

## BELIZE

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#### **WARD BARMON Consular Officer Belmopan (1967-1969)**

*Ward Barmon was born in Huntington, Long Island in 1943. He graduated with a double major in American and Chinese history from Yale University and then studied at the University of Madrid for a year before coming into the Foreign Service in 1967. In 1992 he served as Director of the Narcotics Affairs section in Bogota, Colombia. In addition to Colombia, he was posted to Belize, Taiwan, Thailand, El Salvador, and Honduras.*

*Q: You were in Belize from when?*

BARMON: From 1967 to 1969 when it was still a British colony.

*Q: When you go there, can you describe what it was like?*

BARMON: As the then post report said, it reminded one of a town along the Mississippi River, or the Mississippi Delta back in the depression days. It was very poor, tin, ramshackle shacks sewers. Pretty awful. There is a book out by the vice consul that served there in the early 1960s

(Richard Conroy). If you are doing an oral history on Belize, you definitely want to get him to talk about his experiences. Of course, they are all in the book.

*Q: What did we have there a consulate general?*

BARMON: Consulate. Three officers which I thought at the time was one too many.

*Q: What did you do?*

BARMON: I was the number three in charge of the Consular Section. I had three ladies of Belize as my staff. I also did some political reporting the first year and did all the cultural work. Then, my second year, they brought in somebody else to do the consular work, a staff officer who was trained in consular work. I did administrative work and kept my political reporting and USIS jobs. Every area except that which I specialized in later, which was economics.

*Q: What were American interests there?*

BARMON: Almost none. There was a concern about the Cuban communist influence as well as Guatemala's interest in taking over British Honduras. They were concerned about that igniting some kind of little war in the area. Not much of a drug problem back then, a little bit of Marijuana growing up in the North. There really was not a smuggling conduit at that point that they knew of. There were some odd characters, a couple of Americans doing artifact smuggling, robbing the Mayan temples. A little bit of agriculture exported through to the U.S., sugar cane, citrus, fish products. But, we did not have a lot of interests.

*Q: What about relations with the British there?*

BARMON: Relations were very good. The British governor and his assistant. The British Garrison, headed up by a colonel. Some British civil servant types who ran some of the ministries. Or, if they did not run the ministries, they were advisors to the ministries in agriculture, education, etc., left over from the colonial days.

*Q: It still was a colony?*

BARMON: Until the early 1980s.

*Q: Were things sort of in line to give them independence?*

BARMON: Well, it was moving along slowly, but the biggest fear the Belizeans had themselves and the British had, of course, was that the Guatemalans might invade if the British pulled out.

*Q: So there was no real push for independence?*

BARMON: No. They became self-governing in the early to mid-1960s, I believe. The British were there to run foreign affairs, defense, and advise them in other areas. Basically, they were self-governing.

*Q: How much of a threat was Guatemala?*

BARMON: In fact, not much of a threat. I do not think that the Guatemalans were prepared to take on the Brits. But, there was a lot of hype in the media and people professed to be afraid. The Mexicans, of course, wanted their piece of Belize if the Guatemalans came in. There was some scare tactics by the Guatemalans, but in fact, it was not a real threat.

*Q: You said you were doing political work?*

BARMON: I reported on the opposition party, the "NIPS," the National Independent Party. They did not get into power until the late '70s, early '80s. So, the People's United Party, the "PUPS," were in power for 20 years, until they were replaced by the NIPS.

*Q: What was your impression of the political party's leadership?*

BARMON: Oh, it was pretty amateurish. The premier, George Price, was an ex-Jesuit student in the States and had received the "word of God" in a vision to go back and lead his people. So, he left the seminary and came back and was in fact, a couple years later elected Premier. He was Premier for 20 years until the opposition leader replaced him. Then, he won another term after that. So, he was Prime Minister during some of the 80s.

*Q: Was there much social life there at that time?*

BARMON: Well, there were not terribly many college graduates among the Belizeans. They were very nice people. We had some friends among the younger lawyers, and a few professionals, but a small group.

*Q: Were the Cubans mucking around at all?*

BARMON: No, but there was always the fear that they might muck around in Yucatan, just to the north. But, in fact, no.

*Q: Around this time did we put troops in the Dominican Republic?*

BARMON: I think that was 1965.

*Q: So, that did not have any repercussion?*

BARMON: Not that I am aware of. I did not get to Belize until September of 1967. But there was some concern about Cuban influence in that part of the Caribbean. As far as I am aware of there wasn't.

*Q: Did you get any feel from the British there that they wished, "Hell, let the Guatemalans take it over?"*

BARMON: The British would have liked to have left. They were spending 10 million pounds a year with their aid program and military garrison. I think those expenses were on top of 10 million that they gave to subsidize the colony. They would have gotten out earlier, but they felt constrained. They did not want to seem to be abandoning the colony with the perils of a Latino country invading a non-Latino country.

*Q: After this rather sterile experience....(Barmon interjects)*

BARMON: It wasn't sterile at all. We thoroughly enjoyed it. It was a fascinating experience.

*Q: In what way?*

BARMON: Well, for one thing it was very useful for me my first tour doing all these different jobs. There were very few Americans. We really got to know the local society, the Creoles, the Caribbeans, a few Latinos, the Brits, and some wonderful characters. They ended up in Belize for some odd reasons. Some were jaguar hunters, some were leftovers from the war. There were Jewish refugees, Arabs, Chinese, a couple of Germans that ended up there after the war was over. A truly interesting collection of people.

**FRANK ALMAGUER**  
**Peace Corps Volunteer**  
**Belize, Honduras (1967-1969)**

*Ambassador Frank Almaguer was born in Holgun Cuba in 1945. His family moved to Miami in 1954. He attended the University of Florida and joined the Peace Corps in 1967. He joined USAID and served in Ecuador and Bolivia before becoming ambassador to Honduras. Ambassador Almaguer was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2004.*

*Q: So you were selected to serve as a volunteer. When did you arrive in Belize?*

ALMAGUER: December 23, 1967. Why they would put us in an airplane and drop us off in a strange place on December 23<sup>rd</sup>, two days before Christmas, seemed like questionable logic. By the time we arrived in Belize, of the 14 or so who started with me in Philadelphia, we were down to seven or eight. The group, including others going to the Eastern Caribbean, completed training around the 20<sup>th</sup> of December. We were sworn in by the visiting Peace Corps Director from Washington — Jack Vaughn — with whom years later I developed a good friendship. We were flown to Miami on our way to Belize. My mother was living in Miami, and for the first time I felt comfortable bringing my peers, with whom I shared a unique bonding experience, to my home. It was like these were my brothers and sisters and that was great. They ate good Cuban food that day, followed by last minute shopping.

We left Miami at dawn and arrived in Belize the morning of December 23, 1967. We were lodged in a rooming house in Belize City that must have served as a bordello in its better days; the rooms had paper-thin walls and the bathrooms smelled horrible. One of our married couples

did find a small Christmas tree to put up in their room for some Christmas spirit. The Peace Corps Country Director for Belize, Woody, and his wife were kind enough to host us for a Christmas dinner at their Belize City home. The day after Christmas we each would be taken to our town or village of assignment.

Before we left the Virgin Islands I was told that I would be assigned to a place called Orange Walk, which was a sugarcane-growing area in the northern part of Belize. My assignment would be to work with the agricultural cooperatives and credit unions in the Orange Walk Department (one of six Departments or counties in Belize). Centered on Orange Walk Town, within a radius of some 20 miles there were several villages, most with their own agricultural cooperatives and credit unions. The inhabitants of these communities were a blend of people with Mayan origin and a heavy influence of Mexicans from across the nearby border. Mayan dialects were spoken but Spanish dominated. Further, thanks to the strong educational system established by the British, English was widely spoken, particularly by the young. English was the official language but used primarily when dealing with the government bureaucracy. My Orange Walk assignment made sense since I was in one of the few areas in Belize where Spanish was the predominant language. In fact, a couple of my co-ops were on the Belize side of the Rio Hondo, the river that forms the northwestern boundary with Mexico.

This setting was my entry into the world of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Mayans, the proud heirs to the Mayan Civilization which centered on this part of Central America for a millennia and which declined precipitously long before the Europeans set foot in this region. Of course, I knew very little about that civilization and even the anthropologists knew very little about the Mayas as late as the 1970s. Only in recent years have anthropologists been able to decipher the language and culture of that civilization. And they are still debating the cause of their subsequent rapid decline.

To give you a sense for that part of Central America, northern Belize is flat as a pancake; it's flatter than Kansas. My home base, Orange Walk Town, may have been 30 to 40 miles from the Caribbean on the east, but you would have to drive several hours to get there. Much of coastal Belize is swampy. I would guess that the elevation of Orange Walk Town was five feet. Surrounding it were many sugarcane fields. Every once in a while you would see little mounds in the otherwise flat terrain. "What are those?" Nobody knew. Years later, archaeologists began to do some serious digging and found the most extensive irrigation system in all of Central America and Mexico right there in Orange Walk. *National Geographic* did a story on this some years ago. These irrigation systems were truly impressive. Unfortunately, they had fallen into disuse centuries earlier. This is sad since water is a constant source of concern in the region. The co-ops with which I worked struggled to harness the water. The area receives copious amount of rain during part of the year and no water during the rest of the year. Yet 1,000 or 1,500 years earlier they harnessed the water; the mounds that I could see in the cane fields served to facilitate gravity flows for the irrigation systems that the Mayans had built — very impressive!

Where I lived, in Orange Walk Town, I had no running water and an outdoor toilet; for me it wasn't all that different from what I had known in Cuba some fifteen years earlier. I didn't think it was bad at all. I didn't like having to cross the street and join the line with the women in the neighborhood to pump water for my buckets, but it was a social occasion and my neighbors accepted me quite well. If they knew that this young foreigner was with the Peace Corps there

was total acceptance. My biggest concern was snakes. There are many snakes, in the region, some of which are poisonous and deadly. At least once a month I would hear stories of farmers being fatally bit by snakes, particularly in the sugar-cane fields. Part of the reason why sugar-cane fields were set on fire just before the harvest was to kill the snakes while also eliminating the underbrush to facilitate the cutting of cane stalks with machetes. That is arduous and under-appreciated labor!

In addition to helping the co-ops and credit unions with their financial reports, I helped them develop inventories and to understand the real cost of their operations. I was well accepted by the farmers. I also volunteered to teach a course in geography at the local high school, which was run by a group of American nuns. It was a struggle since few, if any, of the students had even a basic concept of time and place and their role in it. On the first day I pointed to a world map and asked, "Where is Belize?" After students pointed in every direction, the consensus was that Belize was the big island that we know as Australia! Many students refused to accept the idea that Belize was a small area just south of Mexico. I enjoyed the experience, although I also concluded that I did not want to teach for a living. Even though I'm not a Catholic, I also volunteered to work with a local priest in the church's youth programs. I worked with him in creating a small basketball league for local teenagers. So, I was doing all the classical things that Peace Corps Volunteers tend to do around the globe. The experience had elements of loneliness but, overall, it was rewarding. To this day I remain very fond of Belize and its people.

Belize turned out to be very important in my life in other ways, as well. Every once in a while, the big break from the daily routine was to socialize with our fellow volunteers, going into the "City" (Belize City, population at the time of 30,000) or meeting other volunteers in the nearby countryside. In August 1968, a big new group of Peace Corps Volunteers arrived in country (perhaps 20-25 PCVs). That group had trained at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad and did not have the Spanish immersion experience that my group had in Puerto Rico. Hence, the Peace Corps staff in Belize City decided that the group would be exposed to Spanish through an intensive few days in Corozal Town, some 40 miles north of Orange Walk, next to the Caribbean Sea and bordering Mexico. This setting was much nicer than Orange Walk. The Peace Corps staff asked me beforehand to take a week off from my assignment to serve as a volunteer instructor for the Spanish immersion program they had planned for the group. One of the members of that group was a cute young lady from Albuquerque, New Mexico, who spoke some Spanish and was to be assigned to serve as a teacher trainer in Orange Walk Town. Her name was Antoinette Gallegos. I met her and the rest of the group while the yellow school bus they were taking from Belize City to Corozal Town passed through Orange Walk. Antoinette claims that I was checking out all the girls; in fact, I was just trying to be welcoming to the group that I would join in a day or two. We have been arguing about my intent that afternoon ever since. ...

*Q: [Laughter.]*

ALMAGUER: We met there and developed a relationship. She'll tell you stories about Peace Corps that may differ from mine. She did serve in Orange Walk for a few months as an elementary school teacher trainer but was subsequently transferred to work in and around Belize City. We visited each other a great deal, while maintaining a wonderful relationship with the rest of the volunteers in the country. By the time I completed my two years in December 1969, it was

clear to me that we would marry soon after she completed her two years the following summer. We married shortly thereafter, on August 29, 1970 and have been together ever since.

Peace Corps was an important part of my formative years for many reasons. First, I enjoyed the substantive side of what I was doing, even though it was hot and muggy and lacking basic amenities, such as running water or decent roads. Belizeans that I met in my work and socially received me warmly and were wonderful “salt-of-the-earth” people. Secondly, I became fascinated with development as an issue: Why some countries and societies do better than others; what are the key ingredients that allow a country to prosper, and what’s the role of the international community in facilitating self-sustaining growth. I became enamored with the possibility that Belize could develop into a middle-income country. I pondered with some of my Belizean friends and fellow volunteers, particularly over a beer, what it would take to lift Belize out of its poverty.

Most importantly, there I met my future wife. Having the Peace Corps experience, the same Peace Corps friends and Belize in common, were essential ingredients to cement a relationship between two very different people. Any Myers-Briggs personality test would probably put us in opposite personality quadrants — but we had these things in common upon which to build a married life. Further, her Peace Corps experience served subsequently to facilitate her acceptance of my chosen profession, which would eventually take us to many countries and a life punctuated by moves every few years.

*Q: Going back to Belize, what was your impression of the government of Belize and its people?*

ALMAGUER: Belize at the time remained a British colony, its future in abeyance as a result of Guatemala’s claim that the territory belonged to it. It is noteworthy to comment on a peculiarity of our assignment: One of the things we were cautioned about in training was not to say the name of the country. While most everyone assumed that sooner or later Belize would become an independent country, the issue remained controversial. They had an elected government with a premier. But all foreign affairs, defense and some legal issues were referred to Commonwealth authorities in London. The premier (George Price, subsequently accepted by all as the “Father of the Belize Nation”) was the leader of the People’s United Party (PUP) and he and his followers called the country “Belize.” But the local political opposition was not at all interested in independence while territorial claims by Guatemala were unresolved. This opposition called the country “British Honduras,” the formal British name for the territory. The PUP was dominated by the lighter-skinned blend of *mestizos* and creoles. The opposition was predominantly darker-skinned creoles. Fortunately for Belize, a multi-ethnic country, these ethnic and racial divisions were not as pronounced as the divisions one finds in Guyana, Suriname and other Caribbean countries. Nevertheless, to avoid the problem of identifying with one or another group, we would say, “It’s great to be in your country,” or “I love this country,” but never mention the name of the country. That was ingrained in us.

The British did a commendable job of building schools and creating a government infrastructure that delivered services to its people, within the constraints of a poor and remote colony on the fringes of a shrinking British Empire. As I subsequently observed in other Central American countries, the Belizean education system, modeled after British practices, was far better than

comparable education systems in Spanish-speaking Central America. I was generally sympathetic towards the government. The premier (subsequently prime minister once the country achieved independence in 1981) appeared to be beyond reproach when it came to his personal lifestyle. Money was not his thing. He was perceived as a reclusive monk. He was bachelor all of his life and lived in a humble house and went to Mass every morning. He was weird by Belizean standards, since he did not socialize or drink in a country that had the “easy does it, enjoy life” Caribbean mentality. But he traveled a lot all over the country making sure that his government was delivering the services that it could. On at least three occasions I found myself on a Saturday morning trying to go down to Belize City. Hitching a ride was widely accepted and, lo and behold, here would come Premier Price in his Land Cruiser (with a driver at his side); he stopped each time to give me a ride. We were not trained for what to say or do in these unexpected situations. In any case, other than a cursory exchange, he was not talkative (another strange behavior for a Belizean, since they love to talk). As an aside, shortly after I was sworn in as Ambassador, *State* magazine had story about the relationship between Peace Corps and State Department, and there is a photo in that article of me shaking hands with the Premier of Belize in 1968, as well as a photo of me shaking hands with the President of Honduras at the Credentials Presentation Ceremony. It was nice to see.

While I was a volunteer, a Consul General and a small staff in Belize City represented the United States. I assume that at the time, most of the Consulate’s work consisted of following the Belize-Guatemala dispute from the Belize side of the border, as well as typical consular work. This was before Belize had become a popular tourist destination. Hence, I assume that they did not have that much work supporting the tiny American community in Belize. The one thing that I recall is that the Consul had a boat. My small group of fellow volunteers was invited to ride to the cayes (as “keys” are known in Belize) shortly after we arrived in country and we almost perished in a freak storm that appeared unexpectedly on our return to Belize City. If it had not been for one of my fellow volunteers [Lon Hanke], who had boating experience, we could have capsized. The Consulate in Belize must have been a strange place in which to work. The Peace Corps office in Belize City, in keeping with Peace Corps policy, kept its distance from the Consulate.

*Q: Was the Foreign Service crossing your radar at all?*

ALMAGUER: Yes. I saw some brochures and I took the Foreign Service exam in Miami immediately after I left the Peace Corps in early December 1969.

*Q: What were your impressions about your accomplishments? Did you feel positive when you left Belize?*

ALMAGUER: At one level I had been frustrated. I wish I had more knowledge of agriculture and marketing because I could have been more useful to my farmers. On the other hand, I really felt good about: 1) how well they had accepted me into their communities; 2) how they respected my views and listened to my suggestions; and 3) how their frustrations and good fortunes became my frustrations and good fortunes. I remember going to Belize City one time to complain to my Belizean boss (the head of the Belizean Department of Cooperatives and Credit Unions) about a government decision that troubled my clients. He cautioned me, “You know, you’re a functionary of my department. You’re not here as their representative.” I remember



reacting, saying, “I’m not a functionary of your department. I’m a Peace Corps Volunteer.” Even though I was a lowly Peace Corps Volunteer, I had the advantage of being able to knock on doors of a mid-level functionary to represent people who in most cases had never even been to Belize City and had limited capacity to represent themselves. That role was important for me. I really did care. I really felt drawn by the community with whom I worked.

*Q: I imagine today many of the technical issues that you faced with your cooperatives could be handled by Internet search ...*

ALMAGUER: Even the concept of what became the Internet did not exist. The telephone connection to Belize City consisted of one line for the entire northern part of the country. If I had an urgent need to use the phone I would have to go into the telephone office at the Orange Walk Post Office and tell the operator that I needed to call at two o’clock and he would sign me up. When I got there shortly before two o’clock, he would start yelling at the person on the line at that time to “get off the line!” Even the radio was spotty. I remember being in Orange Walk in July 1969 when Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed on the moon. I was listening to the landing on *BBC* on my short-wave radio. Half the time all I could hear was static. Most of the people in and around Orange Walk were oblivious to the event, and as they learned about it, many doubted it or attributed the drought that year to tampering with nature. We simply were not plugged in to the world.

So basically we wrote letters for communication. More than anything else, we depended on the Peace Corps Office to share with us material that we needed to help us with our work, such as agriculture magazines and brochures. For example, one of the big things that I got into was the production of okra. Somebody had told me that okra could grow well in the region and that there was a market for it in the U.S. I did some research and managed to make contact with a buyer in New Orleans who was interested in our potential for okra production. By hook or crook, I learned a great deal about okra, and some of the funniest and some of the most frustrating moments in my Peace Corps experience happened during my okra episode. For a while some of my fellow volunteers were calling me the “Okra Prince.”

*Q: You’re talking about a vegetable that is about two and one-half inches long.*

ALMAGUER: Right. I showed the farmers how big the okra had to be before it was harvested. I told them that the market required okra to be two inches long. Then I would come back the next day, and they not only had picked the ones that were of the right size, but also those that had been allowed to grow three inches or longer, which the market would reject. They had chopped the longer okra to meet the size specification and commingled these with the okra that met specifications. That meant that we had to re-sort the whole batch because the buyer would not accept the shipment that was not 100% up to standard.

My fellow volunteers and I worked with the limited information we could get. The Peace Corps - then and now - is committed to the concept that individuals like myself can tap their ingenuity and thereby make a difference in the lives of people with whom we share two years of our lives. Of course, the world has changed dramatically. Those people with whom I worked — or, more likely their children and grandchildren — now have access to the Internet. I saw some uses of the

Internet by indigenous peoples in remote areas in Bolivia that baffled me years later. Times have changed. But in those days, one was still able to live the classic Peace Corps experience of being thrown out there and expected to do some good. Somebody has said, and I agree, that “the single most important thing the volunteers left behind wasn’t so much the specific knowledge or skills that they imparted, but the enthusiasm and commitment they passed on to local residents to help them carry on, and to look at the possibilities.” Volunteers stimulate positive action on behalf of their communities. I was a believer in the rationale that led to the creation of the Peace Corps and I continue to believe strongly in the idea, although now is more complicated because there are very few places in the world where you can do some of the things I did without better preparation.

*Q: What about the society there? I’ve heard that the Belize’s predominant group were black lumbermen who settled there. Was this the case where you were, or was it more Mayan?*

ALMAGUER: Belize is quite diverse and that diversity is striking since it has such a small population — 150,000 in the late ‘60s, and now perhaps twice as many. The country is about the size of El Salvador but the latter has some eight million people. The other surprising thing is how well various racial and ethnic groups seemed to relate to each other. Certain groups tend to be predominant in one part of the country — for example, the “Black Caribs” (now known as the Garifunas) are heavily concentrated in the coastal south of the country, but you will find them elsewhere. The *mestizos* (mixed Mayan and Spanish blood) predominate in the border areas near Guatemala and Mexico. I worked in that area. The Creoles are dominant in Belize City and the cayes. They are descendants of the original black settlers and slaves, are English-speaking, and have been at the center of political life for most of Belize’s history. In the southwest, in addition to the *mestizos*, one can find Mayans, with their own dialects. Belize is quite a mixed society. As you may recall, soon after the Americas were “discovered,” the Pope divided the new world vertically in half. The western half was granted to the Spaniards and the eastern half went to the Portuguese. Because of geography (South America is further east than most people realize), the dividing line was drawn in such a way that today’s Brazil wound up on the Portuguese side of the line, whereas the Spaniards received the bulk of the Americas. The Papal decision was then reinforced by the Spaniards by colonization of one form or another. In Central America (which was in the western half of the papal divide), that colonization occurred principally from the Pacific side. The center spine of Central America, which is a continuation of the Rockies, was where most indigenous populations lived and where the Spaniards settled. To this day, capital cities and large population centers are in the highlands and on the Pacific side of the center spine. The eastern or Caribbean side was less hospitable, hotter, swampy, and otherwise less appealing to the colonial authorities. Hence, very few Spanish settlements occurred on that side, including the portion that today we know as Belize.

The Caribbean coast was, in theory, Spanish, but in practice it was minimally populated throughout most of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Thus, the British pirates who in those days roamed the Caribbean looking for Spanish galleons carrying precious metals back to Spain found the Caribbean coast of Central America a perfect place in which to hide. Belize, which has the second largest barrier reef in the world (after eastern Australia), was particularly well suited as a pirates’ hideaway because once the ships managed to sail through the treacherous coastal reefs and reach the coastal side of the reef, they found shallow calm waters (unless a hurricane

hits) and plenty of mangroves and coves — a perfect place where pirates could hide. So British pirates settled in there. At that time, there were only small pockets of Mayan population further inland. We now know that this region was a major hub of Mayan civilization and perhaps a million Mayans lived in what we today know as Belize. However, for reasons that remain unclear, the Mayans suffered a major decline in the 1200s or thereabout. Consequently, by the time Europeans arrived in this area, there were few native people in the region.

“Belize” is an interesting name. A theory that I like is that it was named after a pirate by the name of Wallace. In Spanish there is no sound for “W.” Hence, it’s pronounced as a “V,” the sound tending to what in English is that of “B.” As a result, the Spaniards knew this pirate as “Va-lay-cee.” From there, it is easy to see how the pronunciation evolved into “Belize.” At some point, the pirates may have begun to settle along the coast and soon began to bring in slaves. They needed a labor force to harvest the huge mahogany trees that at the time were found further inland.

*Q: When you were there, did you observe a color line?*

ALMAGUER: Yes, but a different color line from what I saw in Florida in the ‘50s and ‘60s. Belize in the 1960s was a Creole-run society. The Creoles, descendants of slaves and of mixed British blood, were educated, like many of the British Caribbean people. (Secretary of State) Colin Powell, who had Jamaican parents, is a good example of a Creole. Because the British had done a good job of creating a civil service, many Creoles were civil servants. The Creole population in the 1960s made up, I would guess, 60 to 70 percent of the population of the country. In more recent times, other population groups, particularly the *mestizos*, have grown faster and I suspect that Creoles now make up less than 50 percent of the population. In my time in Orange Walk, where the population was overwhelmingly *mestizo*, Creoles dominated the public sector, including as teachers and in the police force. The interaction between Creoles and the *mestizos* seemed to be devoid of tension. Intermarriage, while not common, did occur. The real dividing line was the language of common use. The Creoles were English-speaking and only a few spoke Spanish. The *mestizos*, on the other hand, spoke Spanish at home but also spoke English in schools and public settings.

In the south, Belize also had two different kinds of indigenous groups, also Mayan, but more pure and of great interest to anthropologists and others seeking a better understanding of Mayan civilization. I did not meet many from this group in the region of the country where I was assigned. There is another interesting group in Belize, now called the *Garifunas*. They were called Black Caribs up until more recent times. *Garifunas* are distinguished for their deep dark black skin but also with indigenous facial features, such as high cheekbones. They also speak a distinctive indigenous dialect. The history books trace their origin to a shipwreck off the coast of the Caribbean island of St. Vincent. Slaves being carried to the Americas managed to escape and settled in that part of the Caribbean. They must have intermarried with the indigenous Carib Indians. This mixed-blood group eventually settled in the Caribbean side of Central America and can be found along the coast from Belize down to Panama. In no country, however, is this group as important as in Belize. Belize presents a terrific panorama of mixed races and cultures that is a goldmine for anthropologists and sociologists to study.

**R. GRANT SMITH**  
**Economic Officer**  
**Belmopan (1968-1970)**

*R. Grant Smith was born on Long Island in 1938. He graduated from Princeton University in 1960. He later earned a master's degree from Columbia University. He joined the Foreign Service in 1963 and held positions in Pakistan, Nepal, and India. In 1995 he began his ambassadorship in Tajikistan. Ambassador Smith was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1999.*

Q: *You were in Belize from when to when?*

SMITH: '68 to '70.

Q: *I've read this book - what is it, Our Man in Belize?*

SMITH: I haven't read it.

Q: *Well, there's a book about when the hurricane hit. When did the hurricane hit?*

SMITH: '61.

Q: *'61, so this is before. You have to check on that. It's an interesting book. What was Belize like in '68.*

SMITH: It was still a British colony. There was a British garrison out near the airport but not visibly present in the city. It was very much in the British tradition, in the sense that policemen didn't carry guns. It was very peaceful. The governor wore a hat that looked very colonial, with plumes and everything. The economy was very open, as was usually the case in the colonies, but it was *de facto* much more tied to the U.S. than to the UK. The Belizean dollar was then, as it is now, I believe, pegged to the U.S. dollar. The major exports were sugar, orange juice, some vegetables. As far as Belize was concerned, their share of the sugar quota of the United States and whether there was a freeze in Florida or not were major economic issues. It was poor but quite open and democratic. There were regular elections. The government changed. I'm not sure whether it changed while I was there, but the prime minister, who was prime minister several times later, used to drive himself around in an old Land Rover. Everybody knew him, driving around in an old Land Rover. The major issue was Guatemala - the Guatemalan claim - and how that would be resolved. And we were involved in negotiations. I must admit I don't remember the details of the negotiations any more, but we had produced a proposal which had been rejected, and the opposition was strongly against any deal with Guatemala. We'd often have demonstrations, "We don't want no Guatemala."

Q: *Did Guatemala claim a part of Belize or all of it?*

SMITH: That was the problem. Guatemala claimed the entirety of Belize.

*Q: That's a little difficult to negotiate.*

SMITH: It's one of those cases where the very existence was threatened by the claim, not a sliver but the whole country. And it dated back to the previous century and the history of British colonization of that coast and the agreements with Guatemala at the time. But in fact, the country had become very British. It was slightly less than 50 percent of Indian or Hispanic origin people and slightly less than 50 percent of blacks who'd come in from the West Indies, and a small percentage of Chinese, Portuguese, English. But very balanced racially, very mixed racially. And a fascinating place to be because, I used to say, it's the only place where there is no difference between macroeconomics and microeconomics, and you could almost look at the balance of payments or balance of trade and track individual transactions because everything was so small.

*Q: Who was the consul general there?*

SMITH: Bob Tepper was the consul general.

*Q: And what was your job - well, you were number two.*

SMITH: I was number two, but I was the economic officer and in charge when Bob Tepper wasn't there.

*Q: Did America have any interest other than just not wanting to have unrest in the area?*

SMITH: We certainly had an interest in the resolution of the dispute with Guatemala, this being our back yard, and we had an interest in that being resolved peacefully. We were not, however, in a position, I would say, that we were strongly... We were supporting a resolution of the dispute; we were not out-and-out supporting Belizean independence.

*Q: What about Guatemala? Did our consulate general have much relation with our embassy in Guatemala?*

SMITH: We used to go there periodically. In fact, we took the pouch by plane to Guatemala and picked one up and brought it back, which gave us a reason to make that trip regularly. Guatemala was a very different place. You could hear machine gun fire at night. Our ambassador was later assassinated there, as I recall. When we had visitors from Guatemala, we would take them down to a street corner political rally to remind them what democracy was like. The few AID programs that we had in Belize were being run out of the regional office in Guatemala, which was another reason for our going there and people coming over.

*Q: What about the British? Were the British committed to the independence of Belize?*

SMITH: They were committed to the protection of Belize. They weren't committed to pushing ahead with independence blindly. They very much wanted a negotiated solution themselves, because if they pushed ahead blindly, then they had to protect Belize, and they weren't sure that

they wanted to protect Belize that completely, although they did show an interest in the readiness of the airplanes of the Guatemalan Air Force.

*Q: As far as Guatemala was concerned, it seems like Guatemala, more than the other Central American governments or societies, is in a way more prone to violence. It sounds like Belize is relatively quiet and the Guatemalans use their revolvers and machetes.*

SMITH: That was our impression at the time. Subsequently, things have changed a bit, in the sense that there is some almost gang warfare in Belize City now. So some of the violence that later came to affect U.S. cities affected Belize also, but at that time, certainly, Belize was very peaceful. While we were there, we had one robbery. Our trash cans were stolen. And it was some kids, we were pretty sure, and we asked around and found out who they were and sort of left a message at the home of one of them that if the trash cans weren't back by noon we were going to report this to the police; and the trash cans were returned. The place was extremely peaceful when we were there.

*Q: When was the "Soccer War?"*

SMITH: The Soccer War happened while we were in Belize.

*Q: This was between Guatemala and Honduras.*

SMITH: That's right, and we had very little impact in Belize. Both sides were concerned that somehow there might be something going on in Belize supporting their opponent. I can remember in the middle of the war a DC-3 from the Salvadoran Air Force arrived, and the Honduran consul went, "Ah," to the governor and said, "You must impound that plane. It might have been bombing." Although it was clearly a cargo plane. And the governor, I always felt, was sort of uncertain about what to do, but he got his police chief and asked the police chief to go see if the pilot would let them have a look in the plane. And that's what the police chief did. By that time the plane had been on the ground for several hours, so when the police chief looked at it, it had already been loaded with a full load of Scotch Whiskey. So the Salvadoran Air Force, in the middle of the Soccer War, was running whiskey. Ballantyne's, or Scotch, was then \$18 a case. You can see why they were coming to Belize to buy Scotch.

*Q: The Belize government had a prime minister and all. Did you find that except for the defense element it was a pretty independent operation, or were the British still pulling all the strings?*

SMITH: No, we found it quite independent. The area that the British had control of, of course, was foreign affairs and the negotiation with Guatemala, where they were the prime negotiator but were not going ahead without the agreement of the Belizeans. There was a British advisor in the police department, as I recall, who was from the intelligence side, but the level of British influence was certainly not oppressive, and the prime minister was basically in charge of things at home.

*Q: How was life there?*

SMITH: It was isolated. It was quiet. The consulate had a Boston Whaler. I'm not sure whether it was justified on the basis of recreation or justified on the basis of evacuation, officially to Washington, but it certainly served the recreation purposes, because the U.S. government paid for the boat, and the consulate staff could use it, go out. In a 45-minute run you'd be out on a little spit of sand on the reef and some of the best skin-diving in the world.

*Q: Yes, it still is Lumber - was that a big industry still?*

SMITH: Lumber was the reason for the establishment of the British presence in that part of the coast but it had become much less of an industry by the time we were there. Again, sugar - there was a big British sugar mill - citrus, some vegetables - they were beginning to grow vegetables for the U.S. market. There was an expatriate community. There were three social clubs. The one which was predominantly British, which was dead. There was a Latino one, which was quite lively, and there was one whose backbone, I would say, was black civil servants, which was also very interesting but in a different way. It tended to focus more on cricket and things like that.

*Q: Did the Caribbean weigh in? I'm thinking of Jamaica, particularly, or what about Mexico?*

SMITH: Mexico was influential. There was a considerable smuggling trade from Belize to Mexico. If you looked at their trade statistics, you could only understand them if you knew that all of that champagne that was being imported was in fact being smuggled out to Mexico, and other things like that. The Mexicans had taken a position on the Guatemalan dispute that was interesting. Mexico also claimed part of Belize. They didn't claim the whole country, and their position was that if the Belizeans and Guatemalans resolved their claims, the Mexicans would withdraw theirs, which was a position that certainly gave them a lot of credit with the Belizeans.

*Q: Yes, I would think. I mean, this gave them somebody behind them. How did you all feel? Did you feel that this Guatemalan claim was something you really wanted to do, or was this just sort of a local election ploy?*

SMITH: We felt that the Guatemalans had made a large issue out of it. They were printing stamps, Belize was theirs. It was certainly an issue, or seem from our side to be an issue in Guatemala. On the other hand, it was clear to us that the Belizeans - certainly the Anglophone ones, but most of the non-Anglophone ones as well - didn't want much to do with Guatemala.

*Q: Well, Guatemala was also not a very impressive place.*

SMITH: Well, from our personal standpoint that was something else. Here we had a country that was really a democracy and that, by developing country standards, an impressive democracy. And if you look at the statistics, you'll see that elections in Belize are won by 15 votes and that the government has regularly changed from one side to the other. It is a democratic place, and it goes down; it isn't just an elite.

*Q: Well, did you feel there was much interest in what you were doing in Washington?*

SMITH: Not too much.

I was talking about democracy in Belize and how it really was a democracy, and you asked whether there was much interest in Washington. There was interest in resolving the dispute, and that had engaged people in Washington, but I don't think there was much interest beyond that. I remember some years later when Belize did become independent, I happened to be working again in UN Political Affairs and was working with our mission in New York on the statement that we would make at the time Belize became independent and became a member of the United Nations, and I had to keep reminding them how much history the United States had with Belize. After the Civil War some people had fled to Belize and established plantations there. We'd had the strong history of rum-running during Prohibition, which wasn't something we were about to touch on. But Washington didn't see Belize as a key country in Latin America by any means then.

*Q: Were there any disputed islands off Belize? Some of these places in the Caribbean... any island problems?*

SMITH: The Guatemalan claim, of course, meant that all of the Belizean islands were disputed, and subsequently there has become a dispute with Guatemala over where the border is, but at that time, there wasn't a dispute because it was all or nothing as far as Guatemala was concerned. There was no dispute; there is a history of relations between Belize and the Bay Islands of Honduras. I don't think there's any claim there, but there are strong cultural ties.

*Q: I think it was during this time - maybe I'm wrong - that we inserted troops into the Dominican Republic. Was it at this time, or was this a little earlier?*

SMITH: I believe it was a little bit earlier.

*Q: Maybe it was earlier.*

SMITH: But the events of that kind had very little reverberation in Belize. Things that would go on in the English-speaking Caribbean would have some effect there, because you did have a community of Jamaicans or Trinidadians, but those were fairly small. It was a very insular place, with one big issue, which was Guatemala.

**FRANK ALMAGUER**  
**Peace Corps Staff**  
**Belize (1974-1976)**

*Ambassador Frank Almaguer was born in Holgun Cuba in 1945. His family moved to Miami in 1954. He attended the University of Florida and joined the Peace Corps in 1967. He joined USAID and served in Ecuador and Bolivia before becoming ambassador to Honduras. Ambassador Almaguer was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2004.*

*Q. Let's start talking about what you did for Peace Corps the second time around.*



ALMAGUER: I re-joined the Peace Corps, this time as a staff member, in October 1974. There were a couple of options, but the Peace Corps assigned me to go back to Belize, where my wife and I had served as volunteers less than five years earlier. Both my wife and I were a bit nervous about this, but our finances almost mandated a move and it was an opportunity to break into overseas work. By then our son, Danny, was a year-and-a-half-old toddler and this was a good time to be in a place like Belize since schooling was not yet an issue. And we hoped to be able to save some money since housing was covered and we would have few other major expenses there.

I was assigned to fill the position of Program and Training Officer. It was a unique situation since I would be the only American on staff. At this point, the Peace Corps was experimenting with having locals fill most positions. In the case of Belize, a small program with only some 45 volunteers, the director, Alex Frankel, was a local hire. (He was actually from Jamaica but had served as a senior officer in the Belize Government civil service for many years.) Hence, I would be in the unique position of reporting to a local employee.

It was an interesting and, in many ways, difficult 16 months (Dec. 1974 – April 1976). As my wife in particular discovered, a place like Belize when one is young and unattached could be fun — challenging but not terribly difficult. However, when you have a little baby and there's no running water for days on end — and this in the days before disposable diapers — it was particularly rough on her. And we had no Embassy support of any significance. The Peace Corps has always minimized its dependence on the Embassy. Further, it wasn't even an Embassy yet, since independence didn't come to Belize until 1981. Having a local employee as director meant that there was no one in the "Country Team" to represent the Peace Corps. Even our house was substandard by typical Embassy guidelines. To give you just one example, on the evening we arrived we were taken to the house we would be occupying, but it was still occupied by my predecessor — a wonderful person, whom we got to know well subsequently in Honduras. But on the afternoon in which we arrived, he was out-of-town and we soon discovered that hotel restaurants would not open until 7 p.m., with a hungry toddler not quite understanding what was going on! Episodes such as that one made life very difficult for my wife.

On the other hand, I was doing what I anticipated I would be doing, and in a country that I knew fairly well. I quickly picked up on the issues; became acquainted with what the volunteers were doing, and sat down with country officials to help define work descriptions for future volunteers. It was a pleasant and unhurried job environment. It hurt not having an American mentor as my boss, although the director was very nice and very competent, but marched to a different drummer. I also worried that the small Consulate staff showed no interest in the work of the Peace Corps. In the meantime, things got further complicated at home. My wife was pregnant. While the timing was not planned, we looked forward to having a second baby. Some 10 months after arriving, we now had a baby girl, Nina, along with our 2 ½ years-old son. And issues like water, poor sanitation outside our home, and lack of adequate support services continued to plague us — my wife in particular. Amazingly, my wife opted to have that baby in Belize, which in retrospect was crazy. I don't recall that we talked about it that much — it just seemed natural to have the baby in Belize City. The birth itself was memorable in certain ways. My wife's hospital room overlooked the Caribbean Sea and early that Sunday, October 5, the sun was rising as the delivery became imminent. In the delivery room, as soon as our beautiful, healthy baby

was born, the nurse said to me, “Did you bring the soap?” And I said, “What soap?” [Laughter.] It was not totally rustic there, but close to it. And bear in mind that we did not have family nearby or particularly supportive friends to help us deal with the travails of a family with a newborn.

*Q: It was tough.*

ALMAGUER: Yes it was. At that point it became evident that this was going to be too much, and so I began to inquire with the Peace Corps back in Washington. They were very understanding. (I doubt a larger bureaucracy like State or USAID would have cared all that much.) In the course of our few months in Belize, we had ample visits from Headquarters, including from the Peace Corps Director, and it was clear that they were pleased with the work I had been doing and eager to retain me. Early in 1976, the Peace Corps indicated that they would be willing to transfer us to a more substantive program in a larger setting — Tegucigalpa, Honduras. ...

*Q: [Laughter] Oh boy!*

ALMAGUER: ... to do the same thing. I actually went first on TDY [Temporary Duty] in February 1976. When I saw the Maya Hotel near the Peace Corps office, I thought that I was being transferred to Paris. [Laughter.]

**BEAUVEAU B. NALLE**  
**Consul General**  
**Belmopan (1976-1981)**

*Beauveau B. Nalle was born in Pennsylvania in 1927. He entered the Foreign Service in 1956, serving in Washington, DC, Turkey, Uganda, Liberia, and Belize. Mr. Nalle was interviewed by Thomas Dunnigan on April 19, 1994.*

*Q: That's the way I remember Personnel too. Very very seldom was anything held overnight, any arguments held overnight.*

*After this interesting assignment in Personnel, what came next?*

NALLE: What I really wanted was Consul General in Istanbul but good old Bob Houghton took that one out of my hands. He couldn't speak a word of Turkish but that's alright.

I went down to a crazy little place in Central America called Belize. It was a strange business. Belize of course is former British Honduras and the only remaining British colony in the Western Hemisphere. I went there as Consul General, had a staff of 4 Americans and about 8 or 9 locals. And was somewhat startled.

I was told that it was an independent reporting post which meant, as I understood it, I did not have to go through London. I could report directly to Washington. That's the sort of bureaucratic double-talk that I would have been just thrilled to ignore. But anyway, after I'd been there for a couple of months, I got a copy of the famous Kennedy letter.

Only in this case it was from President Carter, saying--as Chief of Mission in Belize, you have this, that--I was looking at it and said, "What? Chief of Mission in Belize?" Nobody ever told me about this. So I put it away, really didn't think much about it.

Here's good old Mother State at work again, about a week after that I got a cable, I think it may have been immediate, from Washington saying, "You will have received your copy of President Carter's letter." I paraphrase this, "Yes," it said, "it's true, you have the title of Chief of Mission in Belize. However, we instruct you that under no circumstances are you to use the title. Under no circumstances are you to call yourself Chief of Mission. Under no circumstances are you to advise the British or the other members of the diplomatic corps that you are Chief of Mission. You are not to use the term Chief of Mission in talking matters over with your Belizean colleagues and friends."

It just went on and on and on. I thought, what the hell is this all about? To this day I don't know what it's all about. It totally mystifies me.

*Q: Obviously the White House had sent this to all posts and since Belize was a semi- independent post, someone just sent it.*

NALLE: Well, why did they send me the original letter from Carter?

*Q: That's what I mean.*

NALLE: I think it's some legal connection with the fact that it's an independent or reporting post.

*Q: Yes, I would think so.*

NALLE: I was in the same category as Hong Kong.

*Q: There may be one or two others but I'm not sure.*

NALLE: Maybe one or two others but that was it.

So anyway, the reason I went to Belize, by this time I was getting old and promotions were fewer and fewer. The bird watching was good and above all in the post report inventory, I noticed the listing of a 21 foot Boston Whaler with 2-75 horsepower outboard motors on it, for use by the Consul General in the performance of his official duties. And also used by the Consul General and his wife every Saturday and Sunday to go skin diving out on the reef or to go bird watching before they do anything else.

We also at that time in Washington, had a little 20 foot Swedish built diesel powered motor sailer which I was able to ship down to Belize at very modest cost. Which we had there for the almost 3 years I spent. And we'd go off on vacation and leave instead of going off to Guatemala or going to Salvador. We'd get on the boat and go to sea for a week, up or down the barrier reef, which next to the reef in Australia, is the second longest cargo barrier reef in the world. The scuba diving and the snorkeling are just unbelievable.

Belize was a very interesting post. It is, was the last British colony in the western hemisphere. It was ruled by a "Governor and a Commander-in-Chief." A very nice old gentleman formerly of the colonial office. Who'd been born in Kenya, raised in Kenya, spoke Swahili and Kikuyu very fluently. An irascible Scott, we got along quite well together, Peter MacIntee.

The problem was everybody wanted Belize to be independent except Guatemala. Guatemala laid claim to the entire territory of Belize based on a treaty that had been drawn up by the then Central American state, empire I think they called it, existing in 1840 or 1835, around there. The treaty was very badly worded. I used to point out to junior officers, my staff, what would happen if you couldn't write well. You could start a war.

So based on their misunderstanding of this treaty, the Guatemalans claimed all of Belize. The question of the resolution of this problem was the so-called Belize Resolution in the UN. Every year the UN would vote that Belize should be independent. Every year the Guatemalans and a few other South Americans supporting their brothers in Guatemala City, would vote, no. For many years the U.S. vetoed the resolution.

*Q: Excuse me, you said the U.S. vetoed, would it not be the British vetoed?*

NALLE: No, the British wanted to get rid of Belize as fast as they could. They'd get down on their hands and knees and beg us to vote for the Belize Resolution. It had complete internal self-government.

*Q: And so we had to do it.*

NALLE: Because we liked the fascist military thugs that were ruling Guatemala. Even today I become angry with our military program piling money into Guatemala with those butchers that were ruining that country. The conservative elements in the US government said that we can't turn loose this good anti-communist friend of ours. And so for years we either in some cases vetoed, in some cases we merely abstained from voting, for the Belize Resolution at the UN.

*Q: The Belize Resolution would not have given the territory to Guatemala would it?*

NALLE: No. It would have just said that Belize would become independent.

*Q: Then the Guatemalans would assume that they could swallow it up.*

NALLE: The Guatemalans would assume that they could swallow it up or at least this is what some thought. I was never convinced that the Guatemalans were going to invade. And besides

the British agreed to keep their troops there. The British had 2400 troops. Part of the agreement was the British could keep using Belize as a jungle warfare training center because they could no longer use Sarawak or Borneo or any of those places. The only place in the world they had for jungle warfare training. And they'd rotate great regiments, the Black Watch, the Queen's Own Foot, and others for 6 months training exercises. And they would keep them there after independence. And they had harrier jets just to fight off the hateful Guats.

I mean, it struck me as the United States government and the State Department at its worst. Because these butchers in Guatemala city were "anti-communists." There was some thought that George Price might be little bit on the left-side himself.

*Q: I think there was.*

NALLE: George Price was gay. That's the only problem with poor old George Price. He used to go out to Miami and cruise from time to time. But everybody overlooked that, that was his business not ours.

I worked so hard along with Jim Cheek who then was Deputy Assistant in NRA. And John Blacken was Director of ARACEN. The 3 of us worked desperately to get us to change our position on the Belize Resolution up at the UN. Finally, by God, we finally did it. In October of 1980.

*Q: It became independent in 1981.*

NALLE: That's right. Then I left 3 weeks after that.

And narcotics was the other problem. This was when I first really faced the narcotics problem. It was unbelievable: overflights, illegal aircraft. We didn't have a narcotics man in Belize. He came over from Guatemala, he came over about once a month. It was primarily marijuana but more and more there was evidence that it was becoming a transit point for cocaine from South America. And more and more it was obvious that senior members of the government, Belize government not the British, were involved in it and it was a very difficult matter. Also, the Nicaraguan situation was degenerating.

We had a plane land, I get called out to the airport. It was an American twin Beech I think it was, with 2 guys in the cockpit who didn't have pilots licenses, didn't have drivers' licenses, didn't have credit cards or passports. They had lots of cash, U.S. dollars cash. The aircraft itself had no aircraft log, it had no air maintenance log, it had no airframe log, it had no engine log. There were no tail numbers on the aircraft. There was nothing. Just these 2 guys with no identification. And an aircraft that couldn't be traced, all the numbers had been filed off.

*Q: And they were American?*

NALLE: Oh yeah, couldn't have been more so, straight out of Mississippi or Alabama, nice bunch of guys. Like this fellow who got shot down in Nicaragua. Do you remember?

Q: *Oh yes I do.*

NALLE: He was the same kind of guy.

Q: *What did you do with them?*

NALLE: I wanted to throw them in jail. The Belize government said, what the hell, let them go. Money probably passed hands out at the airport, I'm sure. They said they were lost.

Q: *The plane was searched, I take it.*

NALLE: The plane was searched, there was nothing in it. As I said, I think money passed hands. The Belizeans let them go, they said, "We've got no reason to hold them." I said, what do you mean you've got no reason to hold them? These guys are as illegal as they can be. They said, no, the plane's all right. So off they went.

About 4 days later a cable came in from San Jose. Saying that a twin Beech with new Panamanian identification numbers. Two Americans--it was obviously the same aircraft--had crashed in the mountains in Northern Costa Rica, just on the edge of the Nicaraguan border and some 500 rifles and a half a million rounds of ammunition had been discovered.

Q: *A prominent press story.*

NALLE: A prominent press story. The plane at that time had had a tail number painted on it in Panama. Which was untraceable. They go down along with this stuff in Costa Rica and had crashed flying north from Panama to Nicaragua. It was a crazy place.

Another time a plane landed at Belize International airport. It requested emergency landing, engine problems. Here's one of these good old Southern boys. Superb pilots, unbelievable pilots, they're so good. He was sitting there behind the wheel, a mechanic was working on his engine. The mechanic, I knew him, a U.S. citizen who was a drug smuggler himself but we never did catch him.

I think the only honest policeman in the country of Belize was on duty at the airport at the time. He came out and looked over the airplane. And back in the after section of the aircraft, were a whole lot of garbage bags very neatly wrapped up and tied with tape. And the policeman turned and said, "Hey man, what that? Give me one man." And the pilot went back and got one for him. The guy opened it up, it was very neatly baled marijuana. And the fellow said to the pilot, "Man you've got about 5000 kilos of pot in the back of your aircraft." The pilot turned around and he looked at the policeman and said, "Son of a bitch, where do you suppose that came from?"

He stayed 2 days in jail. Our consular officer, Bernie Gross, was down in the jail talking to him. And a guy, Bernie told me later, with pointy toed alligator Gucci shoes and electric blue suit came in with a briefcase full of hundred dollar bills. And Bernie was saying, "Hey, we can get vitamin pills and something for food rations." And the guy says, "Why thank you Mr. Gross, I believe my problem is being taken care of." He got up and walked out of the jail.

*Q: That is just a modern style.*

NALLE: It was unbelievable. The police would shake down the tourists, they'd go up to tourist and say, "Welcome to Belize, man." And would pat him in the back and in doing so they'd leave a couple of marijuana leaves. The cop would say, "Oh, what's that on your shoulder? Hey boy, you've got pot. You come on down to headquarters with me. Unless you want to take care of me right now." And the poor tourist would pull out a \$5 bill and give it to him.

*Q: You were there for the independence ceremony?*

NALLE: No I left. I was ready to get out, I was tired and it was a hard post. The old Governor had left and a new guy came in. And he was not helpful. The old Governor had tried to get the Independence taken care of through persuasion. Also the British had a great deal of trouble in working out with Belize just what the terms of independence would be. This went back and forth.

So I was very happy to get out. I had a phone call from PER and they said that--How would you like to go as Consul General to Izmir? I said, I don't even have to talk to my wife about that, well, I'm ready. I made up my mind in 2 seconds. Sheila was tired, housing was just excruciatingly bad, just awful.

**JAMES F. MACK**  
**Belize Desk Officer**  
**Washington, DC (1979-1981)**

*Mr. Mack was born in Connecticut and raised in New York State. After graduating from Cornell University, he joined the Peace Corps and served in Honduras. In 1966 he joined the State Department and was sent to Vietnam in the CORDS program. Mr. Mack's other overseas service was primarily in Latin American where he served as Political Officer and Deputy Chief of Mission at a number of posts before being named US Ambassador to Guyana. Ambassador Mack was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2004.*

*Q: Today is the 12<sup>th</sup> of September 2005. Jim you are the Guatemala Desk Officer?*

MACK: Yes, I was the Guatemalan /Belize Desk Officer so I covered both countries. The reason for this was that at the time there was, and I believe still is, is a serious border dispute between the two countries. In fact, at one time Guatemala claimed all of Belize, which in 1979 was still a British colony. I think the Guatemalans have since reduced their claim but it is still rather substantial. Anyway that was the big issue at the time I was on the desk. The British were anxious to unburden themselves of Belize, which was one of the few remaining British colonies in the Caribbean at that point. Also, important in their thinking was the cost of maintaining defense of the colony. Because of the ever present threat of a Guatemalan incursion they had to

keep a couple of thousand troops in Belize, including a unit of Harrier jump jets, which was an expensive proposition to them. At the same time, they worried, as did the elected internally self-governing Belizean government of George Price, that a grant of independence without a border settlement could provoke a Guatemalan invasion. So they were stuck.

In any event the border issue consumed a significant amount of my time as a desk officer. During this period, I worked very closely with a guy named Millard Burr from the State Department Office of The Geographer. Burr came up with the proposal to guarantee Guatemala *sovereign* access to the Caribbean sea from their main port of Puerto Barrios. The problem was that without an agreement, while ships did enjoy physical access to Puerto Barrios in accordance with the international law of the sea, it was not the *sovereign* access that Guatemala felt it had to have for political reasons. So when we received word that the Guatemalan dictator might be willing to cut a deal, Burr came up with the idea of granting the Guatemalans a mile wide sovereign channel through Belizean waters to Puerto Barrios. The problem we had to solve was that smack in the middle of the proposed sovereign channel were several very small islets called the Sapodilla keys, which belonged to Belize. We knew that George Price was adamant against giving up an inch of territory, so Burr came up with the idea of granting Guatemala *usufruct* of the islands in perpetuity which would allow Guatemala to claim it had won sovereign access to the sea.

Now *usufruct* is a word I had never heard before, but exists in international law, It means *use as if it were sovereign*. For Belize that meant they would retain theoretical sovereignty, but Guatemala would get to use them as if it were the sovereign owner. We thought this was a brilliant solution that would be acceptable to everybody, end the dispute, allow Belize to peacefully achieve independence and win us the Nobel Peace Prize. Just kidding but we were very excited.

Unfortunately, the problem ended up not being the Guatemalan dictator president and notorious human right abuser Gen Lucas Garcia , but the democratically elected Belizean Prime Minister George Price. Price was adamant that he wasn't going to agree to any deal that as much as *implied* loss of any sovereign territory even some water and a few islets. And so, Price lost the opportunity to settle the deal then and there. The British were pushing Price very hard to accept.

*Q: I was wondering why we were making a deal or acting as though we were outside authority. Why weren't the British doing this?*

MACK: Oh the British were very actively involved. Lord Carrington was very, very involved in this.

*Q: He was a Foreign Minister?*

MACK: He was the head of the FCO, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office at the time. He was very, very active in the process and the British dearly wanted to get out. I am sure I am missing some details twenty-six years later. But that occupied a lot of time. My other important issue as desk officer was Guatemala's horrendous human rights record under the military dictatorship, which was waging a war without quarter with Marxist guerrilla group.



Thousands of people were killed in the rural areas where the insurgency raged. In the urban areas, hundreds were gunned down by Lucas Garcia's people working from death lists which it was my understanding he personally approved, kind of like the evil Ming the Merciless in the Buck Rogers movies. It was pretty awful. Not that we could do too much about it since the US already had cut Guatemala off from military assistance a long time before. Remember this was under the Carter Administration. But what this also meant was with no US assistance, we could not use the threat to cut it off as a lever to force greater respect for human rights, although I'm not sure that Guatemalan government would have been susceptible to pressure in any event. They had decided to fight the insurgency, and any suspected of supporting it, their way, which was brutally. In some ways they were successful. Not that they are better off today because of it. In fact a lot of the lawlessness, high level corruption and impunity in Guatemala today can be traced to that period.

In any event, all this was happening in the context of Central America going down the tubes. Remember, the Sandinistas come into power in '79 or '80 in Nicaragua. The insurgents were rapidly gaining strength in El Salvador. The Chichoneros were growing in Honduras. These were not the most happy times to work in the Office of Central American Affairs. And the nights were very long. We were seriously understaffed.

*Q: Well now who were the Guatemalans dictator and his crew killing. Were they basically Indians or were they people who had gotten in his way, or were they unidentifiable group that was fighting him?*

MACK: In the rural areas anybody who was perceived to give aid and comfort to the guerrilla was a target. I didn't have much access to what was going on. The Embassy could not travel to the worst areas because of security reasons. I really didn't know much unless an American or a missionary living there got caught up in it. In urban areas however they were going after anyone perceived to oppose his regime. Those killed were not necessarily communists at all. They may have been labor union leaders or democrats. I am sure there were some communists among them. I had some contact with the people that the dictator was going after when they would come to Washington. This included a Vinicio Cerezo who later became President. But he was certainly no communist at all. He survived a number of assassination attempts and so anybody who was opposed to the dictator seemed to be fair game for Lucas Garcia.

*Q: Well now, this during the Carter Administration?*

MACK: Yes, and Carter was going full bore on the whole issue of Human Rights. So here we are in 1979 in a situation in which on the one hand the leftist insurgencies in Central America were rapidly gaining ground, and on the other President Carter's Human Rights policies were coming on strong. The State Department was kind of caught in a bind. On one hand, obviously we didn't want to see all those governments in Central America be taken over by leftist guerrillas. On the other hand, we wanted to carry out the Human Rights policy. In the case of Guatemala, we did not have a friendly government to support. In fact, they did not want anything to do with us. They were not receiving any military assistance from us.

*Q: Were they picking up any support from the Right – the Jesse Helms types and all that?*

MACK: I don't recall that in case of Guatemala. I just don't recall. I can recall very vividly El Salvador but I cannot recall the case of Guatemala.

*Q: But, did you get caught up in the rest of that. The El Salvador and Nicaragua business.*

MACK: Well we all worked in the same office. And we were all overworked in the same office. Central America was staffed at a level for the sleepy old Central America days. A total of seven officers covered Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Belize. To give you an idea of the work load, after I left, that office grew to nineteen. Our Deputy was Rich Brown, who passed away a couple of years ago. To say Rich was a very hard working guy was an understatement, and he expected the rest of us to emulate him. Just to give you an idea, when someone left before seven p.m., Rich would comment wryly that that person was "taking the afternoon off". The fact is that most of us habitually left work a lot later than that which put a lot of strain on those of us who were married with kids, which was practically all of us. We really began to worry about people there. They were wearing. A few years later, the deputy office of Central America Affairs died of a heart attack.

*Q: Was anything happening in Belize from your perspective?*

MACK: Our focus was to bring the Belizeans and Guatemalans together to resolve the boundary dispute to allow Belize to become independent. That really dominated everything. At that point, George Price had been Prime Minister of that self governing colony for many years and he wanted to be the leader who took Belize to independence. He eventually did, but independence was delayed for a number of years because of the border issue . I cannot recall what year, but it was several years after I left the desk.

*Q: Did we have a Consulate General in Belize at that time?*

MACK: Yes, we had a small Consulate General and interesting people assigned there. The consulate had been there for one hundred and fifty years. It was located in an old wooden building that had been shipped down piece by piece from New England and erected in Georgetown. It was made of pine, a pretty old building. I think it had been painted so many times over the years that by 1980 I think the paint was thicker than what the termites had left of the wood. The standard joke was that the building was being held up by one hundred coats of paint. It definitely was not a secure building and it was a firetrap. I don't know if they are still in it today.

*Q: They had a bad hurricane but I guess that they survived the hurricane?*

MACK: They had a real bad hurricane was 1961 as I recall. It was really bad.

*Q. Who was the US Ambassador in Guatemala during your time on the desk?*

MACK: Frank Ortiz, he just passed away. He was in Guatemala at the time that I was there. He had a very difficult job given our terrible relations with the government, the human rights violations, the insurgency etc.

*Q: That must have been a difficult place for the officers there and the staff.*

MACK: The security was awful. And there was a lot of killing going on. The leftists were active too and they were carrying out assassinations. It was a very, very nasty situation.

*Q: You were doing this from what '79 to '81?*

MACK: Yes!

*Q: Did you feel the cold hand of the Reagan takeover because it really hit Central America, I mean ARA . Or were you too far down?*

MACK: No. I mean there was certainly major change when Reagan came in but remember the Republicans did not control the Congress. So the Carter Human Rights legislation stayed in place. We still had to abide by the law. But the Carter Political Appointees who had wielded tremendous influence, who staffed the powerful Bureau of Human Rights, which had grown to wield an enormous amount of power and practically had veto power of any policy initiative proposed by the careerists working on Central America, were gone.

*Q: Had we pretty well written Guatemala off?*

MACK: We just couldn't do very much with Guatemala because of the human rights problems. It was a very difficult place to work. The country was in the midst of a very serious insurgency and a large part of the country was closed for casual travel; lets put it that way. The government was organizing the rural indigenous population in the highlands into local militias to defend their villages against the insurgents. This turned out to be a rather effective program. But these groups also carried out their own vendettas.

**ROBERT RICH**  
**Ambassador**  
**Belize (1987-1990)**

*Ambassador Robert G. Rich, Jr. was born in Florida in 1930. He attended the University of Florida and Cornell University. Ambassador Rich entered the Foreign Service in 1957 and during his career has served in Korea, Indonesia, Trinidad, the Philippines and was ambassador to Belize in addition to various assignments in the State Department. He was interviewed by Thomas Dunnigan in 1994.*

*Q: Well, now after your adventures with the Marcoses, you came back to Washington in mid 1986?*

RICH: When I came back to Washington I began immediately preparing to go to Belize as ambassador. This was an appointment that was already a year and a half over due. I had left the Philippines en route to Belize, but the nomination had been held up by problems not related to me but problems in the Senate. Now this nomination was revived. In fact, one morning I thought I was going to Fiji as ambassador, and in the afternoon I was going to Belize again. In any case, the Belize appointment was now on track, and when I was finally able to disengage from Philippine issues I began preparations for that appointment.

*Q: And when did you actually arrive in Belize?*

RICH: In the summer of 1987. Belize had been independent for some years at that time.

*Q: I often wondered, Bob, Belize must be torn between various areas-pulls on it from North America, the Caribbean, the British and from Central America. Do any of these have any overweening influence?*

RICH: Essentially it is a Caribbean society with British-style institutions. It is in many respects much more similar to Trinidad and Jamaica than to its Central American neighbors. However, there is a split personality because a significant and growing portion of its population is of Central American origin. The dominant society, which is a combination of English Creole and Caribbean extraction, known there as Garifuna, dominates both government and the economy and is of British cultural descent. I say cultural descent because racially it is primarily black.

However, there is an indigenous Mayan population, mostly poor, mostly rural. And in the north there is a significant population of Mexican origin that moved down into Belize earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when there was a lot of violence and mayhem in the Yucatan. They have become assimilated and are mostly bilingual in English and Spanish.

*Q: I was going to say you would see several languages represented there?*

RICH: English is dominant. Spanish is also spoken in the north, but these people are two generations assimilated into Belizian society and speak English as well as you or I. However, there is a more recent wave of immigration which promises to change Belizian society significantly. That is the immigration of the last couple of decades primarily from El Salvador. El Salvador is not contiguous, but given the poverty and unrest there in the last couple of decades there has been movement to the United States and also to Belize. It is one of these situations where people go and tell their friends that there is land over here, people are not shooting each other, come join us. That population is not assimilated, is mostly poor and rural, and is producing a significant Spanish speaking minority in certain areas. This concerns the Belizians because they see it as their culture being threatened by people who have a different attitude towards law and order, how you settle disputes (not in the courts but maybe with a machete or a gun), etc.

The United States is very important to Belize. Most of the trade and investment are with the United States, as is travel, tourism and shopping. In order of importance to Belize, I would list the United States, Mexico, Britain, the Caribbean Community, and adjacent Central American states. Almost everyone else is off of their radar scopes.

*Q: How does Belize handle its defense problems?*

RICH: Belize has a defense treaty with the United Kingdom. It took its independence very late, the latest of all the Caribbean possessions of the Crown, simply because of an unresolved claim by Guatemala to the entire territory of Belize. Belize hesitated to go independent because they felt that if they cut the tie to Britain, Guatemala might march in. When they did finally take independence in 1981, they extracted a major defense commitment from the British, and it is one of two places in this hemisphere where the British have resident forces, the other being, of course, the Falklands. Until 1993, the British maintained Harrier jets there and some heavy armor as well as a battalion of ground troops. The battalion is rotated and Belize is used by the British as a jungle training area. They only have one other such training area, and that is in Brunei. The argument within the British military of course is a cogent one today, "Why do you need jungle training facilities; the next war is not going to be fought in the jungle? There aren't that many jungles left." For example, the Bataan Peninsula in the Philippines, where our men fought the Japanese so valiantly in the jungles, has no jungle left except in the confines of the former U.S. Subic Naval Base perimeter, now a national park.

The United States was not interested in the British pulling out of Belize. Everyone concerned, and oddly enough even the Guatemalans, seemed to feel that the British presence was a stabilizing force. It certainly gave assurance to the Belizeans that they could maintain their democracy behind this shield. Therefore, there was no move anywhere in the hemisphere or within Belize, itself, to remove British forces. The only pressure in that direction was from the budget types back in Whitehall who periodically said, "This is too expensive, we need to do something else."

We did have a military assistance office in Belize as well as a Defense Attaché, and a very modest program primarily to maintain liaison and assistance on a training basis. It enabled CINCSOUTH in Panama to have a relationship with all the military in the region. The Belizean armed forces were very small, and so our assistance to them was of a very modest nature both in matériel and training.

For a small embassy we did have a rather remarkable set of commitments. There were seven different agencies of the U.S. Government under my aegis in Belize. We even negotiated a military medical research agreement during the time I was there. We had an economic aid program. We had a small military assistance program. We had a rather large Voice of America contingent operating a VOA relay station in southern Belize which was targeted at the trouble spots of Central America. This broadcast primarily in Spanish to Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. The cogency of that investment is now probably less than it was just a few years ago. We also had a Defense Attaché and an important anti-narcotics program.

When we were flying down on the plane for my arrival in Belize after all my preparation and briefing, I said to my wife, “This is going to be different. All my career, one way or another, I have been involved in issues of considerable national interest and concern to the United States to which considerable attention was paid on the Seventh Floor (Secretary of State, etc.). Given the other priorities in Washington, nobody at a very high level is going to pay much attention to Belize. I don’t know if we are going to be bored or not.” My wife had brought some needlepoint and other activity materials, and I had brought some books. Well, we were certainly not bored. I found that there was considerable challenge and a great deal of worthwhile things to do professionally, as well as a dynamic small society in which we made life long friends.

But, to get to the problems of the United States. Institutionally, from a Foreign Service standpoint, what had happened there happens all too often for reasons that do not support our diplomacy- a large gap between assignment of ambassadors. In my case, I noted earlier how that had occurred, but what it meant in this case was that there was a two-year gap between my predecessor’s departure (he had been the first American Ambassador) and my arrival. Given the size of the post, of course the deputy was not very senior. The deputy, unfortunately, in addition to not being very senior, had not been a man very ready to take responsibility, and he let things go from week to week on the assumption that pretty soon an ambassador would arrive and he could put things off. Well, things can be put off only so long without considerable decay. I found the embassy in very poor morale with no sense of direction, and agencies that were totally going off in opposite directions to each other. The strongest figure in the country team was an AID director who decided that he really owned the country.

This had to be pulled together. So from an internal management view, the immediate challenge was to reestablish a sense of direction, pull the team together, get a management operation going and define and pursue the major interests of the United States. So I would be a strong proponent of saying, “Don’t leave posts uncovered so long.” It is less serious in our major embassies where the deputies are always senior, able, experienced people. But, in any case that was probably my first challenge and I was satisfied in the long run. It worked out very well.

Two other problems emerged there which are not at all unknown in our business. I think they are among the most difficult kinds of problems an ambassador has to deal with, particularly an ambassador such as myself who didn’t have an awful lot of clout back in Washington from a place like Belize considering the crises on which Washington was focused. One was corruption within the U.S. mission, itself, and the other was the discovery of misuse of U.S. aid to abet narcotics trafficking.

One of the biggest interests of the United States that I dealt with during my tenure was the fight against narcotics. We had a major marijuana eradication program going on in Belize, and this merged during my tenure with an effort to address the more serious problem caused by the inroads of the cocaine Mafia from Colombia and trafficking of cocaine up through Central America as the sea routes had become more difficult. A small country like Belize simply had no physical means to prevent this.

*Q: Was the Belize government willing to cooperate?*

RICH: Yes. We had excellent cooperation from the government, but it had no real means to either control its air space or sea boundaries. So we invested quite a bit in assisting them in intelligence and in means to better monitor and interdict trafficking. This process expanded throughout my time there.

But a problem arose with the egotist who had been running the AID program and who had been running fast and free over all sorts of regulations and laws in the process. I found that already before I got there that he had been subject to one AID investigation. By the time I had been in Belize only a few weeks, many people had come to me with problems about the AID mission. I had a two page list of horrendous allegations, mostly involving the AID Director himself. Well, it simply wasn't possible for me as Ambassador to investigate all of these directly. Therefore, I contacted the AID Inspector General (IG) and told him, "Look, there is an awful lot of smoke, and an awful lot of problems. The AID mission itself is split right down the middle between people who are the favorites of the AID director for whom all sorts of laws and regulations seem to be bent, and others who for one reason or another appear to be on the outs. In any case, there are so many allegations it is not possible to sort this out given the deep antagonisms within the mission, itself. I need you to send somebody down here to check it out."

That was done and it actually led to a series of IG investigations of the AID mission. I was told eventually that they were preparing a federal indictment against the AID director. I had not thought things would be that serious, but I said, "If this is going to be the case, this man is a major figure in Belize on behalf of the U.S. Government, and I would like him transferred well in advance of an indictment so that the harmful publicity here can be subdued." In that respect I was not successful. They weren't willing to transfer him until just days before the indictment came down. So we did have to deal with all of that in a very public way.

When a new AID director was named, I asked Washington if we could do a complete zero-based assessment of aid to Belize, because the aid program was fragmented in all sorts of little pockets and we were spending a lot of money and not getting much visible for it. With the help of the new AID Director and a positive response to my zero-based assessment request, we set the AID program there on a much sounder track, and I felt that was an important accomplishment. Things went very well, and morale was restored in the AID mission too. Unfortunately for the previous director, who had many fine qualities and was a very experienced man who should have known better than to do the things he did, they chose one of his violations which to prosecute. He was convicted in federal court, stripped of his rank, fined and spent six months in prison. He was due to retire, and fortunately in those circumstances he did not lose his retirement. You don't lose that unless you are guilty of treason.

Well, that was the first problem. The other problem was with the Belizian government. I had forged very excellent working relationships with the government, I believe. Then an election came along two-thirds of the way through my tenure, and the government changed. This is a problem we often have, of course. I had maintained good relations with the leader of the opposition and former prime minister, George Price, who was sort of the father of the country, and his party now was restored to power. But, while I had maintained good personal relations with Price, after all I was this American who had been dealing and working on programs with the previous government which now became the opposition. So, when Price came back into power,

he brought with him a certain degree of suspicion of the American Ambassador, which had to be slowly overcome. Fortunately, because I had maintained frequent dialogue with him and tried to give him every sense of dignity as the leader of the opposition, we were not dealing with each other as strangers. However, in this British style parliamentary system the new government had come into power by the thinnest of margins. It had upset the previous government by less than 2 percent of the vote.

The north central part of the country was the area in which we had the most severe problems with drug traffic. There was a town up there, Orange Walk, that was frequently spoken of as the “wild west.” Even our DEA people wouldn’t stay there after nightfall. That area had elected a man to the parliament whom we knew was a brother and crony of a known drug trafficking kingpin who was in jail in the United States. The government only had a one seat majority in parliament, although later it acquired two by paying off one member to switch sides, so every seat was vital.

It wasn’t but a month or two after the government changed that we began to get very good evidence that this member of parliament from Orange Walk, who had been named Minister of Works in the new government, was improperly utilizing AID road building equipment for illegal purposes. Our biggest infrastructure effort was a roads program which came under the Ministry of Works. There were serious problems also with the implementation of the program. Guidelines were not being properly observed. So, as we gathered evidence, I consulted with the AID director who said, “I have enough basis on which to put a hold on the program for performance reasons. We have a bunch of new equipment coming in, and we will just keep it on hold on our property ostensibly for entirely non-political purposes.” Well, that was fine because that gave us a kind of cover excuse to put a hold on the program and at the same time gave a public reason for the AID director to negotiate with the Ministry of Works while we tried to address the more serious issue.

The bigger problem as I saw it was that here we had a major AID program under which some of our equipment was not only being diverted for inappropriate and illegal purposes, but for purposes directly opposed to a major public policy concern of the United States. The Minister was using some of the road equipment also to grade air strips in the jungle for transshipment of narcotics. This, as far as I was concerned, was absolutely something that the U.S. Government and people could not tolerate. Eventually it would become known, and that could blow up the entire AID program to Belize. So after we collected sufficient evidence, I engaged in quite a dialogue with Washington. Essentially what I sought was permission to go to the Prime Minister to lay the evidence on the table and ask him to deal with it quietly. I said, “My bottom line is that there cannot be anyone administering USAID funds or equipment who is involved in narcotics traffic.”

After some hemming and hawing I got an okay from Washington to go ahead, although given the Inter-American Affairs Bureau’s preoccupation with counter insurgencies and communism I never felt I had really gotten the attention of anyone very senior. So I went to see the Prime Minister. His first reaction was, “You are trying to bring down my government. This is all a plot to overthrow me.” So that was a long conversation. We finally got off of that kick, but he was very suspicious. He was a man who honestly could not believe ill of someone whom he had



known all his life in Belize's small town atmosphere. He didn't want to believe ill of him. He was very dubious. He went out to near one air strip we had described the location of to him and said, "I didn't see any air strip." I then authorized my Defense Attaché to rent a private plane from the municipal airport and take some photographs from the air, totally openly, nothing clandestine about this. We hired a bush pilot. I didn't even want to use our spraying planes. It was quite clear that what we photographed was nothing but a clandestine and unauthorized air strip; it wasn't just an improved road. We also had witnesses to how it was done. Upon being shown these photographs, Prime Minister Price was clearly very disturbed. He said he would undertake his own investigation, which is what I asked of him. It took several weeks and in the meantime we had the AID program on hold. Publicly it was on hold over management discrepancies. Eventually the Prime Minister came back to me and said, "I have reluctantly confirmed your allegations."

*Q: He admitted it?*

RICH: Yes. It was very hard for him to do. I had set a deadline of about two months during which things were on hold, after which we would shut down the AID program if the problem were not resolved. Meanwhile, we were not spending any more money or supplying any more equipment for the roads program. I said, "Mr. Prime Minister, I really have to have a resolution. It is up to you how you do it. You have done part of what I have asked in carrying out the investigation. The other thing I ask is that you remove this individual from any position where he will deal with our funds. Thirdly, I would hope that you could gather sufficient evidence and go to court and prosecute." He never did do the third, but he found a way in a few weeks to remove this man from that ministry, giving him another job as a face saver, which had nothing to do with our programs or funds.

In the meantime AID had been working diligently with the ministry of works staff to resolve problems and we were able to announce that the problems had been sufficiently resolved and the program could go forward. None of the other problem ever became public. I was very pleased that it did not, and that we were able to resolve it satisfactorily. It is the kind of thing that I know our people have to deal with from time to time when you are faced with suspicions by a foreign government that you are manipulating their very existence, and yet you have to stick to the basics of right and wrong in the interest of the United States and hopefully deal with the problem in a way that does not destroy the bilateral relationship in the process. That was an interesting episode.

*Q: I can certainly believe it. How long did you spend in Belize all together?*

RICH: It was a three year tenure. I was able to turnover the post to another fine career ambassador who remained four years because the Clinton administration was slow to name a successor. He in turn was succeeded by a political appointee who also did a very fine job indeed, although I regretted to see yet one more post lost to the career Foreign Service.

**MOSINA H. JORDAN**

**Office of Equal Opportunity Programs, USAID  
Washington, DC (1988)**

*Ambassador Mosina Jordan was born in Brooklyn, New York. She earned a BA from New York University, attended Howard University Law School, UCLA Law School and received a JD from American University. She was a career member of the Senior Foreign Service and served as ambassador to the Central African Republic. She also served at USAID as counselor. Ambassador Jordan was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2010.*

JORDAN: I went to Belize. It gave me an opportunity to see that development approaches are different in different regions. Even though it's on the Central American isthmus, it's a Caribbean country in a Central American environment.

Belize is located on the east coast of Central America and is the only country in Central America whose official language is English though Belizean Creole and Spanish are also commonly spoken. Belize is bordered on the north by Mexico the south and west by Guatemala on the east by the Caribbean Sea. Belize has a diverse society, composed of many cultures and languages that reflect its rich history. The Belizeans are very friendly people, warm and generous. The population of Belize was about 190,000. Creoles, descendants of African slaves, represented 40%, the Mestizos, mixed Hispanic and Amerindian represented 33%, the Mayas represented 15%, Garifuna, descendants of African slaves and Amerindians represented 7%, a variety of ethnic groups including Mennonites made up the remainder of the population.

Belize is the home to the second largest barrier reef and an interlocking network of rivers, creeks and lagoons and the majestic Maya mountains, all representing significant and important ecosystems.

As a former British colony there was good infrastructure in place in terms of governance and also in terms of roads and bridges. They had challenges like all developing countries. Their social indicators were pretty good - maternal and child health, literacy and HIV prevalence. Their major challenge was that the drug cartel had basically taken over the country. Belize was a big drug transshipment point. There was a lot of poverty in the country, particularly in the capital, Belize City and the circulation of drugs had a significant impact on the youth – drug addition and higher levels of youth crime. We had a significant training program there where we took high school graduates and provided them scholarships to attend colleges and universities in the U.S.

*Q: What kind of things were you training them for?*

JORDAN: Everything, all sectors.

*Q: I would have thought that the British would have had a big training program.*

JORDAN: The British had a relatively large training program at one time, but the program was substantially reduced. USAID's training program was a Central America initiative to build capacity as a result of the civil wars in Central America. Since Belize was part of Central America, they were a part of the Central America training effort. Participants obtained bachelor

and master degrees in all disciplines with an emphasis on health and agriculture to build capacity for sustained economic growth.

*Q: Were we concerned that Belize was sort of the odd man out?*

JORDAN: Belize is an anomaly. A former British colony, it shares a common colonial history with the Caribbean countries. Belize is considered a Central American and Caribbean nation with strong ties to both the Latin American and Caribbean regions. It is a member of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), and the Central American Integration System (SICA), the only country to hold full membership in all three regional organizations.

From 1862 to 1973 Belize was named British Honduras and was officially renamed Belize in 1973. Progress toward independence, however, was hampered by a Guatemalan claim to sovereignty over the territory of Belize. Belize finally attained independence in 1981, however the British maintained about 1,500 British troops in Belize, to provide protection from a Guatemalan threat.

*Q: Well, have any of sort of the civil wars that have gone on in Central America, essentially between you might say the left and the right, has that spilled over in Belize?*

JORDAN: No. Belize is a parliamentary constitutional monarchy. The structure of government is based on the British parliamentary system, and the legal system is modeled on the common law of England. Belize has a functioning two-party political system, the People's United Party and the United Democratic Party. In contrast to the Central American countries, elections in Belize are held regularly, democratic principles are adhered to and there's an absence of violence. In addition, every four years the Belizeans voted in a new government because they weren't satisfied with the way the old government was addressing their concerns. This provides a constitutional vehicle to deal with pinned up frustration that could lead to violence.

*Q: Well, what were you doing?*

JORDAN: I was the AID Representative for the development program there.

*Q: And was this mostly, I guess come into the general exchange idea of getting people to the States, or were we doing things on the ground?*

JORDAN: We were doing things on the ground. In addition to the participant training program, we had a leadership exchange program where we would take government officials to the States to meet with members of Congress and local and state government officials to expose them to the U.S. form of governance.

We had a large private sector initiative to strengthen the private sector, -- basically looking at crops that had strong potential for markets in the States, Europe or elsewhere. We were also promoting the development of private sector companies to market and support the new crops. We were trying to strengthen their export capacity as well as strengthen the management capabilities of the private sector. We were also assisting the Belizeans in doing research in agriculture to improve their current crops and explore "boutique crops" for export. We were

focused on developing capacity. What was unique was that you could succeed there. They had strong growth and the potential to grow even more. Once the crops were identified and the private sector entities were established to manage these crops for export, they were successful.

*Q: What sort of crops were they --*

JORDAN: Papayas, peppers and pineapples. The papayas had strong markets in the U.S. and Japan.

*Q: How did the drug trade interfere? I mean was it penetrating into the country or were these just some people sort of at the top using it as a shipment point?*

JORDAN: Crime associated with international drug trafficking posed a major challenge to Belize. The government devoted considerable resources to combat trade in narcotics. Belizeans and others participated in the drug trade because of the opportunity for quick profits and because it was relatively easy to move drugs through remote areas that were difficult to patrol. Belize was a producer of marijuana and a transshipment point for cocaine. USAID built roads to transport produce in support of the private sector initiative and the agriculture export programs. The drug cartel was using these roads in remote areas to land planes to drop off cocaine. They used trucks provided by our garbage disposal project to transport the drugs in country. We constantly protested these nefarious operations to the government and the inappropriate use of our equipment.

Boats would bring in the drugs, in addition to the small planes. Drugs were being used to pay off the little guys on the ground that were involved in moving the drugs within Belize, and a culture of drug use and abuse by these young people developed. We developed youth programs and vocational training programs to help the youth who were caught up in the drug culture to get out of it.

*Q: Who was the ambassador?*

JORDAN: Robert G. Rich and Eugene Scassa.

*Q: How did you find relations with the ambassador and with the embassy?*

I had an excellent relationship with the ambassador and the country team. The ambassador and I worked together in dealing with government corruption, misuse and abuse of USAID resources and in resolving project implementation issues. The ambassador was supportive of my demands to the prime minister to fire the minister responsible for the misuse and abuse of USG resources. For the first time in Belize's history, the prime minister fired a minister in his cabinet. The ambassador was very happy.

*Q: And in many ways this had to be a more positive experience than the Cameroon. From what I gather, the whole mission wasn't that effective.*

JORDAN: No, if I created that impression, I was wrong. We were effective. As I said, we were in an era, the golden era of Cameroon when there was progress being made on all fronts to accomplish a real national agenda set by the president. In education, health and in strengthening trade, particularly in agriculture and in improving the agriculture sector, we were getting support and cooperation from the government, private sector and Cameroonians in general. That weren't problems. We were making progress and we had significant successes. While we weren't getting the kinds of trade relationships that I thought we should have, USAID's program was on target and we were having impact. The government and the people were very supportive of our programs. The difference between Belize and Cameroon was that Belize was from a development perspective, 25 years ahead of Cameroon. They had capacity, relatively good governance. USAID's support to their private sector enabled them to provide better products and delivery of services to the Belizeans. Belize was on a trajectory too of moving forward. Then there was a change in government and the drug cartel began to make greater inroads into the country.

*Q: Were the Cubans messing around there at all?*

JORDAN: The Cubans provided medical support to Belize. They had a major doctor exchange program. There were Cuban doctors in the hospitals and in the clinics in Belize. Cuba also had a significant participant training program as well, training Belizean doctors and others in a variety of technical areas. At one point we had the largest training program and I think five years later, Cuba had the largest training program in Belize.

*Q: When did you leave?*

JORDAN: I left Belize in 1991. I was assigned to Barbados to be the director of the Regional Caribbean Program. The Regional Program supported the countries in the Eastern Caribbean, Grenada, St. Vincent and Grenadines, St. Lucia, Dominica, Antigua, Saint Kitts and Nevis.

*Q: Well, before I forget, when you were in Belize it seemed like the place is particularly susceptible to hurricanes or tropical storms.*

JORDAN: A tropical storm came through in 1989. USAID's offices were in a prefab building located near the sea wall. Belize City was at sea level. The Peace Corp building was next door and the Embassy was located next to the Peace Corp offices. The Embassy was in a 100- year old mansion made of wood and reconfigured for offices. None of the USG buildings could withstand a full force hurricane or a major tropical storm. The Embassy's Hurricane Plan required the American staff to convoy inland to Belmopan. Instead of going to Belmopan, the Ambassador decided to stay in Belize City and weather the storm, which from all reports wasn't headed in our direction. We were fortunate that the storm's outer bands weren't very strong and that all we had to endure was heavy rain. Except for that one tropical storm, I don't think we had any other hurricane or tropical storm threat during my tenure there.

*Q: Were there any problems, as far as you were concerned, with Mexico or Guatemala?*

JORDAN: As I indicated earlier, Guatemala disputed Belize's sovereignty claiming that Belize was a part of Guatemala and these unsuccessful claims, challenges and threats continued throughout my tour in Belize.

*End of reader*