and rather than keep moving, they tended to sort of congregate around well points. Was that a problem?

WILSON: Yes, it was a problem. It was a lesson learned from the well production in the 1960s and early 1970s. The cattle would come, hang around where the wells were, and then they would overgraze the surrounding area. That was a problem. I don't know how they ended up dealing with it in the 1980s or the 1990s, but in my time, it was indeed a problem.

Q: What was the American interest there?

WILSON: At hat time we had an interest in containing Muammar Qadhafi. We had a humanitarian interests in a population that was underproducing food stocks and which was being ravaged by the effects of the drought. We had an interest in working with the political leaders to improve governance. The war against Qadhafi was really played out more in Chad than it was in Niger. Qadhafi tried to destabilize the Niger government periodically while I was there, including shipping guns in diplomatic bags to be used in Niamey. Those were our political interests. We later, as part of our military assistance program, gave the Nigerians a couple of C130s and, as I said, we rebuilt their airstrip up in the north, up close to the Niger/Libyan border. By and large our policy was driven by foreign assistance and humanitarian assistance.

Q: What about the French? The French have always been very sensitive in Francophone countries about American involvement? It sounds like we really were involved there. Was this a problem?

WILSON: It only became a problem when we would be seen to be intruding in areas that the French felt that they had the lead on. For example, when we were trying to engage in political reform, the French would say, "Well, we will take care of that. We'll do it our way." In Africa that is a problem that crops up everywhere, particularly in countries where there are valuable resources to be exported and where there are real commercial opportunities. Fundamentally - and this goes back even to this time - the French have a view on democratization which maintains that the pace of democratization is keyed much more directly to maintaining public security and should not proceed any faster than that it can be achieved without threatening public security. For us, perhaps because we have fewer interests directly engaged in these countries, we work for democracy now and assume that public security will follow. The one activity where our paths do cross in either competitive or surveillance ways is in the production of uranium, which was just ramping up in Niger when I was there. Of course, uranium implies enrichment, which implies nuclear programs. The French and the Japanese were big clients of the uranium that was being produced in Niger.

Q: How were they getting the uranium out?

WILSON: They were trucking it either across the desert or down through Niamey to the coast. But when we were there, it was just getting started, so there wasn't a whole lot of production. It was the time for discovery of the mines and the building of the infrastructure in the north to take care of it.

Q: Was there much of a French military presence there?

WILSON: There was some, but not as much as in other countries. I don't remember if they had their own base or if they were just basically integrated as advisors in the Nigerien armed forces.

Q: They tended to keep a few bases around and move them in when there was trouble. Essentially you didn't have trouble while you were there?

WILSON: Not when I was there. Kountche was known to be very austere and very much in control. He had come to power in 1974, just before Doug Heck got there. In fact, Doug was en route to post, I think, when the coup took place that brought Kountche to power. When I was there, there was maybe one attempt at changing power, and I think that happened just before I got there in 1986. Kountche was very much the disciplinarian; he was idolized by the armed forces, and the memory of him is very positive and very strong in Niamey.

Q: Often the GSO is the main person having to deal with the government on contracting for labor and services. How did you find dealing with both the government and the work force of Niger?

WILSON: You make a good point. I've always thought that ambassadors and political officers ignore GSOs at their own peril, because, particularly in the Third World, the landlord class is also the political class. When you only have 10 percent of an economy that's monetized, the same people who do politics do leasing of palaces, provision of services, etc. We did in fact have a number of interesting relationships with the chief of protocol of the country, with the senior commercial class and with senior politicians. It was always interesting, at the time that we were there, because due to the rapidity of our build-up, our demand outstripped the supply of houses, so would end up essentially entering into short-term leases while building our own structures. We would advance all the money; we would have houses built to our specifications; we would be there to supervise the construction - we would bring people in to make sure that things were done properly. We had a work force there. Because we were doing a lot of construction of houses ourselves, we had a huge work force. A cast of literally hundreds would show up every morning. We'd have to figure out who they all were and send them on their way to do things. Then, of course, at the end of the construction the landlord would come back and say, "Well, now I've got this house; we need to renegotiate the lease." That made for constant battles with landlords to make sure that we got the best deal possible. We also dealt a lot with various protocol issues related to importing goods. Because Niger was a landlocked country, most of our requisitioned supplies went to Lagos first and then were flown to Niamey by an airline that I think we used to own at one point and later just chartered. It was a classical DC-6 that would fly up once a month. It was a DC-6 that was at the end of its useful life.

Q: It was a four-engine plane which won its real fame during the Berlin Airlift in 1948.

WILSON: That's right. Up until the 1970s and even to the mid-1980s it was still flying around Africa routinely. They had pretty much come to the end - the motors anyway - of their useful lives. They used to spew out more oil than one could even imagine their consuming during the course of a flight. The plane would fly up once a month, and we used to work with the customs officials to make sure that they would allow all those goods into the country. So there was always a lot of work with airport customs officials, the in-town customs and protocol officials, and immigration officials to get people in and out. That part of it worked pretty well. I think I had a bit of an advantage in that I spoke French and I got along pretty well with the local population.

One of the major issues that we had was theft. Because we were growing so quickly, we didn't have the systems in place to manage the property very well; so accountability was an always an issue. Getting houses ready for people was always an issue, keeping inventories up to date.

Q: You were saying that going to Niger with your carpentry background, there was no particular wood to deal with, I guess it was mostly cement.

WILSON: A lot of it was stucco - cement, cinder blocks, a lot of sand and cement; it was basically cinder block construction. Most people were housed in an area called "The Plateau," which was the old colonial area. Then they built up a new area called "The Nouveau Plateau." We were the first ones to start building in that area, which was basically across one of the main road. My own house was across on the other side of the city. We had our recreation association there which had a tennis court and swimming pool and a snack bar.

Q: I guess your experience helped a lot in this construction program.

WILSON: In a lot of ways it was wonderful, because being the hands-on supervisor, I had a chance to work with Africans on a daily basis. I had some people who were very close to me, my senior nationals, and we would work through all the various issues that one had to work through, whether it was customs clearance or contracting or property accountability or the motor pool. We hired a lot of people. I had to go back to Niger about four years later as part of a post inspection to check on compliance with the post inspection of two years earlier. I went back up there and realized that a lot of the things that the inspectors had earmarked for correction were things that I had put into place or people I had hired when I had been there. Obviously we were not infallible in what we did; in fact we were pretty much as a staff overwhelmed by the rate of growth.

The General Services section then, as now, was very much understaffed. It was hard to get people, particularly American supervisors. We didn't have nearly as much American supervision as we needed. Because of the growth of USAID, we put into place what was called a Joint Administrative Office which provided combined administrative support to all elements of the embassy. We had to harmonize our management style and the regulations to take into consideration different agencies, different budgets, different procedures, trying to insure that we had the same standards, and then different accountability procedures. It was pretty complicated. At one time, for the last six or seven months of my tour, there was no administrative officer and I was the only GSO and also acting administrative officer. It was a challenge.

Q: With this influx coming in of AID people, this can often have sort of an upsetting effect on a small city, a small country. Was this a problem?

WILSON: Initially it was a problem for USAID. A lot of the people who came out there were people who had come out of Southeast Asia. They had a vision of what their lifestyle as an AID employee ought to be which was based on their experiences in Southeast Asia where they had six or seven servants and had lived in Shangri-la type houses - they lived in a very tropical setting and everybody was beautiful and everything was relatively clean. They arrived in the Sahel and found out that it wasn't like that at all, and that life was pretty tough and not terribly sanitary,

and that the medical facilities were not very good, etc. A lot of these people had to make a real adjustment problem.

Now, in all fairness, one of the things that they did to complement the career people in the project development process was to hire a lot of former Peace Corps volunteers to do some of the key mid-level jobs. That made for a nice mix. They did have some people who were absolutely dedicated to development in the African context; they were not jaded and were not disillusioned by having to move from a relatively plush setting like Southeast Asia to the edge of the Sahara Desert. The frustrations created by the climate were difficult. The Niger government was just as overwhelmed as we were. I think that it is safe to say that for a number of years, just by virtue of the number of Americans who were there and the size and number of our automobiles, we overwhelmed the city of Niamey itself. The General Services operation was located downtown right in the middle of the city; the embassy was just on the outside of town. When I say 'city,' there were really two stoplights in the city; that's how small it was. It was maybe a couple hundred thousand people maximum. We would run shuttles back and forth, putting Chevy Suburbans on the road all day every day. They were very visible. We were not inconspicuous.

Q: This was your first post. What would a political officer do in Niger?

WILSON: The one political officer we had, did political and consular work. While I was in Niger, three Americans died - all within about a 24-hour period. A kid, a tourist passing through, died of malaria. Then we had an airplane go down - a cargo flight bringing in cigarettes. It had an American crew of four, and two of them died. The consular officer and I, as backup consul, had responsibility for taking care of dead American citizens, so that occupied us at that time. The consular officer was a bit squeamish. There were no embalming facilities in Niger. We tried to get the Peace Corps doctor to help us embalm the bodies, but he would have nothing to do with that. We looked up in the regulations, to see whether we could figured how one ships an unembalmed body back to the United States in a way that is both safe and consistent with U.S. rules and regulations. It was a very complicated procedure. One of the things that the regulations suggest that you do if you don't have embalming facilities or can't get the embalming done, is to wrap the body in a formaldehyde-soaked shroud. So we went down to the morgue which had only six places, six iceboxes, and we used three of them during this fairly extended period. It was almost eight or nine days before we put our procedure together. Finally, we went to deal with these bodies, got them out, put them on the slab, and the poor consular officer said, "I'll go do the paperwork. You handle this." He just couldn't do it. I had a Nigerien come in to help me. He smelled the formaldehyde, took one look at me, and said, "You crazy *mazungu*," which is 'white man,' and left. So I was left with these bodies; I manhandled them as best as I could and tried to wrap them up in these formaldehyde-soaked shrouds; that took a couple of hours. All the while, we had a guy outside the morgue building the coffins on a couple of sawhorses. We had to have zinc-lined, lead-sealed coffins with a filtration system because in the heat you've got the expanding gases which needs a way to be released. Otherwise the casket could explode. In fact, one did in Chad - one of the legends is that the embassy tried to ship the body back to the States in a luggage compartment and the casket blew up. We didn't want that to happen to us. The builder of the coffins was a Belgian, about five-six and rotund, who wore a beret. He had a classic one piece of hair that went from one side of his head all the way over to the other side. He always had a cigarette hanging out of his mouth; he was a very strange-looking fellow, not the

sort of fellow that one would in any walk of life want to spend a lot of time with, which is maybe why he was the local coffin maker. We managed to wrap up the bodies and put them in coffins for shipment to the U.S.

Other than that, the political officer - he was the political/economic/consular officer - would write economic reports. We would do our annual foreign economic trends report. At that time you would chart how much foreign assistance was coming in, what the status of the uranium projects were, etc. We would do our general political reporting on what was going on in town, who was in, who was out, who was doing what to whom. Then he would handle the consular work and he would travel around the country to sponsor self-help projects, using the ambassador's little fund money to bestow on worthwhile activities, small activities, throughout the country.

The political/economic/counselor was the job I wanted. I thought that he was up in a second-floor office, right across from the ambassador's; he was not getting sweaty and dirty every day; that looked pretty good to me. The embassy was going to reassign me. The deputy and the ambassador said, "We want you to come up and do this for the second tour. It would mean something like an excursion tour that you get as a first-tour officer now." But then the Bureau's executive director said, "You can't do that, because we won't be able to fill the GSO job. It's much easier to fill a political job than it is to fill the GSO job, and so long as we've got this sucker down here, we've got to keep him there." So they did.

Q: You were there during the first part of the Carter Administration. Did human rights play any role, or were you away from that?

WILSON: Human rights played a role, but we were still trying to figure out how a country goes from a one-party systems that were all over Africa to a multi-party system. So the lag time between the commitment to human rights and the real changing of human rights policies in a number of African countries was considerable. There has been a lot of progress on the human rights front in Africa, for all of its problems, but at that time you didn't really see it, other than maybe just some increased sensitivity to it at some levels. It gave us some ammunition to talk to the government about things like the imprisonment of the journalists who were writing against the government, but we were not yet geared up to talk about free press in the context of having more than one government newspaper, or things like that.

Q: Then, of course, you were coming up against the French too.

WILSON: We were coming up against the French. The French attitude, as I said earlier, was, 'Yes, we believe democracy is a good thing, but we need to go at a pace that they can live with and which won't cause instability. Besides, Kountche is our friend and our national interests are much more geared toward stability in Niger than they are for one man/one vote.'

Q: How did you and your wife find the social life beyond sort of the intra-American community with the Nigerians.

WILSON: The Nigerians don't invite people out very much, especially to their homes. Part of it, I think, is the difference in lifestyles. They could never really entertain you in the way that you could entertain them. They live much more modestly obviously. But in terms of just a social life generally, we were very active. We were active through the recreation association, of which I was president for two years. We revitalized it; we opened up the membership to others than just American citizens, so that we had an international membership. It became the place for the international community to go on a Friday night. We started a bunch of interesting activities.

As I indicated, we spent a lot of time traveling. We would meet the missionary community and Peace Corps volunteers throughout the country. We had a number of Nigerien friends and contacts through my GSO activities - e.g. the landlord class - we would entertain them. That was a challenge because oftentimes if they would come they would not necessarily bring their wives, but rather their girlfriends; they would come late; there would be no-shows. We could quite never figure out why they behaved this way. But certainly in terms of entertaining, we did quite a bit; we had a lot of activities including the Nigerians. Towards the end of our tenure, we started getting invitations from people who liked us and wanted to invite us before we left. That was very nice. When it happened, it was always a real privilege to be invited into somebody's home to break bread with them.

WALTER J. SHERWIN
Program Officer, USAID
Niamey (1977-1979)

Walter J. Sherwin joined the USAID in 1959. He spent the majority of his career working in Africa. His posts include Madagascar, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Niger, and Guinea. Mr. Sherwin was interviewed by W. Haven North on February 8 1999.

SHERWIN: After that, I went back to West Africa and became program officer in Niger.

Q: What was happening at that time in West Africa? This was 1977?

SHERWIN: Yes, 1977. As we discussed earlier, I had been involved in the waning days of AID bilateral programming to countries like Niger in the late '60s. Between 1970 and 1976-77 there was the great drought that devastated the belt of countries south of the Sahara known as the Sahel. Initially AID mounted major relief programs. Once the extreme crisis was overcome, the agency moved to rehabilitation and finally to development programming. The Sahel Development Program was created in 1975. By the time I returned to Africa in 1977, bilateral programs had been fully reestablished in all these countries, and AID programming was flowering. You could actually start up new projects. So, it was really a very interesting period for me. As program officer, I was responsible for the congressional presentation submitted to Washington, not only for Niger, but also for smaller programs in Togo, Benin and Ivory Coast. I also coordinated the planning, design, and approval of several projects, including the Forestry and Land Use Planning project. That was in 1978.

Q: What was that?

SHERWIN: It was a project to improve forest cover in areas just below the desert, to create nurseries and train people to plant and maintain trees. That project in various forms survived for I think about ten years.

Q: How big an area was it concerned with?

SHERWIN: The project focused on several locales in the south-central part of the country near Maradi and Zinder, if I recall correctly.

Q: Was this planting by local people or government planting project?

SHERWIN: Both. It involved the ministry responsible for forestry as well as local authorities and local people, so it was very much a joint effort.

Q: What do you think contributed to its lasting and continuing so well?

SHERWIN: Well, I believe it was making progress and having real impact. I understand the project became part of a major policy reform effort supported by AID, but I don't know the details of that.

Q: Did you have a technical assistance team working there with you, or was it essentially local?

SHERWIN: There were technical advisors assigned to work with the Niger government and the local people.

Q: Any other projects that you worked on?

SHERWIN: There was a major public health project and a shelter development project.

Q: What were you doing in public health?

SHERWIN: I don't recall the specifics of the project, but the basic aim was to make the Ministry of Health more effective in providing primary health care, especially to the rural population.

Q: The shelter project was what?

SHERWIN: This project focused on modest-income housing, and there may have been a connection to AID's housing guaranty loan program, but I'm afraid the details escape me at this time. We did provide a technical advisor to the government.

Q: What about other work you were doing in Niger?

SHERWIN: I worked a good deal with evaluation teams and developed an improved management structure for the cereals project. I also had to deal with the same kind of problems I had faced in Senegal and Mali, following up on local currency accounts. There was a logjam in moving money into and out of those accounts in Niger, and I managed to break the logjam by reconciling local currency records, getting the proceeds from the local sale of U.S. Food for Peace commodities deposited into the counterpart account. We ended up getting $1,500,000 into the account. It was then made available for local currency contributions to projects in AID's portfolio.

Q: These were government funds that had not been properly transferred to the joint account.

SHERWIN: Yes.

Q: How did you find working with the Niger government people?

SHERWIN: They were businesslike, and I had no problems working with them. But they were very reserved, making it difficult to establish a personal relationship with them. They had a different mentality, a different approach to outsiders than people in some of the other countries in the region, but it was not unpleasant working with them. I enjoyed the responsibility I had there for programs, especially for initiating programs.

Q: At that time, did you have a full mission?

SHERWIN: We had a full mission. I made sure that all my deputies were delegated all the work they could handle and received full credit for it. I worked first under Al Baron and then Jay Johnson.

Q: This was at the beginning of the Sahel Development Program or well along into it?

SHERWIN: We had been into it since '75.

Q: That's right. What was your understanding of what the Sahel Development Program was trying to do?

SHERWIN: It was trying to work with the governments and the people to develop their agriculture, improve public health, and especially to deal with potential droughts. Everybody recognized by now that this region was drought-prone, and it was most important to get programs underway to deal with the environment. The forestry project was in that vein. A range and livestock project also was designed at that time. This was an effort to improve range management and make livestock raising possible in a very fragile part of Africa.

Q: Was that working?

SHERWIN: I don't know if that ultimately worked out. My guess is that success was limited because of continued droughts and population pressures. One other project that was attempted was called the Niamey Department Development project. This was an integrated rural

development (IRD) project in the Niamey area, called a department, and like other IRD projects that the World Bank and others were attempting in those days, it attempted to coordinate a whole series of activities in order to raise income and increase development within the department. I don't think that project or any similar project had great success because of coordination problems. It is one thing if you have vertical control over activities involving a single ministry down to local officials that report to that ministry, but when you are dealing with three or four ministries or agencies that are bureaucratically independent of one another, you have major problems of coordination. I think the U.S. government has trouble coordinating its own activities, and the problem is compounded when you try to do that in a developing country, so it is better to keep projects simple.

Q: This was very heavily top down; there wasn't much decentralization of the approach?

SHERWIN: Oh yes, there was an attempt to work with decentralized units. But they each reported to different headquarters. You know, it was almost like three-dimensional chess, very difficult to keep everything dovetailed.

Q: Well, any other experience in Niger that stands out in your mind?

SHERWIN: No, I think we've covered the main facets of the program.

HARVEY E. GUTMAN
Program Officer, USAID
Niamey (1978-1979)

Harvey E. Gutman was born in Switzerland in 1921. From 1942-1946 he served in the American Army overseas. Upon returning in1949 he received his bachelor's degree from University of Portland and later received his master's degree from American University in 1958. During his career with AID he held positions in Laos, Paris, Thailand, Morocco, Liberia, and Nigeria. Mr. Gutman was interviewed by Stuart Van Dyke in August 1997.

GUTMAN: My last field assignment was in Niger which presented a stark contrast to Liberia. It differed from most African countries as it had an austere, honest military government. Its people were typical Sahelians, deeply devout Muslims who formed few personal friendships with foreigners.

The country seemed to have a great future based on its uranium reserves in the North. Proceeds, still small at the time, were placed into a development trust fund. Japanese interests expected to develop a second mine and planned an investment of $700 million. Annual royalties were projected to reach $ 200 million in a few years. (Alas, the uranium market collapsed).

Our programs were largely targeted at the food supply — the area had recently undergone a devastating drought — and a GON priority: the fixation of nomadic tribes. This was a fascinating project, quite different from our classic concerns. I found it challenging to become involved in the study of the Tuaregs, their way of living, value systems, etc.. We did engage a English anthropologist who was considered the foremost expert on the Tuareg, partly as a check on the information and data that the GON supplied. This was a long-range project and still in the state of preparatory studies when I left.

I participated with Peace Corps volunteers in a short course in the Hausa language, the commercial lingua franca of West and Central Africa, analogue to Swahili in East Africa. However, the military and most GON officials came from another tribe, speaking a totally different language. My studies never got very far but my knowledge of numbers and of a number of assorted phrases got me better deals in the markets.

Niger to me, was the essence of a Sahelian country and of the austerity imposed by Nature. The GON seemed to appreciate American assistance and was very serious about development. My tour was short as I had come on a mid-term transfer. Unfortunately, it also had realized that American T.A. projects continued even if they did not make the full contributions, stipulated in the project agreement. Of course, sudden crises can make it impossible for a host country to live up to its obligations. But, generally, USAIDs preferred to overlook host country defaults and to make up shortfalls rather than terminate a technical assistance projects, once it was underway and discontinuation would have required transfer of technicians, cancellation of procurement orders, etc. and unwelcome budget adjustments. Hopefully, AID is taking a firmer approach now.

E. MICHAEL SOUTHWICK
Deputy Chief of Mission
Niamey (1982-1985)

Ambassador Southwick was born in California and raised in California and Idaho. Educated at Stanford University, he entered the Foreign Service in 1967. Basically an Africa specialist, Mr. Southwick served largely in African posts, including Burundi, Rwanda, Niger, Kenya and Uganda, where from 1994 to 1997 he was United States Ambassador. He also served in Switzerland and Nepal. In his Washington assignments, he dealt with African and United Nations matters. The ambassador was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2004.

Q: Dick, let's see we're going to Niger, Niamey in '82?

SOUTHWICK: That is correct.

Q: Tell a little bit about Niger at that time.

SOUTHWICK: I tend to divide African countries into sort of three tiers, bottom tier, middle tier and upper tier. This was a middle tier country, large geographically, fairly small population,

poor, although in the late '70s it thought it would get rich because it had some big deposits of uranium. Unfortunately in 1979 there was an accident, incident not too far from here called Three Mile Island and that knocked the wind out of the uranium market. So, suddenly countries like the United States were no longer building nuclear reactors, a lot questioned about whether that was the way to go. Uranium which was going to be the key to transforming this very poor country into a country with some wealth; it all vanished.

Q: What sort of government did it have?

SOUTHWICK: It had what I call a nice tidy military dictatorship, a form of government to which I grew increasingly fond as my career progressed despite the fact that I often associated with democratization, human rights and so forth. It was run by somebody named Seyni Kountche, who took over in a military coup in the early '70s. The then democratically elected government was botching to a terrible degree a major drought relief effort. In the early '70s the Sahel region, this region of Africa just south of the Sahara, experienced one of its worst droughts in recorded history. A lot of people were starving and the military took over to do things right.

Q: Did it have any particular problems with its neighbors?

SOUTHWICK: Not really. There was concern about Libya to the Northeast.

Q: I can't remember, it has a boundary with Libya?

SOUTHWICK: Yes, it's a landlocked country. On the south is Nigeria, to the north Algeria, to the west what is now known as Burkina Faso, it was then known as Upper Volta, east is Chad. A lot of it is essentially the Sahara Desert, the lower latitudes, what they call Sahel where you do get rain and where there is some rain fed agriculture.

Q: Do they have Muslims and Christians?

SOUTHWICK: No, it was essentially all Muslim, but Islam did not get there until the latter part of the 19th Century in any major degree. What I would call the old time religion was still a factor although everybody kind of identified themselves as nominally Muslim. It was not a fierce radicalized Muslim. It was really quite straightforward.

Q: In Chad it had the Toyota wars and all with Libya. Was there any spillover, was that at the time you were there?

SOUTHWICK: No, I think partly because it was essentially a Muslim country. You did have this distinction between the people who lived in the Southern area, the agriculture areas, who were strictly black African, and then into the desert you've got a group called the Tuareg which historically had been slave traders.

Q: The blue men.

SOUTHWICK: The blue men. They had camel caravans. There was another group of nomads called the Fulani and they also used camels and moved around from place to place, had cattle and what not, not regarded as fierce and warlike the way the Tuareg had been. They stretched all across that Sahara area and the French had fought them quite a bit, literally the last part of the 19th and early part of the 20th Centuries.

Q: Did the United States have any particular interest in the area?

SOUTHWICK: Well, in Africa generally there were kind of three sets of concerns. One of them was keeping the Russians out to a certain extent. That also applied to the Chinese, so that they didn't get the upper hand. That's the main reason we were represented everywhere in Africa. The Russians were represented everywhere so we decided we had to be represented everywhere and likewise with the Chinese. The second tier kind of threats were things like Qadhafi and his kind of expansionism. Zaniness is the only way to describe it; trying to establish a Libyan hegemony over preferably the whole continent of Africa, but certainly neighboring states. Then you had the ongoing kinds of things that I think concern most Africanists in the Foreign Service which was poverty, development, lack of democratic institutions, the whole question of lifting this very poor part of the world up to a better standard.

Q: From a practical point of view, we had no.

SOUTHWICK: No vital interests there. The ambassador we had there, William R. Casey, Jr., was a mining engineer. He had come to Niger in the late '70s working for Conoco to explore the possibility of Conoco investing in uranium. Niger has a sizable deposit of uranium and not every country does. The French had been installed there for some years and had two big uranium mines in the Northern part of the country. When Three Mile Island occurred, the wind just went out of that completely. What it left was you had an American who had some Republican connections who knew something about Niger. After Reagan was elected in 1980, the local Republican group in Longmont, Colorado, which is where William R. Casey lived, decided that they should get one of their own named an ambassador somewhere and the divine fire, or whatever you want to call it, landed on William R. Casey, Jr.

Q: You served there from '82 to?

SOUTHWICK: To '85. It was a two year tour, but I extended for a third year. It was '82 to '85 and partly because I've always hated moving.

Q: I know exactly what you mean.

SOUTHWICK: If things were reasonably tolerable, I didn't want to move.

Q: Tell me about Casey.

SOUTHWICK: Well, Casey was a mining engineer. He'd gone to the Colorado School of Mines. He and his wife were both Republican party activists in Colorado, not at a statewide level, more at sort of a county or regional level. I think he felt that this would be a very honorable thing to

do. Also, the pay wasn't so bad. He was still well remunerated as a mining engineer, but he certainly wasn't a rich man. The local kingmaker in the area, someone I later met, was telling me this story of how he became ambassador. After Reagan was elected, the local Republicans sitting around decided how they could profit from this and the idea came up of one of their members being an ambassador. This woman, who was the kingmaker, who used to deal with local politicians and so forth, putting them in office, told me to my face that she had never before made "an ambassador." She decided that she would just set out with that as a goal, and she said it took three phone calls. She had somebody from their community getting to be a political appointee to an African post. Now, one of the things I learned from Bill Walker when I worked in Geneva, Bill Walker had been head of presidential personnel, was that the Republicans have a harder time generally. At least this was the feeling then, filling federal jobs, political appointee positions. The typical Republican does not necessarily want to work for government, does not regard government in a favorable light. The Republicans felt that the top echelon, and I think there might be some truth to this, secretaries and what not, they get better people than the Democrats, but then when you go down it's a little bit harder. The Republican from Longmont, Colorado that worked hard on a campaign wanted to be ambassador to Niger, a place that nobody cared about, fine.

Q: How did he relate to the job? He'd already been there as a mining engineer, so he was kind of used to roughing it and all that.

SOUTHWICK: Somewhat used to roughing it. He knew nothing about diplomacy, nothing about the State Department, nothing about the Foreign Service. I guess he came through the two to three week charm course that they give ambassadors. What he came with was I think a good heart, a good mind in some senses, a lot of prejudices against government people and Foreign Service people and thinking that all of us were Democrats and therefore unreliable and also because we were government workers and he would articulate this at times, people who didn't have much moxie. If they were really good they'd have gone in the private sector. The only reason people went into government was it was nice, cushy and didn't have to work hard and you never got fired. This didn't go down well to put it mildly.

Q: How did you find working with him?

SOUTHWICK: He tended to be pragmatic. He looked at things as an engineer did. He was kind of jealous of his prerogatives and so forth. I had a good antenna on all of that kind of thing, but by and large we got along pretty well; largely because I carved out a big area of the business of the embassy to take on myself, stuff that he basically wasn't interested in. It was a lot of the political reporting, economic reporting, running the consular section and dealing with the AID ministry and so forth. He was jealous of his relationships in an African country; an American ambassador could have a relationship with the head of the state. What happened as time went on was that Casey, who didn't speak French very well and was somebody that people kind of had a hard time relating to and to understand, government people tended to rely on me a little bit more than would ordinarily be the case. That didn't bother me on one level. On another level, it was something that I had to worry about. It came to the point where, for example, the President would schedule a meeting with Casey and they would suddenly have no translator and they would say, well, can you please send Mr. Southwick, he can do the translating. The idea of our

ambassador having a one on one meeting just kind of disappeared. I think Casey figured out what was going on, but I got that through the grapevine that they just felt that they could communicate with me much better than they could communicate with the ambassador.

Q: You mentioned political reporting. What does one report politically about a neat, tidy, little military dictatorship?

SOUTHWICK: There were things along the border a little bit with Libya that needed watching. You had some of the regional stuff you had to be concerned about. Even then there was this issue of Western Sahara and which countries are supporting Morocco, which countries are supporting Algeria.

Q: The Polisario movement.

SOUTHWICK: Yes, the Polisario movement. Nigeria was a big regional fish there and whether they were exerting too much influence. You'd try to get their votes in the UN. You'd try to get them to adopt reasonably good development polices and not be oppressive. There was an ethnic issue there that erupted when I was there, vis-à-vis the Tuareg, and apparently late in my tour the government decided they had to get rid of them. They just started rounding them up, rounding them up and shipping them off, but where did they ship them to? These people are used to wandering, they'll just wander back. You had those kinds of issues.

Then it wasn't clear totally clear despite what had happened at Three Mile Island that the uranium sector was dead and the potential still existed we thought early on in this. Maybe if the nuclear power industry revived it there would be a need to invest in uranium again.

Q: Well, were we concerned at that time, because certainly it got into the headlines and into the state of union address about the Iraqi connection. This is at the turn of our present century, but were we concerned about Niger and nuclear proliferation?

SOUTHWICK: We were. That was an issue and we tried to get them to sign the NPT, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. They had not signed it at that point, so that was a major goal. I tended to feel a lot of this concern was bogus. It takes a lot to get uranium from a mine and get it transformed into something that could be used to make a bomb. Certainly the first stages of this is of course having uranium. There was a Pakistani embassy there. It was plain to everybody that the reason the Pakistanis were established there was that they wanted a source of uranium because they were even then thinking about having an Islamic bomb. So we were kind of keeping an eye on them. We didn't think about Iraq in those days. It was not a factor, but getting enough yellow cake, semi-processed uranium into the wrong hands where people could transform it into something useful, was a concern.

Q: What about the role of the French there?

SOUTHWICK: The French regarded a lot of their part of Africa as a hunting ground. They wanted to be the principal foreign European power there, somewhat concerned about the United States supplanting them just because we were the United States. I tried to be very reassuring on

this. They had a military assistance program. We began to develop one when I was there, but we always felt that ours was just sort of a supplement and more political rather than training people and really help the Nigeriens run their army. We did sell two C130s to the government.

Q: The transport plane.

SOUTHWICK: The transport plane which is a prestige item for a lot of people in that part of the world. It's a superb aircraft of its type. There really wasn't anything comparable to it then. I don't think there is anything comparable to it now, and a very expensive purchase for them to have two planes that just sort of sit around.

Q: How were our relations with the French embassy? Did we have to try to keep them from getting too suspicious?

SOUTHWICK: As I said, I tried to be reassuring and I think Casey did, too, because the U.S. had a history then as now of sort of an infatuation with Africa, then it just sort of all vanishes and it comes back. Whereas the French especially had a kind of an ongoing sustaining interest in Africa because it shored up their status as an international power because they had, in a sense, a dozen or so client states in Africa. They were also worried about the French speaking world and trying to maintain French as an international language. That was much more alive I would say through the '80s. In the '90s it started vanishing and I would say by now it's vanished almost completely.

Q: Did you get any major visits to your area?

SOUTHWICK: Well, we had Chet Crocker come there and we had George Herbert Walker Bush come there.

Q: The Vice President?

SOUTHWICK: The Vice President came there.

Q: What was he doing there?

SOUTHWICK: He was looking at a number of things including the drought in that part of Africa, and it was just part of showing the flag. He went to a number of countries, I can't remember if Niger was the last one. He went to about four or five countries. He started in Ethiopia and moving back across. That was a spectacular thing because it had been a long time. I think Mondale had been there, but a vice presidential visit in a little place like this is very important. We had planned at the invitation of the government to take him down to a regional town called Maradi. There was a big wind storm that day and we didn't get him down there. The government had arranged for about 2,000 to 3,000 Tuareg on mounted camels to line the route from the airport into town. The news people had gotten there early thinking that Vice President Bush would come, so it was the most spectacular thing they'd ever seen outside of Moses and company leaving Egypt and the ten commandments. It was spectacular, but we couldn't get Air Force Two to fly down there because there was too much dust in the air. I wrote it up as the most

picturesque Tuareg I could find. This was sort of thinking, you know, if you've got lemons, make lemonade. The most picturesque Tuareg I could find and putting them on an aircraft and taking them back to Niamey because we could take off, and that's what I did and took them to the reception. Vice President Bush met a few Tuareg that he never expected to meet.

Q: How about the drought? What were you doing? How stood the drought at that time?

SOUTHWICK: Well, there had been a drought in the early '70s and then in I guess it was '84 or '85. I'm not going to make myself a hero on this, but I have to say I sometimes wonder what would have happened had I not had my ears cleaned. I went over to an AID staff meeting and I ended up talking to a young agricultural economist there who was a Russian immigrant it turned out. He told me he couldn't get anybody in the AID mission to listen to him. He had been doing rainfall analysis and this rainfall analysis indicated to him that Niger was going to have its worst drought ever, worse than anything in the '70s, and nobody was listening to him. I went back to the embassy and read up as much on all of this as I could. I called the AID director and said, look we've got to have a meeting; you've got to bring this guy. We've got to sit down, we've got to talk together, and we've got to figure out what we think we're dealing with here. Well, within a matter of days it was pretty much apparent to everybody that something serious was going on. We signaled to Washington that we thought we needed more analysis, we thought that we were going to have a bad situation there. We would need to import a lot of grain from the United States and we launched a program, which over time worked very well. That was probably my biggest achievement there because I felt I did not want another disaster story. I had read the literature on the 1972 drought and I said this is not going to happen again. It is not going to screw up. Food is going to arrive, the government is going to do it, we're not going to botch it and we're not going to have Mike Wallace or anybody else from 60 Minutes coming to this country on our watch to report on the disaster. We had the usual logistics problems because we knew that we needed more port capacity than what was available in Cotonou and Lome, Togo, and the key to success was to get Nigeria to cooperate. Nigeria had a very uncooperative relationship then. In Bujumbura I had met the estimable American General Vernon Walters who had been on a tour there. He'd known Frances Cook and I decided that the only one who could fix this is General Walters. He could go down and talk to the military regime in Nigeria, general to general, and get them to open ports and he did. We got cooperation from them and started when the time came to move food through the Nigerian ports and get it up there in time. It worked well.

Q: What had been the problem in the '70s?

SOUTHWICK: Some of it as I recall was logistics, and a lot of it was ineptitude on the part of the local government that it had never had to manage anything of that complex nature. A lot of corruption and so forth. There were issues, too, that frankly still plague relief efforts, and that is if you start feeding people do they stop trying to work to feed themselves? One of the things that we had a big argument about with the government was whether our food would be supplied free or whether people would have to pay for it? Because in the country very much like Ronald Reagan said nobody should get anything for free, they should work for it, do something, anything. I thought frankly that he was right. He knew his people better than I did and it just intuitively made sense and I frankly think it made sense vis-à-vis the reigning philosophy of the

Reagan administration, but it was hard to change that policy. We just felt it had to be free so we eventually prevailed on it.

Q: Well, did the predictions about rain turn out to be right?

SOUTHWICK: Yes, it was the worst, it was a huge dip. In the early '70s it was a couple of years of bad rain and that's sort of a cumulative thing. What happened in '84 and '85 is the rain just stopped. I made a field trip at kind of the height of this out into the Sahel region, which was normally agricultural, just looking at the situation. It was about a 2,000 mile trip and whole villages had decamped, had left. There was no one left, there was no water, there was no food.

Q: They headed south?

SOUTHWICK: They headed south towards better climates and where there was rainfall. They just sort of disappeared into the coastal areas of West Africa. Those who stayed did work. I went on another field trip just when the drought broke and I think it was probably one of the most dramatic moments of my life. I was glad to have my 12 year old son with me and two people from the AID mission and it started to rain. It was the first rain since the drought. All over everywhere you could see people were out planting. People just stood out over the hillsides, over the fields for miles on end and they had rain so they had to plant even though they had no idea when the next rain would come. It was a very dramatic scene.

Q: Did we supply the seed?

SOUTHWICK: We did some of those kinds of things, yes. We had some good people in AID. I just don't think they had their antennae up and they tended to be a little bit more cautious. I was responsible for doubling the amount of food to bring in. I said we've got a plan. They were saying, I can't remember the number, like 50,000. I said, let's just say it's 100,000, and it turned out to be closer to what the need was than they were. I was just flying by the seat of my pants, but I felt I was dealing with sort of cautious people who wanted to wait for information to come in, and by then it's too late.

Q: What was the role of the ambassador in this?

SOUTHWICK: He was interested in this and wanted it to work, and that's one area where he and I worked very well together. He was quite happy for me to work the circuits; the circuits both within AID and in Washington. Towards the end of my time there we did have a coup attempt one night.

Q: How did that play out from your perspective?

SOUTHWICK: Well, we had a station there and we thought we had the place pretty well wired. But one night I tried to make a phone call and couldn't get through. I think it was an overseas call and I was dealing with the operator and then I started making some other calls. Something just seemed strange that the phone system was screwed up, not that it ever worked perfectly. I started calling more and more people, and in the course of the night I decided that something was

going on. Then we started hearing some shots in various parts of town. This did not seem to be ideological; it was personal in some units and basically rebelled and they were trying to take the telephone system, radio station and a few other things. In the morning we had gotten word to everybody to stay at home. The ambassador lived right across from the embassy. About mid-morning a junior officer and I started going out just to test the waters. In retrospect this was sort of foolish and silly, but that's what we did. We kept going and we wound up back at the embassy. The ambassador was furious because he wanted to be the one who was feeding all this information to Washington and then we were reporting what had happened. He wanted to completely suppress my role in discovering that something had been happening. I was the first one to know. It was just by chance. It was not something I smelled until I couldn't make the phones work.

Q: How responsive did you find the government of Niger? Who was the president?

SOUTHWICK: The president was an extremely intelligent capable person who ran the place like Louis XIV. He was in touch with all his provincial governors and the senior military people every morning of every day. He was kind of thin and wiry. Quite intense, but basically a good benevolent person. For example when he found out about head injuries with motor scooters, which is what a lot of people use there, he said, despite the cost, everybody's going to have a helmet. By God everybody did have a helmet. No ifs, ands or buts, you know? He was an enlightened despot in a sort of classical platonic view of that form of government. He subsequently got sick some years after my departure and died. People say he was an early victim of the Aids. I don't think that was the case, but it could have been.

Q: Did we have Peace Corps there?

SOUTHWICK: We had a big Peace Corps there; very big Peace Corps.

Q: How did they work?

SOUTHWICK: They liked it. They were out working on the usual array of things, everything from teaching English to little projects; well digging projects and better uses of resources and so forth. We did have a couple of tragedies there. One Peace Corps volunteer died in a motorcycle accident. A few weeks later another volunteer was on a bus going out to his post. He was sitting on the window side inside and a dump truck with a driver who misjudged or was drunk or something just sheered off that side of the bus and this Peace Corps volunteer was killed. Because the Peace Corps director had just a few weeks before accompanied a body back to Washington of another Peace Corps volunteer, I was asked to do this. I went back to Washington, first to Baltimore in this case with the body of a young, he must have been like 20 or 21 years old. It was a very tragic thing and a nice family from Baltimore, Catholic family, just absolutely devastated by this. There's nothing worse than the loss of a child.

Q: Were there any reflections while you were there of any interest of what was happening in South Africa and all?

SOUTHWICK: Yes, there was. Chet Crocker visited and he was preoccupied with South Africa. He found Niger as elsewhere and much of the rest of Africa; they really didn't care very much. One group oppressing another group in Africa. There's nothing new about that. You know? I think that there was about as much interest in that as they had in Poland. I'm exaggerating this a little bit, still this notion that all Africans and African solidarity and apartheid in South Africa was the worst thing that anybody could imagine, just wasn't the case.

Q: What was life like there for you?

SOUTHWICK: Well, we had three children. Initially they were going to French schools and then in the course of time there we got the American community that was building up, we established an American school. It was very tiny at first in a house, and then by this time my wife was very active in this. We got plans to build a school, a small school on the embassy compound which was about 13 acres, 16 acres, something like that. There was room for it. Life was good. I mean I think life in these places for families was okay. You had a community life with other embassy families, diplomatic community and so forth. The Nigeriens were not the most open, warm, hospitable people in the world, but they were not bad. It was possible to get invited to a Nigerien's house. Then you had R&R and there were little places to go to. There was a fantastic camel market every two weeks up the Niger River, about a two hour drive, colorful things in Africa that people would go to. Then I did make two Sahara trips, one all the way across to Algiers and one sort of up in Niger.

Q: How does one go across the Sahara?

SOUTHWICK: Ambassador Tom Pickering who had been in Nigeria had made a trip all the way from Nigeria to Algiers and back I guess. I can't remember, but Casey said, oh we should do that, too. I thought who is we? He wanted to do it. I frankly was not terribly interested in doing it because I didn't feel I needed to do that to experience the Sahara. One thing led to another and in early '84 we worked out a deal where a convoy of two vehicles. I would go to Algiers and he would fly up and come back. Okay. I got a little group together of people who just sort of wanted to go for the hell of it and then people who had, shall I say, more professionally related reasons like the military attaché. We got a group of I guess it was four Americans and the two drivers and off we went. It was a nine day trip. There were 600 or 700 miles of this where there are no roads and you have little posts that you sight. You get to one and then you get to another and head for that one. A lot of camping out. We had, I guess it was, six Americans. We had a very good group and it was probably the best trip I ever took. The desert is wonderful. It's mystical, it's beautiful. You experience total silence and you meet a lot of interesting characters along the way, not too many, but when you meet people, they're interesting. It was a very good trip. We did end up having vehicle trouble with one of the vehicles. These were the diesel Chevrolet carryalls. This is a bad engine to begin with and one of them started leaking oil, but by begging basically with everything from Nigerien road crews to everybody else, we managed to keep enough oil in the crankcase to keep the thing going. It was a wonderful trip.

Ambassador
Niger (1985-1988)

Ambassador Richard Bogosian was born on July 18, 1937, in Boston, Massachusetts. He studied history at Tufts University and graduated from University of Chicago Law School. In 1962 he entered the Foreign Service and his career has included positions in Niger Republic, Chad, Somalia, Sudan and Rwanda. Ambassador Bogosian was interviewed by Vladimir Lehovich in 1998.

Q: *So you were being put into Niger, yes.*

BOGOSIAN: That was by '85. Now the point about Ethiopia was that we had very unfriendly relations with them. There was one incident in which an American embassy employee was put in jail, and we were very worried that that was going to turn out to be something like the Hostage Crisis. In fact, that was never publicized, and the man eventually got out of jail. We had a tense relationship with Ethiopia, and yet Ethiopia is a fairly important country in that part of the world. But it was really the famine. What the famine did was require a large program of humanitarian assistance, and what that required was some presence to actually manage the program. And so we just simply couldn't have a zero relationship with Ethiopia.

In Uganda, we had a somewhat different kind of problem. This was a period when Milton Obote was president, for the second time, following Idi Amin. And Uganda was not considered a country of great importance, but we did have the usual aid programs and so forth. What happened there was there was increasingly evidence of human rights violations by Uganda, and this was an example of how the public pressure developed, and increasingly it meant that we couldn't have the kinds of programs we wanted there. There were questions of safety because of the anarchic character of the military. It may have happened earlier, but in the mid-'80s this was a relatively new phenomenon, of a country where the human rights activists began to press the Administration to modify its policies because of human rights issues. Here, what happened was we were trying to preserve our aid program and maintain at least some measure of political relationship, and I had to go to the Hill and testify. And what I was finding was our views were not seen as sustainable. So in the case of Uganda-

Q: *Views meaning to have some supportive relationship with Uganda?*

BOGOSIAN: Yes, and you know, in a way, in retrospect, I don't know why we cared so much about Milton Obote. Around the time I was leaving, Yoweri Museveni was leading a rebellion.

Q: *Would you repeat his name?*

BOGOSIAN: Yoweri Museveni. He's the present president of Uganda. And Museveni would arrive in some town, and he would not pillage, and his soldiers would not rape, and so he became something of a white knight, you might say. And I would just note that he eventually overthrew Obote and is now president and is someone that we consider is one of the more impressive African leaders these days.

In Kenya we had yet a different kind of problem. Now Kenya is a little different from most of the countries of Africa in the sense that, for many Americans, these countries are just indistinguishable. Nobody knows much about them But Kenya is, quote-unquote, "The Real Africa." There are lions there, and there's beautiful scenery. Of course, the movie *Out of Africa* had not been made yet, but enough people have been to Kenya that it has a kind of cachet that's a little different. But in fact, Kenya has lots of problems. It had at that time an extremely high fertility rate, the population pressures that were going to be very serious. It also is a country that, however beautiful the Rift Valley is, most of it is really desert of semi-arid. And yet we had an increasingly important strategic interest in Kenya because, as I said earlier, it was the one place where our ships in the region could go. And what we were finding was that, because of the problems in the Middle East, we had virtually constant naval presence in the region, and I can tell you, as one who served in the Persian Gulf, that's not exactly the kind of place a U.S. sailor wants to have shore leave. And about the only place they could was Mombasa, and in fact, at one point when we began to be worried about AIDS, the sailors were told not to get involved with prostitutes. And in fact, with the increasing number of females in the Navy, at one point, the Somali prostitutes of Mombasa protested that these "soft" sailors were not able to support their economic activities.

But the problem in Kenya was, like many African countries-

Q: *Somali prostitutes.*

BOGOSIAN: Well, it happens that... I'm using the term ethnically. They may have been Kenyan citizens, but they were at least perceived to be Somali.

Like many African countries, the Kenyans have economic policies that we thought were wrong, and also there was a pervasive problem of corruption. While I was director of AFE, one of our ambassadors was Admiral Jerry Thomas, and his economic counselor was Mark Johnson, who, as it happened, worked for me in Kuwait, and the two of them said they were going to go after corruption in Kenya.

Q: *That was the team in Kenya that you just described.*

BOGOSIAN: Yes. And they got nowhere. They made a very strong effort to highlight and to try to work against corruption. Chet Crocker was very nervous. He said, "What are those guys doing? Don't they realize the problems they might raise?" But in fact, they got nowhere because that corruption problem was pervasive. And so one of the dilemmas we had in Kenya was there was a feeling that to give them aid without structural adjustment was pouring money down a rat hole, but to withhold the aid would jeopardize our interests. And this became evident in a way that I had never seen either before or since.

The first ambassador in Kenya when I came into AFE was Bill Harrop, a very senior and highly qualified ambassador. His economic counselor was a guy named Duane Butcher, and about two days before Butcher's assignment ended, he sent in a Dissent Channel cable. It's the only Dissent Channel cable I've ever seen. And what he said was, the ambassador is violating his own policy. And what he meant was that, having pursued a policy where we were withholding certain aid to

Kenya pending their undertaking certain reforms, the ambassador in the end decided to release the money, but the reforms had not been implemented. So Butcher complained that the ambassador was violating his own policy, and it happens with Dissent Channel cables, they go to the Secretary, and in this case the ambassador is required to send in a response. And his answer, in so many words, was "there's more to life (in Kenya) than our structural adjustment objective, " and in effect what he said was he was worried that we wouldn't be able to get, say, port call rights in Mombasa. So that issue, of course, was with us virtually the whole time I was director of AFE.

Now what that means is that at any given moment there was some hot issue. There's one I remember that in the end nothing happened, but at the time we thought it was going to be a very big deal. We had gotten wind that Qadhafi was planning to bomb Sudan. Now you may remember that I got to Khartoum two weeks after a Qadhafi-inspired coup attempt, and he remained implacably opposed to Nimeiri the whole time, and he was still causing mischief in East Africa. Between the Sudanese and the Egyptians and the Americans there was this notion that what we should do was let the planes leave and head for Khartoum and then the Egyptian Air Force or the Sudanese - I forget which - would intercept them and Qadhafi would be exposed. Now I know parenthetically that some time after this he really did bomb. He bombed the radio station in Omdurman. So we were alerted to all of this, and we were going to spend the night in the State Department. In fact, I did spend the night in the State Department. But a fellow named John McWethy of ABC News picked this story up because we began certain aircraft movements of our own, and somehow people saw this. And in a word, he leaked all this. And as a result Qadhafi never did what he was going to do, and nothing happened. But that gives you an idea of what was going on, which is to say that whether it was Qadhafi or the famine in Ethiopia or the Egyptians being concerned, at any given moment there was some kind of action underway. And this was at a time when Chevron had discovered oil in Sudan and was moving toward building a 900-mile pipeline; this was at a time when the Arabs were still planning major agricultural investments in Sudan and we had hoped to get on with it. As I noted, we had a variety of military and political and diplomatic initiatives underway in the region, some of which were related to Ethiopia and the Horn, some of which were related to the Middle East. And the mere fact that we had these huge assistance programs in Sudan, Somalia, and Kenya gave AFE a kind of weight that was not necessarily the things that involved the kind of high-level public issues that others like, the Middle East, might have. But we were an office that always was working on issues that had a lot of interest within the government. As I mentioned, I visited the region fairly often. In three years, I made three full sort of swings through the region, visiting all the countries, including the Comoros Islands. I consulted often in Cairo or Riyadh or London or Paris. And so in that sense it was a very active period.

Q: *Dick, can I ask on a couple of things that come out? The two things I'd like to get your thoughts on are the Cold War in relation to our policy in Africa, one, and AID or assistance programs as a second thought. With the Cold War, Dick, is it fair to say that our policies were so Cold War driven in these countries that, absent the Cold War, we are stuck with no policies for those countries?*

BOGOSIAN: I don't think it's quite that simple. Certainly there were countries like Angola and Ethiopia. The Ethiopia under Mengistu clearly as a Cold War... And part of that was Mengistu.

He simply went far toward becoming friendly toward the Soviet Union. But the Cold War by itself was not the only issue. You've got to recall that in '73 and '74, and then again in '79, there were energy crises that riveted our attention to the Middle East. And also by '79, there was the trouble in Afghanistan. So to the extent that the Horn of Africa was essentially the other side of the Middle East - and you know, let's face it, it's right next door to Saudi Arabia - whether it was port rights in Mombasa or pre-positioning rights in Sudan, that was all really with a Middle East focus. And keep in mind the kind of relationship we had with Egypt at that point. So the Cold War was a large part of it, but so was the strategic relationship to the Middle East. By the time we're covering here, as I said earlier, we had a lot of things going on with Sudan, so to the extent that Ethiopia represented a threat to Sudan, you could call it "Cold War," but it was a function there. Now if you removed the Cold War part of it - in fact, today it's kind of reversed - we're worried about a Sudanese threat to Ethiopia - the geography remains the same, and so the Horn of Africa is probably going to remain of strategic interest because of the Middle East. Now that probably doesn't raise the stakes quite as much as if the Shah were in Iran or if the Cold War still existed, but it's not completely absent either. And in that sense, there really is a difference between Ethiopia and, say, Niger, or Ethiopia and Uganda even.

Q: *There are other strategic interests.*

BOGOSIAN: Now to tell you the truth, if you go to the Pentagon, they tend to look at it a little differently - not that they don't consider the Horn of strategic value but they kind of come at it a little bit differently, and it's largely a function of its proximity to the Middle East.

Q: *Dick, with AID a couple of questions. What was your sense of the quality of our aid programs, which were numerous and expensive in the areas where you were working right now, and how was it to work with them?*

BOGOSIAN: Good question; I'm not sure I have a good answer. For an aid program to be successful (not counting humanitarian assistance, food, that sort of thing), you need time. And these countries have been so volatile that you start a program and somehow you can never really finish it. As for the quality of the people, I'm really not in a position to say. It's probably mixed. We had good AID directors and good staff and others that may not have been quite so good. I know that there's often a debate in AID. For example when we resumed out AID program in Sudan, the Ambassador and I said let's build roads, and we were told, no, we deal with basic human needs. And it's true that over the years, AID sort of shifts from one flavor-of-the-month to another. In Sudan I think we broke some ground with our structural adjustment program, which then became the model in many other African countries as well. Certainly one has to admit that for all the money we poured in there's not much to show for it, and therefore, I suppose one could criticize it. I find it hard to do so because - one would have to go back a little more and see just what was done, but for example - when we were dealing with Uganda, the AID director was very upset because he had just about got going and then the pressure developed to cut back because of human rights; and what that meant, in some ways, was that AID people in Washington were just reluctant to do more in Uganda, and he felt stymied. Whatever they were doing - we're talking about till up to 1985, and by around 1990-91 Somalia fell apart - I think some of the things that may have worked out over the longer run if there hadn't been such volatility might have proven themselves. It's hard to say, looking back, what we can point to as

we did *X*, *Y*, and *Z*, and as a result today things are better. But I need to say as well, I can't remember every single project that was done, and in a way it may be a little unfair to offer a blanket criticism. The best I can say is we did the best we could, given what we knew and under the circumstances, but there's no getting around the fact that for whatever reason, whether it's our inability to affect corruption in Kenya or the changing political circumstances in one of the countries or the other, there's not much to show for it. Now I think in another sense, though, we can make the point that in a country like Tanzania, which has been relatively stable, some of the discussions that we've had with them in the 1980s about the need to break away from the socialist model (a position that virtually all the donors, even including the Scandinavians, who are socialists themselves and main aid providers, share), we did affect policy there, which I think is now beginning to show some results. So that perhaps shows that if could have some stability you might be able to get somewhere. With all that said, some of those countries - the Comoros, the Seychelles, Djibouti - they're so small they're not likely to make a big splash, and yet Mauritius has been one of the great success stories in Africa. It's a thriving democracy. It's a free-enterprise system. And one result is it's had a fair amount of success in terms of its economics.

Q: *Dick, do you think we're ready to move on to the ambassadorship in Niger?*

BOGOSIAN: Yes, let's do that. There's probably more, I just can't remember it anyway, but those were the highlights.

Q: *We can come back if any inspiration strikes.*

Dick, we're about to reach your ambassadorship from 1985 to 1988 in the Republic of Niger. Can you tell us how that came about?

BOGOSIAN: Sometime during my assignment in East African Affairs, our ambassador to the Seychelles, David Fischer, was by, and he said something to me that I had never really thought about. He said, "You know if you want to be an ambassador, you've got to tell them." So one day I went to the senior deputy assistant secretary, Frank Wisner, and I said, "Am I supposed to tell you if I want to be an ambassador?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Well, all right, put me down." And during my assignment to East African Affairs, the first time they mentioned an embassy was when Jim Bishop, in 1984, asked me if I wanted to go to Somalia, because Bob Oakley, our ambassador, was going to be leaving early so he could become director of the counter-terrorism office. Now as it happened, Crocker said no, he wanted me to stay to be his director of AFE. But one or another embassy was mentioned from time to time, and then in December of 1984, at a time when my daughter used to come into Washington about once a week, she had come in - it was about 7 o'clock and I was in a car pool with Tom Niles at the time, who was a deputy assistant secretary in the European Bureau. I said, "I just need to poke my head into the front office. We'll go get Niles and go home." And when I poked my head into the front office, Jim Bishop was in with Chet Crocker, and they beckoned me in. And Bishop said, "How would you like to go to Niger as ambassador?" He said, "We need to know right away?" So my first question was, well, what's it like? Because he had been ambassador there. He said, well, it's like Khartoum, only further west, which was not exactly true, but he said we have a little military program and AID and Peace Corps. And I said, well, you know, let me check it out with the

family. I went home, and at the dinner table, by a vote of 5-0, we all agreed I should go. So the next day, Hank Cohen, who was the number two in the Director General's office, called. He said, well, what about it? And I said, yes, I'd like to go. I said, "What's the rush?" He said, "Well, what we're doing is, we're nominating a bunch of career Foreign Service officers to replace Reagan political appointees. Now for me going to Niger, that wasn't that big a deal, but a number of -

Q: *Was there a political appointee in Niger?*

BOGOSIAN: Yes, I'll comment on that in a moment. The reason this was of sort of more than routine interest was that Reagan was "accused," quote-unquote, of putting ideologically right-wing ambassadors into Central America at a time when that was very much a highly emotional set of issues in the United States. And so if Cohen was right, what Secretary Shultz was trying to do was get a more professional group of ambassadors into Central America, and I was kind of caught up in that. The ambassador in Niger was a guy named Casey, who was from Colorado, and he was a mining engineer who had done some work in Niger and knew the country and positively loved it there. In fact, they asked me in December of 1984 - I think it was December 8, if I remember correctly - to be ambassador. I presented my credentials on October 11, and one reason it took so long was that Casey wasn't too keen to leave. He thought he was going to be there throughout the Reagan Administration, and in fact, at one point, in 1985, we had lunch together in Washington, and he was telling us what it was like to be there. And then he said he was going to resign officially that afternoon and would I like to come to the ceremony? Which we did. And he introduced me to his son. He said, "This is Richard Bogosian. He's going to replace us in Niamey." And the son said, "You mean we're not going back?" So that family had a little difficulty getting itself torn away.

Niamey, for us, was probably as nice an introduction to being ambassador as one could have. It was, to be frank, a relatively quiet assignment. There are a couple of things that happened that were of interest, but by and large it was a quiet assignment, in contrast to Chad, virtually no crises. As I say, we had plenty of time to get ready to go out. We were anticipating leaving in the summer. At one point we thought we wouldn't be able to have hearings, but at that time Chad was in crisis, and we wanted to get John Blaine out as ambassador, and so the Senate Foreign Relations Committee quickly put together a hearing and three or four others of us were able to go up. And we had a quick meeting with President Reagan, and in those days, President Reagan had the practice of calling ambassadors on the phone. And so you would always say to some colleague, "Did you get your phone call yet?" And this one, I think it was, Friday afternoon, I was told he was going to call, probably about five or five-thirty. Now usually in our office people worked late, but this one day everybody was gone but my secretary, who wasn't about to leave if the President was going to call. And at one point the phone rang and this voice said, "Mr. Bogosian?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Just a minute," and then the familiar voice of Ronald Reagan got on the phone. And if I remember correctly, he said, "Mr. Bogosian," and I was struck that he pronounced it right, "would you mind being my ambassador in Niger?" And I said, "Why no, not at all." No, no. He said, "Is this a bad time to call?" I said, "No, not at all."

Q: *That's wonderful.*

BOGOSIAN: And then he asked me if I'd be an ambassador, and he said, "Well, I guess that's it then." And I said, "Well, I guess so." And that was my call from President Reagan.

Q: *So he asked if it was a bad time to call to [announce] your appointment to be ambassador. Dick, that's an absolutely wonderful story.*

BOGOSIAN: Reagan made the phone call, and then all the different things fell into place, albeit over a long period. In fact, at one point, I wasn't sure it was going to happen, and I nosed around for other jobs, and they even asked if I wanted to be a deputy chief of mission in Riyadh, but by that time the Niamey assignment was coming through.

So we arrived in Niamey in October of 1985, and we stayed pretty much the full three years. And this was a period during which our two daughters when we left were at Wellesley College, and my son was living on his own. In fact, it was - I don't know how typical this is of the Foreign Service, but we kind of had to kick our son out. He was living with us, and we were leaving. During this period, he decided to go to art school, and so, in a word, while we were in Niger, our children were in one stage or another of their college life. And there were certain moments where life was difficult. One of our daughters had some trouble at school, and she left school for a while and changed schools. And needless to say, putting three kids through private school was expensive, and so in that sense, we were still, if not consumed, somewhat preoccupied with family matters.

The embassy in Niamey was interesting in a couple of ways. First of all, it was a superb physical arrangement. We were out of town - that is to say, we were not downtown. We had 17 acres on either side of a road. When we first got there it wasn't heavily or densely populated. We were right next to the French embassy, which had a similar arrangement. We looked out on the Niger River. The residence was on one side, with beautiful grounds and innumerable birds. It was essentially on a flyway, and so at any time of the day you saw beautiful birds, and for about six months of the year there were these storks that would just walk back and forth eating the bugs, looking like waiters in their black - they were about three feet tall, these birds. So it was quite an introduction to Africa in that regard. The embassy itself was designed to be an embassy, and the whole time we were there we were putting up a new AID building on the compound. The Marines moved to a residence just next door to the embassy, and we had our American school, which was a lovely school. And over the time we were there, that school added two or three buildings to its operation. So it was a period of, on the one hand, a very nice physical arrangement that was fairly secure and so forth, even though during this period we spent several million dollars to build state-of-the-art walls all around the compound. We had, in fact, two swimming pools, one on either side. We had a large open lot, on which we could play softball, and so forth. That was the first thing to note.

The second thing to note about the embassy was it was fairly large. And again, what you had was a stable country, so that over time, the programs were able to grow. We had a sizable Peace Corps operation, with over a hundred volunteers, and that meant about four times a year a new group would come in. We had a good-sized AID mission with a seemingly endless variety of contractors and others who were with the AID mission. We had a small military office and, of course, USIA. So from an ambassadorial point of view, I had a nice little operation. There was

plenty there to keep me busy from a management point of view. And by and large, the programs were smooth in operation, and I'll mention one or two others that we had a little problem with.

In West Africa there is this tradition of softball tournaments, and the one in Niamey is every year on October 12th, on Columbus Day weekend.

Q: *Who takes part in these?*

BOGOSIAN: In that year we had teams up from Ouagadougou and Bamako, and I think we had a team from Abidjan that year also. And then the Japanese might put a team together and so forth. And it's frankly a lot of fun.

Q: *Government people?*

BOGOSIAN: Yes, from our embassies mainly. The Niamey tournament was always called the NUTS, the Niamey Universal Tournament of Softball; the one in Dakar was called WAIST, the West African Invitational Softball Tournament; and so forth. That's always on Washington's birthday, and the one in Ouaga is always on Memorial Day. So these are big events in West Africa. And so the first thing we did there was to entertain numerous visitors. Our ambassador from Ouagadougou wanted something to read, and there wasn't one book in the whole house, but perhaps the most memorable moment was when he complained to our dog for barking at the Tuareg guard and said to the dog, in English, "After all, you're partners in security."

Q: *Who was our ambassador in Ouagadougou?*

BOGOSIAN: Nard Neher.

Q: *Nard Neher.*

BOGOSIAN: Yes, N-e-h-e-r, Nard Neher. There were a few things, of course, that happened in Niamey while we were there. I would note, by the way, that we had visits from our defense attaché periodically, and they had a plane, and this permitted us to travel over what was a rather large country. We went up to Agadez, which is essentially in the desert; we went to the uranium mines near Arlit; we went to Diffa and Nguigmi over on the Chad border, virtually a thousand miles away; and various other places. So that was something I never got to do in Sudan, and with the attaché planes it made travel around the country much easier than would otherwise be the case.

Q: *Excuse me, where was the attaché based?*

BOGOSIAN: In Abidjan, and they had a C-12 aircraft. Now it happened that Niger, with its uranium money, had built a beautiful road system, so we were able to travel that way as well. Now typically what we would do in Niamey was, in terms of our work, like any post, you have the various visitors who come and go, and you have the different subjects you're following. The main thing that was going on in those days that we cared about was usually something in one of the neighboring countries. There was always this concern about Libya. Typically Nigeria was in

one state or another of turmoil. During these years there was a little war between Burkina Faso and Mali. Niger itself, in those years, was very stable. In fact, the political situation was almost inert. The leader of the country was Seyni Kountché, a typical African dictator, in the sense that he was a military man; but Kountché was also a very remarkable person. He was not particularly large, but he was clearly a dominant person. Impeccably dressed, shoes shined, pants creased, slim but with a military bearing, he took power in the mid-'70s at a time of famine, when he was no longer able to tolerate corruption in terms of delivering food assistance. So he was fairly honest as well. A little like Nimeiri, he was a good friend of the United States and a strong supporter of things we cared about. For example, AID was pursuing programs in family planning. Now this is a country that's 90 percent Muslim. There was, and indeed later was even stronger, resistance, but Kountché, in a meeting I attended, asked a room full of AID representatives whether they thought it was better to have abortions in Nigeria or toss little babies in barrels rather than have family planning. He was quite graphic. And so he was conservative - he was very careful about even contraception, let alone abortion - but he was willing to permit family planning; and that was something we cared about. On the other hand, the country when I got there was just coming out of a severe drought and famine conditions. We had, of course, provided a lot of assistance. They were worried about desertification, and the minister for environment asked the AID director if there was anything we could do. And the AID director was not very forthcoming, and as we left the meeting, I said to the AID director, a guy named Peter Benedict, who was a very good person, "Why weren't you willing to help him?" He says, "We don't know how to combat this problem." And in fact, the Chinese ambassador told me that they had planted something like a billion trees in China. He said it had no effect. So desertification is one of those problems that may be in the "too hard" category.

Now while we were in Niger there are several things that happened that are worth noting. In one of the far-off parts of the country, a place called Dirkou, which is kind of in east-central Niger but essentially in the desert...

Q: *I spent several wonderful days in Niger once upon a time.*

BOGOSIAN: When was that?

Q: *In 1967. I had a wonderful time. But, Dick, these countries don't change.*

BOGOSIAN: Well, Niger had uranium, and they had a boom.

Q: *A wonderful boom. I spent all my time with a French sociologist and psychoanalyst.*

BOGOSIAN: In Niamey?

Q: *He lived in Niamey, and he worked with witch doctors; and I spent several days with him. He took me to meet all of the leading tribal medicine leaders in that area, wonderful people, very interesting people, and he was a very interesting guy. And I had a grand time there. I went swimming in the river, did various things like that, drove to Gao-*

BOGOSIAN: That's Mali.

Q: *I know.*

BOGOSIAN: Although it's not.

Q: *- drove to Gao with the AID director from Niamey. The deputy chief of mission told me to take him. He said this guy's been here for three months, he hasn't been out of town. Anyhow, do you feel -*

BOGOSIAN: Yes, let's go.

Q: *Wonderful.*

BOGOSIAN: There were several things going on in Niger when we were there. Unlike, say, in Washington, where there were big policy issues that you grapple with, these were more in the nature of sort of discrete things that happened, but they all kind of added up to the further education of Richard Bogosian. For example, in Dirkou, which, as I say, is in a remote part of east-central Niger, the French had built an airstrip, probably in the 1950s. And at a time when we were looking for ways to kind of show our support for Kountché in a military way, some people - this was before I got involved - came up with the idea of repaving the airstrip in Dirkou. This turned out to be an incredibly difficult undertaking in many ways. First of all, as I said, it was in a terribly remote area, and it kind of showed a little bit the hubris that Americans have on the "Well, we can do anything." But after all is said and done, to get construction equipment up there proved to be extremely difficult. There's constant wind and sand. It's a little hard to put concrete and do some of the other things. But the other thing that happened here was to find myself constantly bickering with the U.S. military because of their unwillingness to support our attaché office, which had the task of trying to get this thing done. And so I would send what I thought were confidential and narrow-channel cables to various people complaining about EUCOM, the office in Europe that oversaw this, only to find the general lecturing me on "Dick, you don't do it that way." The point here is, on the one hand, I found myself enmeshed in intra-Pentagon bureaucracy, trying to find out where you go to get something done, and to find that on the one hand I had a defense attaché who was, frankly, not well qualified to handle this, and on the other hand I had general who wasn't used to having people challenge them. And for my part, I realized that I could be right and still lose the war if I get some general mad at me. And in effect, what happened was the project went on for years; it was over budget; it was late; but as a matter of pride the U.S. military was determined ultimately to get it done. And my recollection is at one point we had to practically go back to the beginning and start all over again. In a way, it became a kind of bad joke, that with all our supposed technological capabilities it was awfully hard to just pave an airstrip in the middle of nowhere in Africa. And it was a kind of an object lesson on being a little more modest and humble in terms of what we're getting into. In another sense, the significance of Dirkou was that for virtually my whole assignment in Niamey, there was something that involved me with the American military in what proved to be an awfully uncomfortable thing. They didn't like to admit that they had screwed up, and in the end they built a beautiful airstrip that everybody agreed was a job well done, and when they finally got the right equipment, the right people, it was done - but it took a couple of years to do something that we thought was going to be done in a couple of months.

Another area that came up while I was there was what I refer to as the Tufts project. Now I'm a graduate of Tufts College. The president of Tufts University at that time was Jean Meyer, who was a world-renowned nutritionist and apparently had fought in the Resistance in France and so forth.

Q: *Jean Meyer.*

BOGOSIAN: Yes. And he established a school of nutrition and he established a veterinary school. And this was a program in livestock management, and among other things what they were developing was a vaccine for rinderpest that would not require refrigeration - which would have tremendous application through much of Africa, for all these herders off in the middle of nowhere. Now the Tufts connection was an interesting one. For one thing, we had a dog that developed something called Cushing's syndrome, and because all these veterinarians were there they worked on the dog. But more than that, the dog had research value for them, and so they benefited from that.

Q: *They collected bits of information about the dog?*

BOGOSIAN: I don't know, they kept that dog going a couple of years longer than would have been the case otherwise.

But the other thing was Meyer came out. The problem was that AID didn't like this project. They were not sure it was going well. Meyer came out to try to save the project, and he was a man of some ego - after all, he had done a lot. He explained how the French were unhappy when he became an American. But we were waiting for something to happen, and we were just looking over the garden in the back yard, and in my stupidity I tried to connect with him by telling him that I had gotten a good grade in biology, and I said to him that I got an A in botany. And he says, "Yeah, I got an A, too." And he was this world-renowned nutritionist who sort of lived that way. But the real problem with Meyer - and I used to see him in Medford because I'm from Medford and I'd go up and meet with him at Tufts - and this was over a year or two period, this relationship, when AID was getting ready to scuttle the program, he phoned me and said, "Dick, what can you do?" And I had to come face-to-face with my responsibilities as ambassador and supporting the AID mission and my natural desire to help my alma mater, and I said, "I'm sorry, President Meyer, there's really just nothing I can do. The program is going to have to be stopped." "All right," he said, and that was that. I put the phone down, and I said to my wife, "There goes the honorary degree." So that was one of those things that personally was rather disappointing.

One of the things that happened while I was there was a summit of Air Afrique. Now Air Afrique is an airline that's owned by several West African countries, and it was in trouble. And so the presidents of the owner countries came to Niamey, and there was a meeting that the diplomatic corps was invited to - I guess it was their closing meeting - and one by one the different presidents came out. Sankara of Ouagadougou had a pistol on his hip and he wore fatigues. And the audience gave polite applause until Houphouet Boigny came out. Now he was about five feet tall. He wore a pork pie hat and he looked like a little frog, but this man clearly

was the most charismatic of the group, and the audience just erupted in applause. That was the only time I ever saw him, but it was a very interesting object lesson in the stature he had. And in that part of Africa, typically, he was looked upon as the elder statesman of them all.

Q: *From the Ivory Coast.*

BOGOSIAN: That's right. There was one major political even while I was there that I can recall, and that was the death of Kountché. Now as I said, there were no political parties; there were not opposition groups; there were no secret groups that were at all significant. After I left Niamey, they went far toward creating a democracy, and the political life became much more vibrant. And then there was a coup that snuffed the democracy out. But while I was there it was very inert. Kountché was somewhat of a stern person. When I presented my credentials - I think it was a Friday or whatever - he said, "Come, let's get together next week and have a good talk." So within a week I had a real substantive meeting with him, and I felt very good about it. But shortly thereafter, the next two times I wanted to have a meeting with him, I couldn't get it. One was with Meyer, and he wouldn't see Meyer, and one was with one of the Department people. So I felt pretty depressed, and Jim Bishop told me not to worry, that it would work out, and it did. After that initial period I was able to see Kountché virtually any time I wanted, and that meant that every couple of months I would have a meeting with him.

We would review just about all the subjects. The one subject he was very careful about was relations with France. He would talk about Libya; he would talk about all of Niger's neighbors; he would explain to me relationships; but when we came up to France he tended to be much more cautious.

Q: *Because he was closely affiliated with France.*

BOGOSIAN: Yes. Clearly he didn't want to get into that with me, which revealed that he had a delicate relationship with France. Now in Chad, Idriss Deby often complained about the French in a way that Kountché never would. Kountché was much more discreet. Now keep in mind that the French essentially kept Niger afloat, not only by all the ways it did everywhere else, but by being the principal buyer of Nigerian uranium. And I later learned from a senior French official was one of the keys to the French relationship with Niger, in terms of Uranium, was that the certain terms of the agreements - to buy or whatever - were such that Nigerien uranium could be used for military purposes. In other words, if they bought uranium from Canada or the United States or Australia, there would be clauses in the sale that would require the uranium to be used for peaceful purposes, whereas the Nigerien uranium didn't have that. So the French would always want to keep the Nigerien uranium mining industry afloat. That said, from purely economic point of view, the uranium industry was in deep trouble. It was too expensive, and the boom times were clearly over by the time I got there.

Q: *Dick, can I ask how was the weather when you were there? You mentioned desertification. Was it a drought time?*

BOGOSIAN: Not really. There was a serious drought in the mid-'80s that was ending around the time we got there. The period we were there it was normal, which meant some rain. I can't

remember that it was particularly excessive, but it wasn't drought conditions. The problem is the country, just geographically, is mainly desert, and there is a sort of desertification. So even under the best of circumstances, and even compared to other Sahelian countries, Niger is not well situated geographically.

So I had a good relationship with Kountché. He was a man that I frankly had great admiration for. He was a man of tremendous personal integrity. People thought his wife was a crook, but he himself was considered honest and so forth. He was dour. When he died, very few people shed any tears. There were rumors that he wasn't doing well. And then on December 31, 1986, typically he would receive the diplomatic corps, he would receive various groups of people. The DCM and I showed up at about five in the afternoon only to see Kountché carried out on a stretcher. And so throughout most of 1987 he was sick and out of the country, and then he died, I think, in November of that year. He had come back; we had one more meeting with him; and he was very unstable physically. So I think he had, they referred to it as a cyst on his brain. Whether it was a brain cancer tumor, I'm not sure what it was, but he effectively was out of commission from January 1, 1987, on.

He was replaced by Ali Seibou, who was a very popular soldier, a military man, much more garrulous, known to like drinking (in this Muslim country), and in a word more popular. And it was Ali Seibou who gave a little more momentum to what was a rather slow movement toward democratization. But that was mainly after I left.

We had one interesting thing happen. We had a couple of things happen that really were kind of tests one has to face as an ambassador, not huge crises, but particularly, I guess, when you're new, there is some concern that your authority be respected. And what I found is very often this is a function of the personal relationships you develop. I said to the AID director when I got there, "I have a letter from the President that says I'm in charge," more or less. He said, "Yes, I know, and I have a letter from the AID director in Washington, who says I'm supposed to report to him." And I realized that no matter how loyal any of these people were to me, the other agency heads all had a requirement to report to their home agency, so one of the things I made an effort to do was to enlist their allegiance. And that mean usually supporting them against their home agency. In other words, the problems that arose in the field were not so much State versus AID but AID Washington versus the AID director or the Pentagon versus the defense attaché, and so what I was able to do as ambassador was to be their advocate with their own agency. And often that made the difference between their being treated badly and not being treated badly. So that was the way I could be sure of their allegiance.

But even so, there were times when it got a little tricky. For example, Ali Seibou was an old soldier. He liked being with soldiers. And he had a mess every Friday, or a happy hour or whatever they called it. We had a captain at that point who was our senior military person, although he himself was a junior military person but he was the head of our little office. And Seibou invited him to attend his weekly meeting, his weekly happy hour. And I said to the DCM, what do I do here? I'm the Ambassador, and he's going to see the president every week. And the DCM, who was Joe Saloom, later ambassador to Guinea, who had worked with me in the office of aviation - and he was my second DCM in Niamey - he said, "Well, do you want to give up the chance of having this regular contact with the president?" And we agreed that that probably was

not a good idea, so the issue became setting down some ground rules, which I was confident the captain did observe, and in a word what it was was "Don't get beyond your brief of military affairs, and if you hear anything interesting let me know." The point is, on an organization chart it's not supposed to work that way, and I think there are ambassadors that would not have permitted this to happen, but I chose to let it happen and I don't think we had any problems.

Similarly, the AID director was in some ways the most important American in town because this was not a place where you had American companies. When I was in Kuwait, you could argue that the American manager of the Kuwait Oil Company was much more important than the ambassador. But in Niger there was no American company; there were no other activities; so the AID director probably had more money to hand out to people than anyone else around, and as a result, of course, he had some importance. And it was interesting the way this showed up. First of all, in terms of people, AID almost certainly had more children going to our school than any other element of the embassy, and therefore, it was AID, both through their students and through the money that they put into the school, that made that school possible. But it was a wonderful school, and it was one of the things that made the quality of life in Niamey what it was.

So there was something that came up, and I can't remember what it was, but the AID director was very upset, and he said if you don't do *X*, I'm going to pull out of the school. Now we had a generally good relationship, but he was playing hardball on that issue. And I'll be honest with you, I can't remember how we resolved it except he stayed with the school. But my point is that when you're an ambassador, even when you are nominally in charge, you have to work all the time at enlisting the loyalty of your team, and it is possible that there are times that it can be put under great strain.

Now there was another battle that came up, and the AID director and I were allies, but we lost the battle. When I got to Niamey, we had what was referred to as a Joint Administrative Office, and so the JAO, as it was called, handled administration for all AID and State, and needless to say, a lot of the resources came from AID because they comprised such a large proportion of the embassy. But the head of the office was a State officer, and a fairly senior officer, which is to say, someone who knew her way around Washington. Now the AID director had no problem with that, but AID Washington wanted to get out of these JAO's. They claimed that they were being cheated in places like Cairo and elsewhere. And we said that's stupid in Niamey. You know, we have one truck. Are you going to divide the truck? And the AID director and I tried very hard, and I wrote to Ron Spiers, who was our under secretary for management. I felt that Washington really let us down on that because they were unwilling to battle AID in any meaningful way. And I think it was too bad for all concerned because then what we had was two separate offices, neither of which was that strong. Because our office was smaller, we couldn't have it headed by a senior person. That's another example of the battles you win and the ones you don't.

Q: *Dick, let me stop this side of the tape.*

This is August 21, 1998, Part A or Tape number 4 with Richard Bogosian. Dick, thanks, we are still in Niger, and we have just left one of the AID projects.

BOGOSIAN: Well, actually, I think there were just a couple of other little anecdotes to mention about Niger. In some ways this was the least tumultuous of our different assignments, and as I pointed out, we had Peace Corps and AID and so forth, and a lot of our attention was to the community. We used to regularly visit Peace Corps volunteers in the field. We would attend their swearing-in ceremonies three or four times a year. I did try to learn a little bit of the Hausa language while I was there, and one time, when we were near Zinder, in the middle of the country, a Peace Corps volunteer took me to her village, and she said, "They're all excited about your coming." I greeted the group in Hausa and said a few words in Hausa. They were very excited. She said, "They don't really know what an ambassador is." And she said, "They don't really know where the United States is." I said, "Did you tell them that it's across the water?" She said, "They don't know what the water is." She said, "Their one question was is it near Mecca?" And so that was revealing, that these villagers in the interior of the country probably had very little idea what the United States was all about. One of the people we saw in Zinder was the so-called Sultan of Zinder, and he lived in a mud house, probably 300 years old, bats flying around, with his four wives, who lived in equal apartments, to meet the Islamic requirement that they all be treated equally - sort of a touch of medieval life. They have these so-called *Griots*, people who spend the whole day simply singing the praises of the Sultan, and we saw them.

But two things to know. One is that in a place like Niamey, you obviously have your representational requirements, and we would invite a Nigerien over and we could seat 18 people at our table, and my wife would be at one end with the men who were the guests of honor, and their wives would be down at my end, according to protocol. They tended to be very pretty, very attractive, very well dressed, and *mute.* And I would try to engage them in conversation - you know, how many children do you have? One. Do you work? No or yes. And then I later learned, too late to do much about it, that to a Nigerien woman, you're not supposed to talk. That's not considered ladylike -

Q: *This was in French, Dick.*

BOGOSIAN: Yes, in French. So at one point I said to my wife, "I'm not going to miss out on all the fun. We'll sit across from each other. At least that way I can talk to the men while these women sit there mute." Now when we went to Chad, right next door, we found quite the opposite, where the women were lively and outspoken and much more fun to be with.
My wife was very busy running the household, making sure that our grounds were kept up. We grew all kinds of food for ourselves. And she, as I said, mother-henned the Marines and the Peace Corps and so forth. One of the things that I tried to do there was get the Marines and the Peace Corps to interact a little more with each other, and it was not easy at first. I would tell the Marines and the Peace Corps that they were very similar to each other, and they would kind of look at me wondering what I meant. And I would say, "Each of you in your own way undertakes a challenge that most of the rest of us couldn't meet." And that would seem to spark something. But I've got to admit that one reason the Peace Corps and the Marines worked so well in Niamey was that an individual Marine named Amos Diaz, from Puerto Rico, understood what I was getting at, and he made a major effort to bring the Marines closer to the Peace Corps, and it worked. And he did things like wear some of the bright African what they call *panyas*, these fabrics. That was almost unthinkable for a Marine, and it was very interesting to see how one person could cross a kind of psychological boundary and maintain his credibility with his own

group and bring the rest of them along with him. And just like having good people in the embassy proper, one marine like Amos Diaz did a lot to help us in our work there.

My wife organized a tennis tournament every year that turned out to be one of the social events of the year, and she took the money and used it for a local charity, helping people who were disabled or helping to build cribs - not cribs, but little beds - for children in the hospital. And it turned out these things didn't exist, and it took a lot of work to get the local people to, in effect, let her help them. So that was kind of an all year event for her, and she got help from some of the other members of the embassy community.

I mentioned that our school was one of our more successful endeavors, and while we were there, the chairman of the school board, who was a fellow named Marshall Pittman, whose wife was a civil service employee on an excursion tour there as a budget and fiscal officer. He was chairman of the school board, and this event occurred on an evening when the people had come from outside of Niamey to look over the school to determine whether it should be accredited and certified - which in the end they did. And so Marshall wanted to appeal to them. He wanted to give them a good impression, so he put together in the common room of the school what was a fairly fancy dinner. In Niger almost everybody dressed casually all the time, but this was suit and tie and everything and tablecloths. And he arranged for a chicken dinner to be made, and there was salad and chicken and mashed potatoes and some other stuff. At the head table we got served first, and these beautiful golden brown half chickens. So there was lively conversation, and it was a rather pleasant evening, and I started cutting the chicken, and it wouldn't cut. So I had a little mashed potato and a little peas and carrots or whatever, and I tried again, and it wouldn't cut. I tried to break it, and it wouldn't break. And I watched as, one by one, everybody in that room could not penetrate the chickens. And at one point Marshall says to me, "I think everybody's enjoying themselves, don't you?" And I said, "Yes."

Q: *Was it guinea hen or something?*

BOGOSIAN: No, it was just local what we would call range fed. Anyway, they were a little tough. You've got to boil them first or something. So that was life in Niamey. At any given moment we were busy with this or that, but it was a relatively stable time for the country. We had good relations with Niger at that time. At any given moment we were wondering whether the military program would continue because of budget cuts and so forth; the same with AID; but it was a period during which I cannot recall any crisis. And at any given moment we were busy or we were grappling with one problem or another - as I say, the most significant development was the death of Kountché, which really ended an era for Niger, but in terms of my work on a day-to-day basis it had very little impact. There was some reporting to be done at that time, and there was some concern that there was a funeral and some events that people had to come to. But it was not a period of either tremendous new initiatives or tremendous changes, and as a restful, looking back, it was if not dull at least quiet.

CARL C. CUNDIFF
Ambassador

Niger (1988-1991)

Ambassador Cundiff graduated from the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee and the Fletcher School at Tufts. He entered the Foreign Service in 1966. His career included posts in Saigon, Paris, Lagos and Abidjan and he was named ambassador to Niger in 1988. He was interviewed by Raymond Ewing in 1996.

Q: Ok. That was from 1986-88. And in 1988 you had another overseas assignment. Where was that and how did that come about?

CUNDIFF: I went out as U.S. ambassador to the Republic of Niger in Africa-going back to West Africa for the third time.

Q: And had you been to Niger before from Abidjan?

CUNDIFF: I had not been to Niger before.

Q: You were nominated by, let's see...who would it have been?

CUNDIFF: President Reagan.

Q: And confirmed by the Senate.

CUNDIFF: Correct.

Q: Did you have any difficulty with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee?

CUNDIFF: Not personally. A number of us were held up for reasons that I don't remember and probably never fully understood at the time. They were not related to me. They were of some other nature but there was a delay and eventually we were approved. One day at midnight, just before one of its periodic recesses.

Q: So when did you actually arrive "in country," late in 1988?

CUNDIFF: As I recall, we arrived in August 1988 in Niamey. And we stayed for three years.

Q: Niamey is in the Sahel. It is, I suppose, a semi-desert environment. What sort of city is it?

CUNDIFF: It is as you described. It is a city in a very arid region-the Sahel. It is essentially a very modest city consisting of fairly low buildings usually yellow or brown in color and I would say it is a fairly modest city.

Q: Roughly how large is the capital and how large is Niger when you were there?

CUNDIFF: Niger itself is the 6th largest country in Africa, geographically. I can't remember what scale that comes to in comparison to parts of the United States. But it is a fairly large country.

Q: Population?

CUNDIFF: Population-I can't remember precisely what the population was at the time but it was about seven to eight million. And Niamey itself probably had maybe a half million people.

Q: And it is fairly sparsely populated given the geographic size of the country.

CUNDIFF: Very sparsely populated. People largely live in the agricultural area, in small towns and in small villages and cities and the countryside trying to make a living in dry-land agriculture.

Q: And what sort of government did Niger have at the time when you went?

CUNDIFF: When I arrived it was a government with a single political party and with a military officer as president.

Q: Niger is part of the former French colonial area of Africa so I assume the French influence as was the case in Côte d'Ivoire was quite strong still.

CUNDIFF: The French influence, I would say, was somewhat strong but not really as strong as in the Ivory Coast in the sense that...maybe the right word is not so much "French influence" as French presence. There were considerably fewer French people in Niamey because there were not really any large commercial opportunities. So the French community is relatively small and therefore the presence is not all that visible. There are French companies but I would not say that you get the impression of as much French presence as I did when I was in Abidjan which is a richer country and a commercial and financial center for West Africa.

Q: Niger is largely Muslim?

CUNDIFF: Yes. Muslim.

Q: And is a member of the Islamic Conference Organization, is that what it is called?

CUNDIFF: As I recall that is what it is called.

Q: Well, let's turn to the United States embassy that you were the chief of mission for. What did that consist of and, in general, what were United States interests in Niger at the time that you went?

CUNDIFF: Well, I think that the interest of the United States in Niger at the time was largely in the realm of promoting economic development and providing humanitarian assistance. There was not, to be frank, much to do in the way of promoting U.S. commercial interests because of the very poor economy and the poor prospects for trade and investment-very modest prospects

for trade and investment. We had a very large AID mission; we had a fairly large Peace Corps mission. And I would say the focus of our presence was largely on economic development and humanitarian assistance.

Q: What sort of sectors was AID involved with...mainly with the agriculture area?

CUNDIFF: Agriculture and health.

Q: Family planning?

CUNDIFF: I don't remember the details of that. I'm sure we were. But the focus was on protection of the health of women and children and I think, in general, basic health facilities for the population.

Q: And in the agriculture area-we were involved in what? Fertilizer supply, or...?

CUNDIFF: No. I think it was more largely to do with technical assistance to the Ministry of Agriculture in order to increase its capabilities to provide assistance to the farmers. A lot of the focus was, of course, on dry-land agriculture and grains - trying to promote better cropping methods and better seeds. And, to some extent, better use of fertilizer. But it was largely a technical assistance effort.

Q: And I'm sure that the World Bank and a number of other donors were active in Niger in the time you were there.

CUNDIFF: Absolutely. Other donors were involved in agriculture and the World Bank played a major role. Plus there is also an international agricultural research institute located near to Niamey as well.

Q: Did that institute-you say it was international-did it try to do things affecting the Sahel area in general or West Africa?

CUNDIFF: West Africa, the Sahel area. But in those international agriculture research stations those results are shared world wide. It is just that they happen to be located in different climate zones and different agriculture zones.

Q: Was the U.S. government or American citizens involved with that?

CUNDIFF: Yes. There were American agricultural scientists associated with that institute. And we also financed it indirectly through our work with the World Bank.

Q: You mentioned we also were involved in providing humanitarian assistance related to the Sahel situation which had existed for some years before you got there.

CUNDIFF: Humanitarian assistance essentially was in the agriculture area taking the form of emergency food supplies when there were crop failures in Niger which do occur periodically.

There was no crisis while I was there on the same level of magnitude as occurred in the early 1970s but there was a periodic need for assistance. There was also a need for assistance, strangely enough, due to flash floods. Extreme short, heavy rains washed away crops sometimes.

Q: Were refugees coming into Niger from elsewhere or was this primarily from within the country itself?

CUNDIFF: Primarily within the country. Not a major refugee problem. In fact, very little refugee problem at all.

Q: How about Peace Corps? You said it was a fairly sizeable presence of Peace Corps volunteers. They were working in similar sectors - agriculture and health?

CUNDIFF: Agriculture and health exactly. Also on the agricultural side involved in environmental projects working, for example, on the planting of trees and efforts to essentially protect the vegetation.

Q: We've talked about AID and Peace Corps. Were we involved at all on the military assistance side?

CUNDIFF: We were. We had a small military assistance program which was the remnant of a larger program which had been active a few years before. The origin of that of course is the fact that Niger borders on Libya and the United States wanted to have a close relationship with the Nigerian military and try to help that small army maintain itself.

Q: Niger also borders on Chad. Was that another aspect of our military assistance-a concern about the situation in Chad?

CUNDIFF: I think of less concern.

Q: The embassy itself was probably fairly small-a very large AID presence and Peace Corps staff. Were there actually U.S. military personnel there?

CUNDIFF: Yes. On the embassy staff we had a major who was in charge of the Office of Military Cooperation and a senior sergeant.

Q: And then we had a political officer or two or three?

CUNDIFF: Yes.

Q: And an economic officer or two?

CUNDIFF: One. The economic officer also did consular work.

Q: But consular work was probably fairly limited because there weren't very many American citizens other than those part of...

CUNDIFF: Most of the American citizens were in the official mission if you include Peace Corps in that. And also, however, there were a couple of hundred American missionaries; because it is a poor country it has attracted the interest of missionary groups.

Q: Were there also representatives of non-government organizations-American based NGO's?

CUNDIFF: Working under contract for AID we had CARE, and there was the African Development Foundation and some other AID contractors. So we had a fairly substantial presence...focused as I said, on development assistance and humanitarian assistance. And you are right. The consular workload was not heavy because not many Nigerians can afford to travel. So we didn't have that much of a request for travel visas.

Q: And the ones that you did get were probably to a considerable extent government officials.

CUNDIFF: Or financed by scholarships paid for by perhaps AID or by the USIA. We had a public affairs officer with a small staff. We had a cultural center which was located at that time in downtown Niamey.

Q: In terms of your own responsibility, I assume since it was a fairly isolated post in the interior of Africa - that the morale of the mission community and families was pretty important. You and your wife probably spent quite a bit of time in that area encouraging people to feel comfortable, dealing with issues and problems that came up.

CUNDIFF: We spent a lot of time in that area and I think very successfully. That is my personal assessment of it. We entertained as often as we could, all members of the official community. Invited into our house all the visiting AID experts who came through. And we entertained Nigerian officials quite substantially in our home and we traveled. My wife and I traveled throughout Niger and wherever we traveled we visited the Peace Corps volunteers. We usually took them some food if we had some to take at that time. We would have dinner with them in their respective villages or cities and it was a very, shall I say, personally very satisfying assignment from that perspective.

Q: A place like that is very "hands on." You get out into the dust and on the roads.

CUNDIFF: Absolutely. You travel for miles in a very arid climate in terrain that looks something like maybe parts of Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah - that sort of thing.

Q: Only more so.

CUNDIFF: Even more so. Right.

Q: And the residence that is provided for the ambassador was adequate for all of these purposes that you have been describing?

CUNDIFF: We made it adequate. It was not a large house perhaps by some peoples standards. But it was quite large enough for us and, because it is dry there, you can usually entertain outdoors without worrying about rain for most of the year. So we had opportunity to entertain on the lawn and the terrace behind the house. It is a very attractive residence overlooking the Niger River. And people were always very pleased to be invited.

Q: And you felt that morale was good in the community and the mission?

CUNDIFF: Yes, I think it was.

Q: And that was obviously important.

CUNDIFF: I think it was. We had a very active community. There was a lot of attention on soft ball games, sports and so on. We opened up the tennis courts at the residence for people to play on. Our swimming pool was available for people to use. We just had a very active, participatory community.

Q: One of my regrets of my time in Ghana, which overlapped to some extent with yours, was that while I played softball and like softball a lot, it took us awhile to get organized internationally and the only two tournaments we went to were in nearby Lomé in Togo and Ouagadougou. But we never got to Niamey. But my successor twice removed has just written to me recently saying that he has just came back from Niamey where they won. The Accra team won the softball tournament which I think was over Columbus Day weekend in October.

CUNDIFF: It is a tradition. It is the WAIST (the West African International Softball Tournament). It has a lot to do with morale in that part of the world for us.

Q: Tell me about what some of your political objectives were with the government. Were you at that time trying to encourage elections, political parties, opening up of the political system or were we primarily looking for Niger to play a role internationally in the United Nations and perhaps in other areas as well?

CUNDIFF: I would say that the democratization process was becoming more important during the time that I was there. A lot of that was going on under its own momentum without benefit of any foreign advice particularly. As you may recall, there were national conferences being called in a number of West African countries. Niamey, Niger rather, began to want to have a National Conference. There was one just as I was getting ready to leave Niamey at the end of my assignment. But the process of moving from a single party to multiple party elections, that process was entrained as I left Niger. Obviously it was something that we were in favor of, but we did not have to be really involved in the encouraging process which was already well underway of its own momentum.

Q: Where would you give credit for that momentum? Was it strictly within the country? Or were they looking at examples elsewhere? Were they getting advice or encouragement from France or...?

CUNDIFF: I think the encouragement for the democratization process was going on in a number of other African countries at the time. I think the examples were really coming from Africa and from other countries which they were looking closely at. And I think there was a general desire to democratize and that process was well launched. And we were involved in helping out in certain ways with small assistance projects. We had earlier sent-before I had arrived there even - we had provided financing for an American constitutional expert to visit Niger and to help them with one of their constitutions at that particular time. So the process was well launched and I think the USIA visitor program also probably played some positive role because people were able to visit the United States and look at our elections and look at our process and our way of government and so on. In effect we were having an influence through our rather substantial technical assistance projects which had brought many Nigerians to the United States where they became familiar inevitably with our particular system.

Q: So our impact was positive and perhaps in ways that we can't be sure about but we can't take credit for...

CUNDIFF: No. I don't think so. I think that what you were seeing perhaps is the payoff of a long period of international relations and contact through cultural programs, through the USIA visitor program, and through the AID scholarships and other supports. Even through the military assistance training program which brought officers to the United States for training.

But I don't think you can, as you say, point to any particular event as being determining. I think the process at that time, of democratization was moving forward on its own. It was supported by students, by labor unions, supported by civil servants, perhaps less so by military officers inevitably. But there was a big momentum for democratization.

Q: Was security a major consideration, a major issue?

CUNDIFF: Security was of two concerns. One, I was in Niger during the war with Iraq, the Gulf War. And I was concerned about protecting the American community from any spillover from what was going on in Iraq. And the other form of security concern had to do with domestic instability because there were clashes that occurred as part of the democratization process. You had students and the unions demonstrating and you had the police clashing, at least one time I remember, with the students and the unions. There was that sort of thing. So you had instability in the city of Niamey related to domestic politics.

Q: I know neighboring Mali has had a problem in the northern part of the country over the years with...is it the Tuaregs? Is that a problem also in Niger?

CUNDIFF: The Tuaregs are one of the eight ethnic groups as I recall in Niger. You know the largest ethnic group is the Hausa. The next largest is probably the Zarma and then the Fulani and so on and smaller groups. But the Tuaregs are a very important part of the population in the northern part of the country...the drier part in the Sahara Desert and in the south, even up to Niamey itself. Throughout the country now many of them have come out of the desert and gone to the cities to metropolitan areas. Yes, the Tuaregs because of their nomadic, traditional life have difficulties sometimes dealing with sedentary societies. And there were, while I was there,

there were some acts - illegal acts - by Tuareg groups on police stations. And in turn the military went chasing these people across the desert and inflicted damage on them. So there were, from our perspective, concerns about human rights violations and abuses of power by authorities in their response to the problems with the Tuaregs.

Q: Some elements?

CUNDIFF: Some elements, yes. And this is complicated by the fact that Tuaregs are present also in Libya and Algeria and in Northern Mali.

Q: Was there activity by the Libyans in Niger? While they have a common boundary/border, it is obviously right in the middle of the Sahara Desert so it is not a very populated area in either country.

CUNDIFF: Well, I couldn't address what Libya's exact activities are; the visible presence of Libya is the embassy. They have an embassy. In fact they built a brand new embassy in Niamey while I was there. While I was there they had an accredited ambassador to Niger and they invited to Libya the head of state of Niger as well as other neighboring heads of state. So there was an exchange of Libyan officials and Nigerian officials and I think that there was always some concern about the fact that many young Tuareg men had gone up into Libya seeking employment and had been influenced perhaps by their stay in Libya. And then later they would come back to Niger and that would present sometimes a question for the local authorities.

Q: Besides Libya, France and the United States, did a number of other countries have resident embassies in Niamey?

CUNDIFF: The diplomatic community in Niamey was small. The foreign aid organizations were quite present - the United Nations, the World Bank, the Food and Agricultural Organization and a number of UN related agencies were there. On the bilateral side, we had France, and the United States. From Western Europe, we had Germany and Belgium with active embassies. We had a number of Muslim, or Islamic country ambassadors there. Especially from North Africa - Algeria, Tunisia, Libya. Also Egypt. Saudi Arabia had a chargé d'affaires. Pakistan had a chargé d'affaires.

Q: And I suppose some eastern countries, the Soviet Union?

CUNDIFF: Russia. The Soviet Union was represented by an ambassador and a small embassy.

Q: How about China?

CUNDIFF: China was also represented. When I was there it was the People's Republic of China represented by an ambassador and a staff.

Q: And Japan?

CUNDIFF: Japan was represented by an ambassador in Abidjan. They had no office in Niger. The Japanese ambassador would periodically visit as would the ambassadors of most of the other developed countries but they would usually come from Abidjan.

Q: I seem to recall the name of a person from Niger who has been mentioned as a possible candidate to replace Boutros Boutros-Ghali as United Nations Secretary General. Somebody that is connected with the Islamic Conference Organization.

CUNDIFF: That is right.

Q: Was this the person who was maybe Foreign Minister when you were there?
CUNDIFF: No. That person is Algabid. While I was in Niger, he was located most of the time in Saudi Arabia because he was the executive director of the Organization of Islamic States.

Q: That is obviously a very significant position I would think within the Islamic world.

CUNDIFF: Yes. He had formerly been a minister in several governments in Niger, including at one time, maybe even briefly, Prime Minister.

Q: Does Niger see itself as trying to play a significant role in the world? I mean it had obviously got a lot of problems of its own but perhaps can make a contribution. They are in the United Nations and all these other organizations. Do they participate in UN Peace keeping or other activities like that?

CUNDIFF: Yes. Niger has participated in the Gulf War for example. They sent a small contingent to Saudi Arabia. And they have most recently, this is since I've been there of course, offered to I think participate in the ECOWAS military activity in Liberia. So they do periodically participate in peacekeeping efforts. They have to find some external financial support in order to make that possible. They do not have a large military and therefore they can't really send very large contingents. But usually they send a regiment. They are active in the United Nations and other international organizations. But I think Niger's role is limited by its limited financial resources.

Q: Did you persuade them to send a unit to Saudi Arabia at the time of the Gulf War to participate in the coalition?

CUNDIFF: I wish I could take credit for that but the truth of the matter is Niger offered to do that, I think, largely as a result of consultations with Saudi Arabia. The French ambassador and I were informed of Niger's intentions and, of course, the Nigerians indicated a desire for as much support as possible. But in the end, as I recall, they worked out arrangements with Saudi Arabia - details of which I don't know. They were responding essentially to a longstanding friendship with Saudi Arabia. As I said, the Saudi's had always maintained a diplomatic presence in Niger, plus they had given some assistance to Niger from time to time in helping building of mosques and that sort of thing.

Q: People sometimes, who are trying to reduce expenditures or perhaps reduce the United States presence or role in the world are critical of having an embassy or a lot of programs in a place like Niger. How would you, looking back, assess overall the role of the American embassy - having a resident United States ambassador and some of these other programs? Do you feel that they are making a contribution and contributing to the United States interests and objectives?

CUNDIFF: Well, I think that from my perspective, it is useful to have an ambassador in even a relatively, what shall I say, relatively small mission such as Niamey. I think that an ambassador's presence gives an overall sense of cohesion and identification-central identification to the U.S. presence. It is the ambassador, if you will, who personifies the pulling together of the entire U.S. presence - whatever that might be. Having an ambassador is very important to the host country, a small country like Niger or small, economically at least.

I think they put a lot of emphasis on having an ambassador with whom they can have an official dialogue when there is any issue at stake. Whether it be a vote in the United Nations or activities such as we had in the Gulf War or whatever. It is important to have that ambassador around as a person that they can have a dialogue with. I also think that the ambassador's presence perhaps is an ideal way of pulling together different agencies of the U.S. government so that you have coordination of AID and the military assistance if there is any, Peace Corps if there is any, information and cultural programs of the USIA and so on. That is sort of a general response reflecting, I guess, my own particular bias.

It is true that you could provide this ambassadorial dialogue with a country through a regional presence. You could have an American ambassador, for example, in Abidjan also accredited in Niamey as many of our Western friends do have. We also talked about the Japanese ambassador coming up for a visit from Abidjan to Niamey. You could have that kind of arrangement but in my personal opinion, I think you inevitably dilute the bilateral relationship because an ambassador in Abidjan who also has responsibilities for the American embassy or presence in Niamey is going to be stretched pretty thin. And inevitably, I think, the bilateral relationship will become less close.

Q: Will be stretched thin and also won't have the ease of access and contact that one develops on a very regular basis where see the president or whoever not just when you need to deal with a problem or when you happen to visit. But you see him at functions and events and people come to know you and have confidence in you. Certainly the regional ambassadors I've seen from other countries work hard at it but it they don't see to be or can't be as effective as somebody who is present on the scene.

CUNDIFF: I think that is right. And I think also one has to take into account the fact that the United States is a global power, maybe arguably the only one right now. And if you are going to be a global power and a global leader it is probably in your interest to try to have a direct bilateral diplomatic presence at the ambassadorial level just about everywhere in the world. You do not, I would argue, need to have necessarily a large supporting staff for such an ambassador.

And I think one can argue that the United States presence can perhaps be diminished in lots of posts including one such as Niamey given the changes that have occurred in our own interests

and in the way world events have developed. And to give you an example of that today, we no longer have a military assistance cooperation program in Niamey. We are in the process of closing the AID mission. We maintain a USIA presence and we maintain a strong Peace Corps presence but frankly, even since I've left Niamey; it hasn't been that long ago...1991 - five years later...there have been reasons why these reductions in our presence have taken place that have to do with more recent developments which I won't go into in our bilateral relationship. But the fact is that we have substantially diminished our presence since I was there. And diplomatic dialogue continues. But we have an ambassador. And I think that in my judgement is important.

Q: A person accredited to that government with that title makes a big difference...

CUNDIFF: Yes.

CLAUDIA ANYASO
Public Affairs Officer, USIS
Niamey (1990-1993)

Ms. Anyaso was born and raised in North Carolina and was educated at Morgan State University and American University. She joined the State Department in 1968, where she specialized in Education and Cultural Affairs, with particular regard to African countries. She had several tours in Washington as well as abroad. Her foreign assignments include Lagos, Abuja, Port-au-Prince and Niamey, where she served primarily as Cultural and Public Affairs Officer. Ms. Anyaso was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2009.

Q: Let's see you went to Niger and you were there from what?

ANYASO: 1990-1993.

Q: '93, okay, Niger looking at the map here is bounded by Algeria, Libya, Chad, Nigeria, Benin, Central African Republic and Mali; it's really stuck in the middle.

ANYASO: It's a huge country; it's in the middle of the Sahel.

Q: Yes. Let's talk first about Niger on it's own. What is the political and economic system?

ANYASO: Another poor country. Their claim to economic fame I guess would be uranium and uranium prices had plummeted by the time I got there so they weren't doing very well at all. They did have cattle so leather goods.

Q: Did they sell the cattle? Is it one of these things where the more cows you have the wealthier you are type of thing?

ANYASO: That's true, however, they did sell them; they earned them actually. You know there is this migration we studied in geography, I think they called it transhumation. We studied it in geography and you'd go from where you were down and around so these cattle went all the way down to the west coast of Africa from Niger, hundreds and hundreds of miles. They had this whole migrant culture that went with that and then their kids weren't going to school. They had a Tuareg situation…

Q: These were the blue people because of the blue scarves they wore.

ANYASO: The men in blue who rode camels and who had been a part of the trade between the Maghreb in North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa carrying gold from the south and salt from the north to the south and gold in the south and also slaves; they were a part of the slave trade. But in the independence in Niger they had lost out; let's face it these guys were very powerful and tied into communities all across from Sudan to Senegal but they were sort of locked out of government, this new government.

Q: In the old Francophone Africa it was almost without borders there.

ANYASO: It was almost without borders.

Q: Nations all of a sudden…

ANYASO: It had a really huge impact on these countries. You have Tuaregs both in Niger and in Mali, which is right next door. At the time I was there in those three years the Tuaregs were rather peaceful as opposed to the ones in Mali who were rather aggressive; they had attacked and they were attacking the government for resources because they too had been locked out of the government in terms of positions. In employment they too weren't getting the education so they were very unhappy in both places.

We had in Niger let me see when I first got there I think Carl Cundiff was the ambassador; then Ambassador Jennifer Ward came. Anyway, we were interested in the Tuaregs and bought their leather goods. They had this wonderful jewelry; the various towns in various Sahelian countries had their own cross so you have this beautiful silver jewelry; the Agadez Cross is probably the best known but there was Tahwa and Zinder and a lot of other towns too; there were about 23 crosses. There was this famous jeweler, Tuareg jeweler, and the ambassador's wife, Mrs. Cundiff was saying we've got to do something, we should have a show and my predecessor had ignored her and as soon as I got off the plane practically she was there with her proposal. "Oh yes, we have to have an exhibit of this jewelry," and I said, "Why not?" Programs are programs and any way we can promote culture and as I say put in an American spin we'll do it. There was a separate American cultural center, which I was director of, we had a little exhibit hall and so we ended up with a combined exhibit of the jewelry. Mrs. Cundiff had made these white hands in wood and had them painted white and then we put rings and jewelry on the fingers; it was very attractive and against black velvet or indigo cloth, I think we used indigo cloth. So that was very attractive and there was a very fine photographer in town who was French and he had been out in the desert where the Tuaregs live and he had photographed many Tuareg women wearing this

jewelry so we had a combined photography and jewelry exhibit which was, I think, my introduction to Niamey, which is the capital of Niger, where we were. It was beautiful.

Q: Of course, the jewelry was portable wealth for a migratory group.

ANYASO: Portable wealth, absolutely. It wasn't gold but it was very beautiful, beautiful.

Q: You mentioned crosses. How stood Islam in Niger while you were there?

ANYASO: How stood it? It stood tall; I would say 99 percent of the people were Muslims.

Q: Why the crosses then? Was it a jewelry symbol more than anything else?

ANYASO: Not really, you have these crosses because those were like symbols for the town. Agadez they had a cross, it was very much like in Ethiopia I found the same thing that the towns had these crosses, you know the Coptic crosses from Ethiopia.

Q: Each one has it's own…

ANYASO: Right, each one had it's own design and it had nothing to do with Christianity but it was a cross. We forget, I think sometimes we forget, that Christianity was built on many cultures and how we got the Christian cross I don't know but there are all kinds of crosses in the ancient world including in Niger.

Q: Well actually I think crosses started out as torture instrument.

ANYASO: Right with the Romans, the Romans used it that way.

Q: And the crucifixion of Christ and the rest is history.

ANYASO: Right, exactly. So you have this very impoverished country and what do you do? AID had a very good program at the time; I think they were spending about $26 million. They were trying to get them to…they had all these animal hides and they wanted to add value to the hides so they would get more money for it and that kind of thing so they worked with them on the leather much of which was exported to Europe. They were teaching them how to grow onions; they had the best onions, huge monster onions and that was pretty lucrative. They also had pottery, their own kind of pottery and this I learned about when President Carter came. President Carter has his program; it was called Global 2000 and sponsored by The Carter Center.

Q: This said he is no longer president.

ANYASO: He is no longer president, he is a former president but he has this Global 2000 Program much of it having to do with health in some countries. In Niger they have this guinea worm, which is a horrible infestation, you put your leg in the water and there are these parasites and they get into your skin and they grow sort of like a tapeworm would grow, horrible. So he was working on guinea worm and it was a good thing to do. We had Peace Corps there and they

did some health but a lot of English teaching and so what was I going to do? I had a cultural center, I did exhibits, we had educational advising, we had a very good library and I think they enjoyed using that. The jewel in our crown was our English language-teaching program.

Q: Okay, I'm looking at Niger and here is an impoverished country in the middle of Africa…

ANYASO: Yes.

Q: …with strong ties to another civilization, which is France and so adding English to the mix what does this mean to the Nigerians and why English?

ANYASO: Why English is right. English because they recognized it as the language of business and they recognized it as the language of science and they recognized that they could be much more marketable if they had English. So we had classes that were always full and we also had off site classes in the ministries. At one point I think the prime minister or the deputy prime minister or somebody was taking English from us and so they felt that it was very valuable and they liked Americans during this time. This was all pre-9/11 and we were sort of popular, our ambassador was popular, all of our ambassadors were popular, we got out into the community. In Niger we worked it out so that once we had international visitors the DCM or the ambassador would have them to lunch; we made them feel very special and they were because they had been invited by the State Department to visit the United States in their field so it worked very well. As I say, we weren't very competitive because it's a very small society; a small population but there was enough for everybody to do.

Now I discovered in Niger that they too had a music school; now this wasn't the Anglicans or those Saint Trinity Episcopal nuns, this was actually done by the French. They had a huge French cultural center and sometimes we used it for our programs and they were very good about it, they showed the movies but they have this music school, a very fine music school. When we had our music groups come in we would always take them to classes at the music school so it was a very cooperative arrangement. I didn't feel that we were competing or at odds with the French at all.

Q: Were there any changes of government while you were there? I mean were there coups or that sort of thing?

ANYASO: I had in Nigeria. In 1985 we had the Babangida coup which I was there for. In Niger there was an attempted coup; the students and the labor unions were out in the streets protesting against the government and the government wasn't very happy about this so they had tanks in the streets. Then they decided they would take over the government so it was a situation and this was under Ambassador Ward, where we wanted to be on record as being against taking over a government in this way. Ambassador Ward turned to me and said, "Well my PAO, I want you to go over to the radio station with this statement." We had gotten a statement from the State Department on this situation. "Take over this statement and get them to read it." I said, "You want me to do what? Would you explain that again?" She said, "I want you to go over there and take this statement and have it read." So I said, "Good."

So I got my little car and driver, we had a driver at the time; we hadn't merged with the State Department at the time so we still had little things like cars and things like that. So I got in the car with the driver and said, "Ibrahim we are going over to the radio station," and he sort of looked at me because they had ringed the radio station with tanks and there were all these military guys sitting on these tanks with rifles. We went over there, we had been over there many times before without the tanks but we went over there, we had a diplomatic tag on the car and they let us in, amazing. We got in and I asked to see the director, I knew him very well, and I said, "Well I'm here because we are very concerned about the situation. The U.S. government does not support a take over like this." I said, "I have a statement here from the State Department and I'd be very much obliged if you would read our position." Not a problem, he took it, went into the studio and put it on the air. We got credit for supporting a democratic government in Niger. I felt good about our role in that and we were very open about it and luckily there were no negative consequences, they didn't arrest me or put me in jail or anything or complain to our ambassador or make a complaint of the ambassador, call her in or complain.

Q: Actually you were supporting the government.

ANYASO: We were supporting the government, right. Well we were supporting actually the students and the labor unions who were protesting against the government that's why it made it a little dicey but we were supporting democracy is what we were doing and we were against the military.

Q: Were the Libyans messing around?

ANYASO: The Libyans always messed around. They liked to meddle in various things so as you said, looking at the map it's right above Niger. In fact, there is a strip on that particular border where there is uranium, which they had their eye on. So they were actually trying to claim it as a part of Libya but it wasn't so there was that kind of friction. But in a country that's very, very poor when people offer you resources you take them so I think that the Niger government got a lot of support from France but not enough, they got some support from us but not enough and so Libya also offered them support. The large central Mosque was built by the Libyans and there was an airline that was built and funded by the Libyans. The Libyan cultural palace, cultural center, was right next to mine.

Q: What do they have in the way of culture outside the works of Qadhafi or something?

ANYASO: I know, I know. I didn't see much activity there; however, when the Gulf War started my center was attacked.

Q: You were there during the Gulf War?

ANYASO: '91.

Q: This is '91 this is Sudan; I think it was '90.

ANYASO: Yes, it was '90.

Q: When Saddam Hussein moved into Kuwait so basically was it that they were supporting Saddam or was it just an Islamic thing because the Egyptians and Syrians were on our side in this.

ANYASO: Exactly, they were, I think it was an Islamic thing and I think it was Libyan meddling and it was the university students who used our library, many of them. We got a call saying that they had spotted students coming across the bridge from the university into town; we didn't know where they were headed but they showed up at our center, which is across from the main market. They had lots of slingshots and rocks and Molotov cocktails.

Q: That shows some preparation.

ANYASO: There was some preparation.

Q: This was not spontaneous.

ANYASO: No, they broke out every window, they burned a couple of our cars and the building also caught on fire. So we were in touch with the embassy, which is away from us letting them know what was going on. I had the USIS photographer taking photos of all the protestors and everything so we had a photographic record of everything. Then the embassy sent help in the form of the station chief to get us out of there so no one was hurt in this episode but what I had been concerned about before I went to Niger was the security. For ten years before I got there there had been recommendations to move the center because they felt there wasn't enough set back, it was right in the heart of the city and it would not be safe if there was a threat. So when we had a threat and it was attacked they realized we really should move it so I spent a great deal of my time looking for a new location.

In the meantime, they put all of us into the embassy and I think we were squeezed into two rooms in the embassy for six months or so while we were looking for a new place. We found a very good location with a lot of set-back, we had space for our English teaching, we had space for a library but you know the State Department requires you to have certain security upgrades and things like that. We had requested that and they lost the request and we were waiting and waiting and waiting and finally I think they got a DynCorp contractor out to supervise the installation of cameras and mirrors and doors that we needed so we finally got a new cultural center; beautiful. It was really a very nice one and I think I told Ambassador Ward we'd really been through it and I said, "What we are going to do is we are going to put a plaque on that building with your name and my name so that we will never be forgotten." The new PAO who just went out to Niger, Robert Tate, was in touch with me not long ago and he said, "I see your name every day when I go into the office."

Q: Let's talk about the attack a bit. How serious was this? Was anybody's life or health threatened during it?

ANYASO: I think so if we hadn't gotten out. It's funny, these things happen and it's frightening when it is going on and then it just goes away. There were no repercussions, the government was

concerned and they provided protection and all of that, after the fact. I never felt that the Nigeriens had their hearts in it and as I say I think it was all staged by the Libyans.

Q: You might say a demonstration demonstration had a fanatical mob.

ANYASO: Right.

Q: I mean as happened in Islamabad about the same time no that was in '79 when several Americans were killed.

ANYASO: I know but there were no weapons.

Q: That was a fanatical crowd and it wasn't even planned. It was a spontaneous thing with the Islamic fundamentalists in Pakistan and just all of a sudden attacked. It was a very dangerous situation but this was…

ANYASO: This was not fanatical.

Q: We all know these demonstrations can get a little out of hand.

ANYASO: Yes.

Q: But basically the same people throwing rocks at you are in line to get books the next day.

ANYASO: Exactly, exactly the way we saw it and the way it happened. It was serious enough, however, that the department included it in its global terrorism report that year because it was an attack on an American facility during that period.

Q: Well how was the Sahel played out in those days?

ANYASO: Let me just say that in terms of our embassies and embassies I was familiar with either I had worked there or had friends working we had probably the highest morale of any embassy where I had ever been or seen, France, other African countries. The morale was very, very high, the different agencies worked well together. As I said we had Peace Corps and they had softball tournaments, we had a softball team and then we'd have Peace Corps volunteers from other countries, we put them up in our home and they would come and have a tournament, a competition. It was very hot in Niger; I think temperatures would be 120-125 in the shade. So every house had a swimming pool so that you could cool off and that helped to keep us going and hydrated. I went over to Burkina Faso, which is one of the neighbors for FESPACO (The Panafrican Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou), sort of a neighbor of Burkina where is Burkina Faso.

Q: It's over there it butts onto Egypt.

ANYASO: Yeah there it is down there it's like a top of a bottle. I went over there and it is lively and dynamic so things in the Sahel were going very well. It's has no oil so most of the Sahelian

countries are poor, lots of camels but we were working and trying to develop their agriculture and I think in some of the countries they started growing cotton and things like that to bring the economy up so it wasn't so bad. The Cedi, no the Franc their money was based on the French Franc. The bottom fell out of their economies after I left in '93 when the French withdraw that support of the monetary systems in those countries; it just plummeted. AID also left Niger, they had a regional representative or somebody there but the funding that they used to put in there. I don't know how they are managing at the moment; but I think uranium prices have gone back up and remember during the Iraq war situation of Ambassador Wilson and his wife…

Q: Yes.

ANYASO: …he went to Niger.

Q: Joe Wilson came to Niger to find out about yellow cake.

ANYASO: Yellow cake, which is part uranium.

Q: He was sent by the CIA to see if Saddam Hussein was buying…

ANYASO: Yes, Valerie Plame was…

Q: …apparently one gathers there was a forged communication, which implied that Niger was supplying Saddam with yellow cake and it wasn't. A whole sort of one of these Washington scandals about disclosing that Joe Wilson, whom I've interviewed by the way before this happened, that his wife was a covert CIA operative which she was. It was quite a scandal during the George W. Bush administration.

ANYASO: It was but there you go uranium prices have come back and that's very helpful to their economy.

Q: How was schooling for your kids?

ANYASO: They had a very good school there in Niger. We had U.S. professors, teachers, and there again they added to the mix and the community and some very, very nice people, good people. The kids played soccer; I didn't have any problems with the curriculum at all.

Q: How old were your kids by this time?

ANYASO: Well actually I had sent my older boy to high school in the States and my older daughter was in school in Madeira, I think. So I only had my younger daughter and my younger son the first couple of years and then my younger daughter went to school in the Stats so I ended up primarily with one kid.

Q: I'm looking at the clock. I really have to stop at this point because I have to pick something up. I notice you've been coughing too so…

ANYASO: I've been coughing because my allergies are bad.

Q: Okay well we'll pick this up the next time in 1992 or 3?

ANYASO: Maybe '92.

Q: And what did you do?

ANYASO: What did we do? Well we finished with the _____ and all of that. It was just more of the same, nothing spectacular after that. Well I can pick it up there; we did more travel in the country.

Q: Okay, we will talk about your travel before we move you out of Niger.

ANYASO: Okay.

Q: Okay today is the 5th of November 2009 with Claudia Anyaso. Claudia we are talking about travels is it in Niger?

ANYASO: It is in Niger, that's correct.

Q: It's sort of a place where you don't know…is Timbuktu in Niger?

ANYASO: No, Timbuktu is in Mali.

Q: Mali yes. What's in Niger?

ANYASO: Funny you should ask. What's in Niger? Maradi, which is a large town I don't know positioning in terms of the map but it's certainly outside of Niamey. Tahoua is another commercial town there and a town that I liked a lot was near the border with Nigeria. I'm trying to remember the name of it because it had a sultan down there and we would go down there and talk with the sultan. Zinder, which sounds like something out of the Arabian nights, Zinder. The Sultan of Zinder was down there and they had lots of cattle. One of the things about Niger is that a lot of people kept cattle and they were migratory people; they would walk the cattle all the way down through Nigeria even to the southern part. Anyway, the reason I liked Zinder was because the people were more like Nigerians and then I discovered that there had been an old kingdom called Borno, B-O-R-N-O, which had been in Nigeria and had spilled over into Niger and that's why the people there were more like Nigerians.

Q: When you say Nigerians I think of the three major groups of Nigerians.

ANYASO: Yes.

Q: Which ones of these were the…

ANYASO: Oh I don't know the people were just more outgoing, ebullient and friendly. I think Nigeriens on the whole were much more, what's the word, much quieter, much more restrained. I remember the Wadobi, who are part of the Tuareg's, the ones who do the makeup on their faces, the eyes and all of that but that is all they did. They moved their eyes, they didn't move their bodies, there were no hand gestures, there were no dances all they did was move their eyes. So these people down in Zinder were much closer to their Nigerian neighbors. As it happened, the next president of the country was to come, I think, from Zinder. We had a Voice of America personality who spoke fluent Hausa and he had gone down and interviewed this politician down in Zinder under a tree. So after he was elected president he was visiting the United States he remembered that the only person who paid any attention to him at all was this VOA reporter so he insisted on his U.S. schedule that he stop in at VOA and greet people. They, of course, did a taping with him there; that was wonderful.

Q: What role did the Sultan have in Niger?

ANYASO: There had been a jihad across the Sahara from Saudi Arabia through Sudan all the way across and so the religion of Islam had come into the country through the northern part of Nigeria; Nigeria is 50 percent Muslim, mostly in the north but in Niger 99 percent of the population was Muslim. This Sultan was a part of that earlier period where Islam was coming into the country, they set up these Caliphates and things like that so a remnant of that was this Sultan in Zinder; you may recall that there is also a Sultan in Nigeria who is in Sokoto. So it was very historic to have him down there and he was a well-regarded person in the country. He did not play a major role in the political life of the country as it were because I think the military as in Nigeria; the military was the most powerful institution in the country.

The other place I visited and this was at the request of the former ambassador from Niger to the United States, Djermakoye, who wanted to take us down and he lived in the southern part of the country. He wanted us to know that there had been kings in Niger called after his family Djermakoye; so he took us down for a nephew's wedding. We saw the tombs of these kings and it gave us a better understanding of the history of the country because for most people Niger is not on the radar, it's not there at all and people don't know anything about it, it doesn't have much of a history except that it does. Its history goes all the way back millions of years, I believe, there was an archeologist from the University of Chicago who was doing work in the country in the north in the Tuareg areas of the country. He was involved in unearthing dinosaur bones and he was trying to make the link between dinosaurs and birds. Other excavations also revealed that the country was not always dessert but there had been oases, there had been rivers, there was greenery in this part of the world and there were people there. They recently unearthed some skeletal remains of two types of people who were living in this area; so the history of the country goes back a long way although we now see it as a small impoverished African country.

Q: Was there anything we could do public affairs wise in these small little like the Sultanate and other places? Were we trying to reach out to them at all?

ANYASO: Well we were. The reason we were traveling around and talking to people was that we brought experts out to advise them on various things, education and things like that. I even at one point brought a storyteller down from Paris; he was a young man who had graduated from

Georgetown University, he had married, I think, a French woman and he was living in Paris and he was telling these wonderful stories, very creative guy. Well storytelling, the oral tradition is very strong in Niger and in other parts of Africa. So people marveled at this American who was also a storyteller and he had little instruments that he would use to amplify his stories. So I remember taking him around to Maradi. In most of the large towns they have these cultural centers and we tried to have good relations with the directors and the staffs of these cultural centers so we arranged a program for this storyteller to go down there. Most of the important people of the town came out including one of their filmmakers. We organized the program so that there were local storytellers as well as our guest storyteller; so it was a very nice evening.

What I remembered from that particular time was that one of the things we were doing was promoting Democracy so it sort of entered into all of our conversations. I remember this filmmaker looking at me and saying, "Okay, Democracy is fine, good, people should participate but people are hungry and so far Democracy hasn't done anything for us." They had a national assembly, they had had a sovereign national conference where all the people could come and voice their opinions but so far people didn't see any tangible results from it so he wanted to let me know that Democracy wasn't very good if it didn't bring tangible results, if people were still starving what was the good of it. So that sort of struck me, caught my attention, and I think that we tried to work very hard. AID had a program in the country at that point in reaching out to areas like that and trying to boost economic development in the country.

Q: Well then you left Niger when?

ANYASO: I left Niger in 1993.

CHARLES O. CECIL
Ambassador
Niger (1996-1999)

Ambassador Cecil was born in Kentucky into a US military family and was raised at several military bases in the US and abroad. He was educated at the University of California, Berkeley and the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). He entered the Foreign Service in 1966. A trained Arabic Language speaker, the Ambassador served abroad in Kuwait, Dar es Salaam, Beirut, Jeddah, Bamako, Muscat, Tunis and Abidjan. He was US Ambassador to Niger from 1996 to 1999. He also had several assignments at the State Department in Washington, DC. Ambassador Cecil was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2006

Note: Subsequently, Ambassador Cecil served as Chargé d'affaires of the US Interest Section of the Belgian Embassy in Tripoli, Libya from 2006 to 2009.

Q: Today is the 8th of January 2010 with Chuck Cecil. This is a part of our continuing thing. Chuck, what will we be discussing this time?

CECIL: We'll talk today about my three years as chief of mission in Niger, from the summer of 1996 to the summer of 1999. I might have a little preamble before I get to my arrival in Niamey.

Q: Do your preamble and have at it.

CECIL: The preamble would be that my experience might cast an interesting light on the process of selecting chiefs of mission, ambassadors, to go to posts. I don't know how often this happens, but this is what happened in my case.

I was DCM in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire. In 1995 I was nearing the end of my tour. In early summer I received a call from Deputy Assistant Secretary Bill Twaddell in the Africa bureau who asked me if I would like to have my name put on a list of candidates to be chief of mission in Sierra Leone. I was flattered to get the call, but I said to Bill who was a good friend of mine, I said, "Honestly speaking, it's not a country I could see myself spending three years in. It just didn't quite grab my attention." I was already beginning to think about retiring and turning my hobby, photography, into my second career. I was quite prepared to go back to Washington, and after a year or so retire. I thanked him and said, "No offense, please, I hope, but I'd just rather not be on that list." My ambassador in Cote d'Ivoire, Hume Horan, told me really I should let my name be on these lists. He said the important thing is to get your name on those lists that go up to the seventh floor. They begin to recognize your name. Just because you put your name on a list doesn't mean you're going to get the job. There were always several names. He said, "Just becoming known on the seventh floor is a good thing in itself, so if you ever get another call, maybe you should put your name on the list."

As a matter of fact, after a while I got another call from Bill. How about Guinea this time? I have to admit it didn't really interest me all that much, but taking Hume Horan's advice, I said, "Well, sure, Bill. That would be fine. Why don't you just go ahead." That happened, I guess. I ended my tour in Abidjan. I went back to Washington. I took up my assignment in the Freedom of Information office, which was kind of a place-holder while I decided whether I was actually going to retire or not.

One day the phone rang, and it was Bill Twaddell again. He said, "Congratulations, Chuck! You're on your way to Niger!" I said, "Niger? Are you sure, Bill? We never talked about Niger. We talked about Guinea." He said, "No, I've got the list right here in front of me, and it says Niger. I don't think the White House will have a candidate. Of course, we still have to go over there and get their okay, but I don't think they'll have a candidate for Niger, so it looks like you might be on your way."

I was delighted because Niger to me was inherently much more interesting and much more important. I was told later that what had happened was that Under Secretary Dick Moose had made the decision. Richard Moose, of course, had been in the Carter administration as Assistant Secretary for African Affairs. Not to be confused with George Moose who was the Assistant Secretary for African affairs when this selection process was actually going on.) .Dick Moose had come back in the '90s under Clinton as Under Secretary for Management I think it was. I guess he must have sat on the committee, the D committee. I'm not real sure how he got a hand in the process. This was the same Moose who had apologized to the Congressmen in 1994 for

my failure to provide an opportunity to buy souvenirs on the tarmac in Abidjan at 3:00AM when they were en route back to Washington after attending Nelson Mandela's inauguration in South Africa. I guess Moose didn't hold that against me.

Anyway, I was told that Dick Moose looked over the names coming up to the seventh floor and said, "Well, first thing that we do is hold all the French-speaking assignments and look at them as a group." Apparently that was a first step. Then when the day came he looked at me among others, and he said, "Cecil's had five assignments in the Arab world and three so far in Africa. Rather than send him to a place like Guinea, let us send him somewhere in the Sahara where maybe some of that Arabic experience will come in handy. That argument seems to have prevailed. The careful process of soliciting candidates interested in particular posts was set aside, the cards were re-shuffled, and re-dealt.

It was curious. I was happy. It was, I thought, a great assignment. Some other things happened before I got there, but that's a part of the story. I thought of this as a good outcome. That was sometime in the fall of '95. Shortly after that the country director for AF?W, Dane Smith, asked if I would come and work in AF/W as a second deputy director for the few months that it would take while my nomination was going through its various stages. The office was very overworked as a result of an inspection report some years earlier. They had abolished the second deputy director position that that office had traditionally had for years and years. They had one for the Anglophone countries in West Africa and one from the Francophone. Some inspector's team thought that was too many.

I went in for about seven or eight months, was the deputy director for francophone Africa, and that was a great way to prepare for my assignment, allowing me to see Niger's role in a regional context..

Q: What was happening in francophone Africa at that time?

CECIL: The most important thing for me was that in February of 1996 the democratically elected president of Niger, a man named Mahamane Ousmane, was overthrown in a military coup. That was to determine the nature of the rest of my assignment because we have a law that says, of course, when a democratically elected government is overthrown, then our assistance programs must be terminated. At the time I was nominated we had a USAID mission in Niamey and a program of about $19,000,000 a year in various kinds of development assistance. That was immediately called into question. By the time I arrived in Niamey that summer, I think it was probably August of '96, AID was already beginning the process of phasing out their program. Rather than arriving to find an AID program on the increase with lots of positive things happening, I found an AID program in a phase-out mode. A lot of my attention the next three years was devoted to that.

The coup was not quite bloodless but almost. The former president was placed under house arrest. The man who led the coup was chief of staff of the army, a man named Ibrahim Mainassara Baré. He assumed the presidency and promised elections in a few months. In fact, they did have elections in July of '96 before I arrived. The elections were generally regarded as fraudulent. Baré was the victor with 52% of the vote. They were following the French system where if you

don't get a majority on the first round you have a run-off, but he handled that problem by getting 52%. When I arrived, I think it was August, I found a military government in place pretending to be democratically elected, but everybody knew it hadn't been. That was the first task confronting me: How to manage the phase-out of our AID program and how to carry on a relationship with the government which was distinctly out of favor in Washington.

I should say a word about the mission. We were a small embassy, a small mission. There was a USIA representative, the Public Affairs Officer. We did have a Marine security guard detachment, and we did have the AID mission. We had no CIA station. We had no military attaché of our own. At the time we did have a large Peace Corps program, and that turned out to be the most important demonstration of our support for the people of Niger.

We had 34 direct-hire U.S. government employees counting the Marines. We had 113 Peace Corps volunteers when I arrived, and during my time it probably rose as high as 130 but was more often in the area of 115-120. We had 389 Foreign Service Nationals employed by the mission including the AID mission. That number sounds high to me, and I'm guessing it must include our locally hired security guards as well.

The non-official, American presence in Niger was very small. There were five different American missionary organizations comprising 180 American citizens at several locations in the country. Some of them were doing medical missionary work. Proselytizing was definitely a low-key thing, not a major high profile effort since Niger is, of course, almost entirely a Muslim country. There were two church-related development agencies; Catholic Relief Services and World Vision had offices in the country.

There were a variety of other NGOs working in development assistance. Africare was probably the most important one of those. We had two American oil companies in the country exploring. Exxon International was in the southeastern part of the country over near Lake Chad exploring, and Hunt Oil, a small independent oil company, had a concession in the far north near the Libyan border. They had not started their work when I arrived, but they did launch their program after I had arrived. That was pretty much the entire American presence. There wasn't much else to it.

Q: What were American interests in Niger when you got there?

CECIL: Of course stability is always an interest. In 1995, the year before I arrived, the government of Niger had finally concluded a peace accord with rebellious Tuareg tribesmen in the north of Niger. The Tuaregs are periodically rebellious. They're a nomadic people and live in Mali and southern Algeria, some few in Libya and in Niger. They've never felt that they were receiving their proper proportion of their governments' revenues.

In the case of Niger, Niger has uranium, and Niger at that time was the world's second largest exporter of uranium—may still be—and all the uranium was up in the areas inhabited by Tuaregs. So this is somewhat analogous to the Niger delta problem in Nigeria where the people in the Niger Delta don't think they're getting their share of the oil revenues. In Niger the Tuaregs didn't think they were getting their share of the uranium revenues.

We were happy to see the peace accord because there was some concern that Libya was playing off the Tuareg insurrection and trying to increase its influence with the Tuaregs. There was concern that if the Tuareg rebellion spread it could affect Algeria and Mali. Mali had a stable democratic government. Algeria was extremely important for its oil and gas resources. We wanted to see stability and the continuation of the peace process. We also wanted to see Exxon and Hunt conduct their exploration programs. If they found anything significant obviously that would not only contribute to Niger's prosperity but also create more jobs for Americans and profits for the companies' concerned.

What else? The promotion of democracy and good governance has been an American objective for years and years. The coup in Niger set us back in that country, but that continued to be an objective for Washington—always to try to find ways to promote a democratic government and to build civic institutions. The resources didn't follow, though, to support those objectives, so a lot of it was words and not the necessary resources.

One of the basic questions during my time was how do you deal with a government that has come to power through illegitimate means? Washington wanted a kind of hands-off attitude. This was more obvious when Susan Rice became Assistant Secretary for African affairs. At the time of the coup and during George Moose's assistant secretary-ship, Susan had been over at the NSC in charge of African affairs. Then after a year or so, after I'd been in Niger maybe a year, maybe a little less, she became the assistant secretary of state for AF. She was much more forceful in wanting to sanction the government of Niger for being illegitimate than George Moose had been.

This set up a kind of situation in which Washington's views and the analysis coming in from the field were quite different. The relationship between my embassy and the State Department became more and more contentious as Washington liked less and less what we were reporting. The essence of what we were reporting was that even in a government that has come to power illegitimately, there may be, and in this case in Niger there were, conscientious, honest, hard-working government officials who were working for the best interest of their country. They didn't participate in the coup, had nothing to do with it, but they had been brought into positions at the ministerial level.
My argument was that we need to cultivate these people and do everything we can to strengthen their influence in this government to try to move the country back toward a democratic path. Washington's attitude was we should minimize our contact with the government of Niger. That's sort of hard to do when you're sitting there in the capital.

One of the ironic things was I don't believe hardly a week went by, certainly many months of the year this was true, hardly a week went by that we did not receive a telegram from the Department asking us to try to persuade the government of Niger to do something. They always begin the same. They will describe an issue. Very often it's in the UN where we need a vote or it's some international conference that's about to convene somewhere where we either need a vote or we need support for our position on various issues. Could be economic issues, environmental issues, rule of law issues, whatever.

We get these cables coming out from the Department saying, "Please go the highest appropriate level in your host country government and get their support on this issue." We're constantly

being asked to do that, and in most African countries when you talk about the highest appropriate level and you talk about getting a country's vote in an international forum, you almost always have to go to the foreign minister or sometimes to the president or if there's a prime minister maybe go to him. Those are the three people you almost always have to go to to get a vote. I'm always getting these requests to go see the highest appropriate level, and at the same time I'm hearing through email messages and phone calls from the bureau, "Now you don't want to have much contact with that government. We don't really think they're legitimate."

Chas Freeman wrote The Diplomat's Dictionary. He has a wonderful definition there which in a nutshell describes the relationship between my office and the African bureau in Washington over the three-year period that I was there. I'd just like to read it into the record.

Q: Please do.

CECIL: The term that Chas is defining is "reporting, reward for honesty". He says, "The rewards for diplomats who report honestly and forthrightly on foreign developments which contradict the convictions of their leaders at home have been well established by history. They will first be ignored, then charged with disloyalty, and finally dismissed. Diplomatic reporting is, therefore, always a contest between the professional integrity of those doing it abroad and the prejudices of those who read it at home." That's the end of the quote. The only thing I can say is that Assistant Secretary Rice didn't dismiss me before the end of my tour, but I didn't get a fourth year or another appointment after that, either.

Q: Going back to the coups before your time, was this just a power play? Was this greed? What was motivating the coup?

CECIL: President Ousmane was elected in 1993 if I recall correctly. His government was a coalition with another one or two parties. There was a prime minister from one of the coalition parties. As the scenario unfolded, Ousmane did not get along very well with his prime minister, and at a certain point in 1994 I believe it was, the president issued a decree which severely restricted or cut back the authority of the prime minister. The result of that was that the prime minister's party withdrew its support in the national assembly for the president's program.

The president stopped attending the periodic meetings of something like a ministerial council. The constitution says he's supposed to attend these meetings, but he stopped because he didn't want to be in the meetings, which were chaired by the prime minister.

The two men were unable to come to terms, and the president said that he would dissolve the national assembly. He did that once. He's only allowed by the constitution to do it once a year, and he made it clear that he was going to do it again as soon as he could by the constitution, and that would have been in February of '96 that he would have been able to do it again. Following his first dissolution the results of the election to choose members of a new national assembly made the president's position even more untenable because his party lost even more control in the assembly as other parties aligned against him.

You could say that the military simply lost patience with the civilian politicians. Both the president and the prime minister had kicked several issues into the supreme court for decision, and the supreme court wasn't very happy with this. It said these are really political questions. They're not legal questions. The country's experiment with a freely elected democratic government wasn't proceeding very smoothly. The military simply said, "We can fix this," at least that was their outward position. When President Baré, Colonel Baré, took over in February, he promised elections and said at the moment he wasn't going to be a candidate, but sometime between February and July when the elections actually took place, he changed his mind, and he decided he would be a candidate, and he got the 52%.

That's in a very quick nutshell what led to the coup. If the civilians had been able to cooperate and manage the country's problems, perhaps the coup would never have occurred, but we don't know for sure.

Initially I think there was hope among the people that this new group under Baré might be able to move the country forward, but Baré was surprisingly not a very forceful leader. You would think that a career military officer who had risen to be chief of staff of the armed forces would be a strong leader, but over the next two years or so, he was clearly overly influenced by those around him. Some of those around him as I said earlier were very fine men, very conscientious and hard working, but unfortunately there was another group. You could call them thugs. They were out only for their own interests. They didn't have a democratic nerve in their body. They were all for power and control and wanted to get whatever they could out of their positions. Unfortunately, this latter group had undue influence on Baré. We'll get to the end of that story I guess a little farther along.

Another point I want us to talk about, because Niger provides a very quick and simple example, is a lack of cooperation among U.S. government agencies in the country during my time. The example of that is that USAID, which of course often has more money than State, their mission had a satellite communications link. This is 1996 now, remember, a communications link that allowed them to access the world wide web, the internet. The embassy (State) did not. One of my requests was, "Well, as you phase out, please transfer that satellite communications capability to the embassy so that we who remain behind can have the benefit of that." AID wouldn't do it. I even went back to Washington by message, by phone, trying to get the Department's help, and the Department wouldn't even get into it. They said, "No. AID has the right to do what they want with it. It's their normal procedure when they phase out of a country to offer any equipment they have to any other AID mission that might want it. Other AID missions get first right of refusal," in other words.

That in the end is what happened. The dish was taken down and shipped out of the country to another AID mission, and we were left again with less than state-of- the-art communications in the State Department component of the mission. I have always found that very difficult to reconcile with my ideas about how we're supposed to all be allies and working together to achieve the same ends, but petty interagency concerns seemed to often prevail.

There was another problem we confronted during my time and that was this point about the law requiring us to close the AID mission, which hampered our effort to promote democracy and

good governance. There's a part of the law, I think it was called Section 508, that did not allow us to spend any U.S. government money training anyone who could be considered to be a government official. The definition of government official was not very precise.

We pointed out to that if we were out to promote democracy, one thing we could usefully do would be to provide workshops or seminars with experts from Washington to locally elected council members. Niger still had a very active functioning system of local government. People competed for office and were elected to office. We said some of these people have never served in any kind of public office before. Some of them were illiterate. This would be a wonderful opportunity to have a workshop or a seminar giving them our view about the responsibilities of local government officials and how you serve constituents and how you get things done, but Washington said, "These are government officials. You can do it before they are sworn in to their seats between the time they're elected and the time they're sworn in. That would be permissible, but once they're sworn in no, you can't do that."

We proposed that the law be amended but of course we didn't get anywhere with that. If it's ever happened since I don't know because it's an issue I did lose touch with after I finally left the country, but it's another case where we're hampered by our own legislation or our interpretation of it. That same interpretation prohibited us from inviting military officers to seminars on civilian-military relations. The Department of Defense does a lot of that, and we couldn't do that because we couldn't spend any money to invite a military officer from Niger to participate—the very people we should be wanting to cultivate and influence!.

There were a lot of frustrations along those lines…

Q: I can imagine!

CECIL: There's one final point about the AID program I should mention, a little document drawn up at my request. This is a draft study. It's called Supporting Change and Changing Support, 36 Years of AID Assistance to Niger dated March 28, 1997. I did everything I could to delay the closure of the AID mission, but when it became clear that the mission was going to close, I said to the mission director, "I want you to write up a short record to tell us, to answer the question, 'What have we received for 36 years of USAID activity in Niger.'" I said, "I want you to have two readers in mind. I want you to have first Senator Jesse Helms in mind, who might come along saying, 'What have we got to show for all this money for 36 years,' and I want you to have a good journalist who's experienced in international affairs in mind as your other reader, who might come to this report and turn it into some kind of article for his newspaper."

The mission director strongly resisted writing any such report. He dragged his feet. He found reasons he couldn't get to it. He had so much to do with closing out. I finally reached the point where I said, "If you want any kind of a memo from me on your performance when you leave here, I've got to have this report first." Only under that kind of pressure did he finally produce this report which is 16 pages long. In typical AID fashion he contracted out the drafting, hiring someone to come from the States and spend at least a couple of weeks—I actually think it was longer—in Niamey, writing the report. Even so, it was never officially issued and blessed by AID. The final bureaucratic pirouette. He said, "Of course this report might have legal or other

policy ramifications, so I can't just issue it in my own name. It'll have to go back to Washington and be reviewed by our legal staff and by our policy people." That's why the copy I have today is stamped "draft, March 28, 1997." It was never ever issued in any other form than that. I doubt that there are many copies that can be found in any file today.

Q: When you're editing your transcript of this oral history, if you want to put some excerpts from that, conclusions, whatever you think might be pertinent from that, please do.

CECIL: I don't know how a person would access it these days. I don't know if it's available under the Freedom of Information Act, for instance, if it's not an official document. I suppose our other reporting is accessible. Hopefully it will be interesting reading for some researcher some day.

One which I re-read the other day before coming here was titled, The Future of Islamic Fundamentalism in Niger. Back in 1998-99 that was a topic of some interest. It was obviously before al-Qaeda blew up the twin towers, but we looked at that subject as best we could. I'll just say for the record our conclusions were that while there was always some potential for fundamentalist influences to grow, Niger's history was not a troubling one in that regard. The Nigerien attitude toward Islam has always been very tolerant. There's not much formal religious structure in the country, but there was one man regarded as the senior of the imams, and he was known to be quite tolerant not only of different forms of Islam, but also of the Western religions, the other religions as well.

Christian missionaries who worked in the country didn't vigorously proselytize. They were free to do their work and, of course, they conducted their church services. In fact, Niger's official holidays included Easter, a remnant of the French colonial period. As far as Islam was concerned, the country was not troublesome, though there was an incident during my time in which a church in Maradi was burned, for reasons I'm not aware of. We did argue that poverty can engender desperation and, therefore, that might lead to religious fundamentalism, but we did not see it as a likely development back at the end of the '90s. I think it's probably still that way. Northern Nigeria, on the other hand, has been afflicted by a number of terrible outbreaks of violence at least partly attributable to religious fundamentalism. I often asked Nigeriens to explain to me why Nigeria is afflicted with this fundamentalism and Niger is not. I think it's because Christians from the south of Nigeria are much more numerous and much more influential in Nigeria—therefore a target of envy and hostility—than is the case in Niger, where there are almost no indigenous Christians.

Q: How about the Peace Corps in Niger?

CECIL: The Peace Corps remained the only really visible evidence of our support for the people of Niger as they tried to confront their very difficult environment and very difficult living conditions. My sound bite back in those days for anybody who wanted to talk about Niger was, "Niger is the world's poorest Muslim country." That was using per capita income as my measure. Also, Niger was continually ranked within two or three of the bottom countries in the world by the UN's Index of Human Development. During my time the only countries ranked lower than

Niger were Sierra Leone and Rwanda both of which were either in a state of civil war or just recovering from one. Then we had Niger.

The Peace Corps presence was no doubt the most productive thing we did during those years after the coup of 1996. I'd also seen the Peace Corps working in Cote d'Ivoire. There's no doubt in my mind that we get more benefit per dollar spent on the Peace Corps than any other thing the U.S. government does. The volunteers were spread throughout the southern part of the country, living in the villages in the absolute most basic conditions you can imagine. No running water. No electricity of course. Yet we had a very high third-year extension rate. They seemed to thrive in those conditions. They were working in health care, in agricultural improvement programs. They weren't teaching English which was an activity you often find in other countries, but we weren't in the school system. We were in the villages living with the people. Some of the volunteers were working on environmental issues trying to help prevent or minimize soil erosion, for instance. A variety of really grass roots activities.

I visited the volunteers as often as I could. I've always felt that I needed to travel around any country I'm in if I'm really going to know it, and I also insisted that my staff do as much travel as they could as well. Visiting the volunteers in their villages was one very visible way that I could demonstrate to the government of Niger that we regarded the Peace Corps presence as an important one. It was also a way of gently reminding the government that the government of Niger is essentially responsible for the security of the volunteers. Of course I would always call on local government officials in the areas that I visited. That was always my first stop. I think it contributed to raising the profile of the Peace Corps in the eyes of the government of Niger.

In some cases I even took government officials with me. For instance the governor ("prefet") of the region around Zinder. He spent a whole day with me on my first trip making the circuit of two or three villages that I went to. He was a military officer and he had never seen the volunteers out in their villages, and it was quite an eye opener for him to see that. "You've really got Americans living out here under these conditions?" I remember another case near Gouré, in the far southeast. The deputy governor spent a day with me also as I made my rounds.

The Peace Corps was a wonderful institution. I have the greatest admiration for those people, and they contribute so much to our image. There is no better money spent.

Q: Were there efforts to diminish the Peace Corps back in Washington?

CECIL: No, not during that time. There was in fact an attempt to increase the number of volunteers worldwide to 10,000. That was announced and talked about, but the Clinton administration didn't get its shoulder behind it. It didn't push hard enough, so that did not happen.

We held pretty steadily in Niger in the neighborhood of 110 to 130 volunteers. I understand recently just this past year that the Peace Corps budget has reached a new high. I don't know what that means in terms of the number of volunteers, but we didn't see any efforts to reduce their presence in Niger. In some ways they were insulated from the other attitudes in Washington.

You can tell me what other aspects you might be interested in.

Q: I'm wondering, did you sense the… I don't want to put this in pejorative terms, but we seem to shy away from criticizing the government of Nigeria. Sometimes there's a tendency to pick on a small government, like Niger, on the part of our assistant secretary. Then there's staff and all, the ones they can't do anything about and to show that they're really tough.

CECIL: We can be tough on the countries that don't matter so much. There might have been something of that. Maybe Washington said, "This is a good place to make a point, to demonstrate a principal. You overthrow your government, you're going to suffer."

Washington carried it beyond just stopping resources. They actually proposed activities that we in the embassy had to say as clearly as we could would be counterproductive. I'll give you an example. Not only would this activity not be allowed by the government of Niger, it would certainly close off any hope of future dialogue. It really hasn't been very well considered. What I'm talking about is this example:

At some point Washington proposed that NDI—the National Democratic Institute—send a team out to give workshops to political parties in the opposition to try to help them become more effective. More effective in raising funds, more effective in mobilizing people, more effective at presenting their message and working in opposition to the government. We said, "This sounds pretty naïve to us."

First of all, I thought that the U.S. government's rule was, and it is an AID rule, that we need to be impartial in any training or assistance that we give to political parties. No way can you conduct a workshop only for members of the opposition. What do you think the party that supports the government will be doing? What do you think the government's going to be doing? Washington's idea was they wouldn't conduct the workshop in Niger. They would bring trainers from somewhere else and conduct workshops somewhere in the region, inviting Nigeriens they had identified. Well, of course, we pointed out that the government of Niger might not let these people leave, might not give them the permission they needed. It seemed so poorly conceived that we were really amazed at the idea.

There was another proposal that we work with one of the two labor federations, the one that was in opposition to the government, and help them to become more effective. We pointed out that throughout '97 and '98 Niger was afflicted with one strike after another by one group whether it was teachers or government workers or whatever. There were just so many strikes going on. We had to ask Washington, "Is your objective here to promote civil unrest? Is that what you're trying to do? This country doesn't need a stronger labor movement. It's got a very strong labor movement already, and it's retarding the economic development of the country and the education of the school children and all of these things you might expect will follow. It revealed a mindset in Washington, "We want to do anything we can do to the detriment of President Baré and his gang of thugs," as they saw everyone fitting under that category.

We did stop the NDI program from happening. I'm glad to say that we made such a strong argument that I guess even Washington finally realized the futility of their approach.

Q: Were you getting friends coming back and saying, "Hey, you're not with the program. You better watch it."

CECIL: I don't think anyone ever sent me a warning message. Maybe I guess I could see what was happening in that we weren't getting any of the support that we were requesting, not only in something simple like the satellite dish. I also sent in a number of cables over a period of a year, year and a half, making the arguments for retaining an AID mission in Niamey. At one point I said, "Even if we just focus on democracy and good governance, we should have a resident AID representative to oversee these programs because we could spend quite a bit of money doing these things and part-time coverage from some other post doesn't work." The idea was that Bamako would start managing the minimal activities in Niger. That just doesn't work. You have to be here daily to deal with issues as they arise, to meet with people who show up, to pro-actively seek out targets of opportunity. But we didn't get support on that.

I sent a detailed and precise argument in a message. I think the message was entitled, "Can we afford to close AID in Niger?" or something like that. I was making all the arguments for keeping an AID presence. I got a nice one page, one and a half page reply from Brian Atwood, the administrator of AID at the time. He told me he appreciated and understood all of my arguments. He thought, in fact, they did have some merit but AID was in a time of phasing down certain programs and needing money to carry on others, and Niger was unfortunately a place where they could take funds and use them elsewhere in more favorable circumstances, more favorable environments. His was the only response I received from Washington. The Department was silent.

In general the State Department never answered what I'll call our policy cables. The DCM and I spent quite a bit of time over a period of a couple of years at various points along the way making the best arguments we could for keeping an AID presence or for doing other things. Usually we were just ignored.

I can probably be accused of a certain naiveté. Throughout my career I always thought that policy should be derived from a process of careful analysis of the pro and con factors surrounding any proposal. I relished intellectual debate, and felt that the way you determine the best course of action is to put your reasons out there for others to analyze and critique. You *should* do that, after all; no one's infallible, and we should want our lines of reasoning to be examined by our peers to see if there are any flaws. But you reach truth, or conclusions, through a process of give-and-take. It became clear to me in Niamey that those in charge in Washington were not interested in examining the premises on which they had already reached their conclusions; they weren't about to open their policies up for debate again. We were expected to be loyal executors of policies already determined. My conception of loyalty was that I should tell my supervisors in Washington the facts on the ground as I saw them, and give them my best analysis of where current trends—either of current policies or of proposed ones—would lead us. But no new information was desired. We were an annoyance. Read that Chas Freeman definition of honesty in reporting again.

Q: Usually with a country like Niger you have a fairly junior desk officer, so this would be at the central African or…

CECIL: It's the office of West African affairs. The desk officer was desk officer for Niger and probably Burkina Faso as well I think. There was also Benin and Togo, small countries that might have been under his or her supervision. There were two desk officers during my time. I wouldn't blame the desk officer for these things. It's true that the first officer was stronger than the second, but I think the issues, the guidance, was coming from on high and a desk officer would not be able to overturn that.

Q: During this time were you able, you might say, to play the Libyan card? Libya does border on Niger, and Libya's a treat or something like that.

CECIL: I guess people were aware of Libya's negative influence in those days, but that didn't seem to overrule the objections that they had on other grounds.

Just to give another example or two. We had proposed under the heading of democracy and governance what was called the Women in Politics program. This was a program that AID had in a number of countries where you would take women who are active in their communities. Some might hold positions in local government or whatever. We have seminars and programs to try to make them more effective, raise their sensitivity, educate them a little bit.

One of our proposals was to have a Women in Politics workshop in Niger. Another to try to strengthen the media. There are quite a few newspapers in Niger, and they managed to survive during this period although there were a number of efforts to punish them. Nevertheless there were several newspapers to work with. There were also NGOs. There were human rights NGOs, for instance. We proposed working with these kinds of organizations. Washington considered the Women in Politics idea for about six months, or at least we thought they were considering it for that long. I think probably earlier it was put on the shelf and we just weren't told. The result was those other proposals that I mentioned. Instead of Women in Politics and instead of supporting the media and the NGOs, we got the idea of training opposition political party members and training the labor federation that opposes the government. It was always hard for me to understand why Washington paid so little attention, gave so little weight to our analysis. Clearly we were out of favor.

Q: You have this sort of thing. We alluded to it before. As I do these oral histories I find some are particularly prone to find countries in Africa, small countries, to be whipping boys, to get dumped on to prove, , even if you're a woman, that you have balls at the policy level, just to show that you're really tough. You know you can do this with a small country without any particular repercussions, where you wouldn't be doing that to China or Egypt or a country like that.

CECIL: There a couple of things that happened that I should note. Maybe we should jump to one of the final most important things that happened during my tour, where there is one tiny little insight that might be good for some PhD researcher in the future when he's researching the history of the period.

President Baré became increasingly unpopular because his government was not achieving anything for the people really, and thugs in the government were never hesitating in using intimidation and suppression to achieve their means. Honest and conscientious people didn't resort to these kinds of tactics and didn't have people at their disposal who would go out and beat people up or set fires, such as the fire in the printing plant that printed the main opposition newspaper, for instance.

Things were continuing on a downward spiral, and in April, it was April 9, 1999, President Bare was assassinated. He was at the airport about to board a helicopter to go somewhere else in the country, and the presidential guard opened fire on him. The guard was commanded by Major Daouda Malam Wanké. I think it's pretty much accepted that he planned this assassination and he gave the order at the airport to fire. The guard opened fire with some very large artillery against the president as he was moving from his car to his helicopter. He was hit. He was accompanied by one of the sous-prefets (deputy governors) of Niger. In fact, the one who had spent a day with me visiting Peace Corps volunteers in his region in the far eastern part of the country. He was an unusual person in that he was an Arab. There were not many native Nigerien Arabs, but he traced his ancestry back centuries to the time when Morocco exerted substantial influence over this part of the Sahara.. This man tried to help the president get back to the car, and the firing continued, and they were both killed. This was I believe probably a Friday if I recall correctly, so we were in the office.

There was no other public reaction. There were no demonstrations and no celebrations, either. The place was pretty much quiet and clamped down. I got a call before the day was over. (The assassination happened in the morning.) I got a call from one of the military members who had been close to Baré asking if he could come and see me the next morning, so I said yes, of course. He did come on Saturday morning. I think this was their effort, the new group, the coup leaders, to try to dampen any further negative U.S. reaction because he came purporting to ask my advice on how to proceed at this point.

They had closed the borders the previous day. I said, "One of the first things you need to do if you're trying to create the idea that you're in control is you need to open borders again and return to life as usual, as normal." When he was there, he said, "Major Wanké would like to see you." I said, "Fine," of course. I think it was going to be the next day. Wanké was calling in several ambassadors. I know the French ambassador was there before me.

I went to meet this man whom I had never met before. When I arrived in his office, he said, "Do you know about my role in the coup of 1996?" I said to him, "Well, I certainly don't know anything in detail. I know that you were one of about a dozen men who are said to have planned the coup with President Baré. I know that you're one of that group, but I don't know anything about what you did beyond that." He looked at me, and he said, "Well, this time we're going to do it right." What he meant by that and what he explained was, "This time we really are going to have free and fair elections. We really are going to turn the government over to a new group of capable civilians who can lead this country in the right direction." In fact, that's what happened.

The assassination was April. He announced quickly that by January 1, 2000 the government would be back in civilian hands. In fact, they had elections in November of '99. They welcomed

observers. Observers came. Elections were honestly conducted. The victor was Tandja Mamadou who's the current president. I was no longer there. I left probably in August before the elections took place, but I must say Major Wanké and the group that acted with him in 1999 did carry out their promise.

Tandja Mamadou was another story. I had gotten to know him since he was head of one of the most important political parties, and it was one of the parties in opposition to President Baré. He was elected to that five year term under their new constitution. He was reelected in 2004 to a second five year term. According to the constitution, that's all he could have, but as you may know from the papers in 2009 he first abolished the national assembly, and I think he might have abolished the supreme court as well. I'm a little unsure of the details. He had a national referendum to amend the constitution so that he could run again and again. That happened.

He is now in his third term. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) said they no longer recognize him as president. We have, once again, announced that the AID programs that we were carrying on from outside of the country, administered mostly from Bamako, I think, that these will be suspended because he's used extra-constitutional means to carry on as the leader. It's hard to understand why he'd do this except he's a very stubborn and a strong-willed man. I knew that all along. I'm sorry he has this short-term vision for what's best for his country.

I should say that during my time under President Baré, I was always able to meet with the leaders of the variety of political parties that existed. The president who was overthrown, President Ousmane, was a man I could call on anytime I wanted. Early in my time he was under house arrest, but later they lifted that. It was a curious mixture. It was a government that had come to power illegally, but nevertheless let a lot of things continue to function as they had in the past. Political parties were quite active. They were harassed, there were measures taken to make their work more difficult. Journalists were arrested for things they wrote, but they rarely closed down papers. Maybe they would suspend a paper for a short time. They set fire to the presses of one.

A lot of what you might call normal political activity continued to flourish, and I could talk to just about anyone I wanted to. I could always see any government official anytime, and they were so eager to earn the good will of the United States that I always had to be sure I was ready for an appointment before I requested it because they might say, "Come now," or, "Could you come at 2:00?" That was true at any level, even the president. If I wanted to see the president, I better be ready before I pick up the phone and make the request because they might just say, "He'll see you in an hour." Of course, Washington didn't really want to hear that. They thought I should be keeping arm's length, and I never really understood where that was going to lead us.

Q: There is this attitude that you alluded to. How did you find life in Niger?

CECIL: Poverty is pervasive. You develop a kind of callousness, like many of us who have served in a third world, in poor countries, I think. It's like working in an emergency room in a hospital. After a while blood doesn't bother you. That's how you learn to live with poverty all around you. You do what you can with people you come in contact with to help them, members

of your household staff for instance, embassy employee family members. You do what you can where you have an opportunity to support programs that will have a wider social impact. You do that, too.

The level of crime was not high. We were relatively secure. We did have a regional security officer in the embassy, but I didn't have an armed guard or anything like that. There was no concern at that point. Of course while we were there, the embassies in Dar Es Salaam and Nairobi were attacked by al-Qaeda, so we were always conscious of the potential security threat, but there was nothing that made me or members of my embassy ever feel that we were personally in danger. As I said earlier, we traveled a lot.

The main problem when you travel was the bandits, not terrorists or people doing things for political motivation, but just robbers out on the road wanting to take your money or your vehicle. After I left we had a death. A military person—I believe he was a member of the office overseeing the Marine security guard detachment, but it was someone who had arrived after I had left—was killed when he tried to stop a carjacking at night at a bar in town, but again, it was robbery, not politically motivated.

Q: You left there in 1999?

CECIL: '99. It was a very stimulating three-year assignment despite the contentious relationship with the African bureau front office. Like everything else in the Foreign Service, it was an education.

End of reader