

BENIN

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ROBINSON MCILVAINE Ambassador Dahomey (1961-1964)

Ambassador Robinson McIlvaine entered the State Department in the early 1950s. Before his career in the Foreign Service, he graduated from Harvard, served in the Navy and worked in both journalism and advertising. His overseas posts included Lisbon, Dahomey, Guinea, and Kenya. Ambassador McIlvaine was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in April 1988.

Q: You were appointed by the President to go to Dahomey. Dahomey now has changed its name, is that correct?

MCILVAINE: That's right. It's called Benin.

Q: How did you get the appointment as ambassador?

MCILVAINE: I received a telegram in Leopoldville saying, "The President wishes to appoint you ambassador to Dahomey. Do you accept?" And I quickly went to the map to make sure I knew where it was, and said, "I do."

Q: Do you feel this was an assignment because you now were an Africanist?

MCILVAINE: Yes, by this time. I can tell you those ten months in the Congo were like ten years in anyplace else.

Q: So your feeling is the appointment came because, really, basically, through your work in the Congo.

MCILVAINE: I was one of the few people with any experience in post-independence Africa. In early 1960, the Congo, Ghana, and Guinea were the only newly independent countries.

Q: Did you get a feel for the new administration? I'm thinking particularly in the African bureau and the feeling towards Africa. We had a new administration that had just a chance to get their feet a little bit wet on this. What was your impression at that time?

MCILVAINE: The new Assistant Secretary was a major Democratic politico, G. Mennen Williams, who had been governor of Michigan a number of times, and I am sure expected something higher in the administration of John Kennedy than Assistant Secretary for Africa. But anyhow, that's what he got, and he made as much of it as he could. He definitely was very much interested in these countries and set much more of an emotional tone than we'd had before under a professional career Assistant Secretary, who was dealing with everything from a more analytical point of view than emotional point of view.

Q: How did this emotional point of view translate itself, say, in Dahomey?

MCILVAINE: I can tell you one thing, in those days--I don't know whether it's still done or not--ambassadors were supposed to write a "year-ender", which was to be a compendium of what they thought about the country, our policy, how it was working, what it should be, and so on and so forth. I was noted for not being too verbose, so I wrote a one-pager, and the gist of it was that this was a very interesting country, had a long ways to go--this is about Dahomey now--and it was basically a French problem, we should be in there in a small way to help do whatever we could within our budget restrictions, but really, the bottom line was it did not make any difference to U.S. national security interests what happened to Dahomey. Well, "Soapy" Williams was furious with that, I learned later from friends. I got to be a very good friend of Soapy's, but he didn't like that sort of hard-nosed analytical point of view from any of his ambassadors. I should be emotionally involved and for anything the Dahomians wanted. So on that little bit, we disagreed, but he never, in the end, held it against me. As I said, I remained good friends with him.

Q: Before you went out there, did you have any instructions or goals to do, or was it just, "Go out"?

MCILVAINE: Nobody ever took me aside to give me any instructions. I had the usual briefings.

Q: What was the situation in Dahomey when you arrived there, the political and economic situation? What sort of country was it?

MCILVAINE: The Dahomians were very interesting, I learned later, in that they were the best educated in all of Francophone Africa, and nobody's ever been able to satisfactorily explain why, whether they were brighter or what. Anyhow, they held all over the French African empire, the secondary spots in the French Civil Service. They were tower operators at airports; they were in all the sort of civil service jobs that required a certain amount of education, but not necessarily the top, were occupied by Dahomians all around, in Senegal, in Congo Brazzaville, in Ivory Coast, in Gabon, etc., etc. So they were very bright and had acquired all this education unusual for those countries at that time.

But there was absolutely nothing in Dahomey in the way of natural resources or anything. The entire economy was palm oil, palm plantations from which palm oil is extracted and made into Palmolive soap or whatever you make out of palm oil. So here we had a country with these rather well educated and competent people and not much to do.

Then when the other countries like the Ivory Coast became independent, and they had a pogrom, if you wish, and they expelled 12,000 Dahomians, all of them very well educated and all of them occupying major posts around the country. The same thing happened in Brazzaville, up and down the coast, all these thousands of Dahomians came home. Well, that produced a very unstable situation.

Q: This was when?

MCILVAINE: This was all within a year, '61-'62. So I guess it was '63, we had the first coup d'etat in Dahomey, and they had a coup d'etat every couple of years from then on until the current man came in, and he was a lieutenant in the Army when I was there. I hardly knew him. But he is left leaning and has a Marxist point of view, and he's stayed in power just the way Mobutu has ever since, which is now about 18 years.

Q: When you went out to Dahomey, how was the staff of the embassy? Did you have a feeling of a certain amount of expertise in Africanness at this time, or was it still learning?

MCILVAINE: No, no. We had a DCM, a girl political officer, an admin officer, and that was it. None of them had ever been in Africa before. I was the expert; I'd been a year. [Laughter]

Q: So you spoke from depth of experience.

MCILVAINE: Yes. [Laughter]

Q: What were you doing at the embassy?

MCILVAINE: That's a good question. President Kennedy asked me that. [Laughter] I said, "I visited every single village at least once, some of them several times, maintaining a presence and investigating possible agricultural extension work." That's about it. We had a very small AID program, had no Peace Corps. We had a good public affairs officer, and we had some events, and visiting orchestras and other cultural groups and that sort of thing. We just got to know

Dahomians and did pretty damn well at it, too. I still have them show up here occasionally and look me up.

Q: What was the role of the French? Did you deal with the French quite a bit there?

MCILVAINE: Yes. A new French ambassador arrived after I'd been there about a year, and came to call on me. He'd just been French ambassador in Ecuador or some place in Latin America, and he said, "Well, I used to have a lot of fun when I was ambassador in Ecuador for four years and watching my American colleagues squirm about this and worry about that and so on. I just would play tennis. I rather suppose that our roles are reversed here, that you're the one who has the good time, and I have to worry."

I said, "That's right and we're going to keep it that way." [Laughter] But you see, the French were always suspicious that we were trying to take over their colonies. In my view, the last thing we wanted to do was take over anybody's headaches, and all of these countries are headaches in a certain sense. There's absolutely no point in encouraging anybody to think that you're going to take them over or take over responsibility for them.

Q: Were you getting any pressure, subtle or otherwise, though, from Governor Williams and the African bureau and all to try to look for more things to do in Dahomey than you felt was really warranted?

MCILVAINE: No, not really, because they had budgetary problems. This comes a little later. I was later ambassador to Guinea and Kenya, and by the time I finished all of this, I made up my mind that in none of these posts, if a mythical U.S. President had said to me, "McIlvaine, you have carte blanche from the U.S. Treasury. Ask and it will be given, whatever you think is needed." I wouldn't have asked for another nickel, because I couldn't be sure that it could be effectively spent and do any good. You can always have more projects, and they're always after you for more, and there are always people who have their special requests. But development in Africa depends so much on the state--as the French call it, the cadre. Have you got the people to run whatever it is you're planning to do? In most cases, you didn't. Therefore, building a steel mill or building a lot of too sophisticated projects was a waste of money, because we now have seen them go to pot in a lot of places around the world.

So in any case, did Soapy Williams push? No, not specifically on that. I felt the whole time I was in Africa that from the point of view of a Foreign Service officer, it was very satisfying. Washington did listen to us in the field. In most cases, we knew more about it than anybody in Washington, and you didn't have what these poor guys in Europe must have, of presidents talking to presidents back and forth all the time, and ambassadors never catching up to what's going on. In Africa, the embassies and the ambassadors were the kingpins; we made the policy. Of course, sometimes it didn't get followed, but we were listened to, anyhow.

Q: You mentioned that you had a woman political officer when you were there. Since there's been some controversy at that time, it was said that the Foreign Service as an institution tried to keep women out of major roles, with the idea that they couldn't be as effective as males. How did you find having a woman political officer in Dahomey?

MCILVAINE: This case wasn't too good an example. I'm very fond of this gal, she's very nice and very bright and a good linguist, but she was a little vague. At one point she even lost the Great Seal and had a hell of a time finding it. [Laughter] Little things like that. So I don't think that was a fair example. On the other hand, I don't know if you ever knew Nancy Rawles, but she was our economic officer in Nairobi, and I recommended her strongly to be an ambassador, and she was later; she was ambassador to Togo and the Ivory Coast, but, alas, died a couple of years ago of cancer. She was a great officer in any milieu, no matter what. So to me, all these things about women, blacks, and others, it depends on the individual. It's unfortunate, I think, to have to do things by percentages, but maybe that's the only way you can correct imbalances. I don't know.

Q: You returned to the United States in 1964. Is that right?

MCILVAINE: Right.

Q: Then you became the Coordinator of the Foreign Service Institute's Interdepartmental Seminar. How did that come about?

MCILVAINE: That was familiarly renown as "the counterinsurgency school," something that Bobby Kennedy was very big on. How it came about, I can't tell you. Somebody pushed some buttons, and my name came up, having been through the whole business in the Congo and a coup d'etat or two in Dahomey. Therefore, I ought to know something about counterinsurgency. Of course, the school was all oriented towards Vietnam, about which I knew nothing and have never seen to this day, but never mind. So I was brought back to do that, to be headmaster of that school. It didn't last very long, because the Congo blew up again, and so I got jerked out of the school and put in charge of the Congo task force. That was at the time when we flew Belgian paratroopers in to rescue various U.S. and other missionaries and whatnot in Stanleyville.

Q: You said you had several coups when you were in Dahomey. How does the embassy operate during a time of a coup?

MCILVAINE: [Laughter] They're all very gentlemanly in Dahomey. One of them happened while I was away. You just had a different set of people, musical chairs, all of whom he knew intimately. To give you an example, I was in Paris in later years, and I walked up the Champs-Élysées, and at three different restaurants, somebody said, "Eh, dit-on, mon vieux!" And it was an ex-president of Dahomey, and I sat and had a beer with him. Then I'd go to the next one, I got another call. I ran into three of them on the same day. [Laughter] In three separate restaurants, they were all in exile in France.

Then the first president, who had been there while I was ambassador, came back to power. This is while I was in Kenya quite a few years later. I stopped off to visit Dahomey on the way through from being on a promotion panel here. And then two summers ago, we swapped houses in France, and while we were in Paris, we looked up three of the ex-presidents and had dinner with all three of them--separately; they don't talk to each other.

So in Dahomey, nobody was ever hurt in any of these coups d'etats. It was done in a very civilized manner.

Q: *President Olympia was assassinated.*

MCILVAINE: He was next door in Togo, yes. He was assassinated, but that wasn't in Dahomey. That was Togo.

BERNARD E. DUPUIS
Assistant Area Operations Officer, Africa Bureau, USAID
Washington, DC (1965-1967)

Bernard Dupuis was born in Berlin, New Hampshire in 1927. He served in the U.S. Airforce (1947-1954). He received his BA and MA from University of Maryland, College Park. He joined USAID in 1962. His overseas posts include Phnom Pen, Cambodia; Leopoldville, Congo; Georgetown, Guyana; Quito, Ecuador; Haiti; Managua, Nicaragua; and El Salvador. Mr. Dupuis was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2010.

Q: *You went to Washington?*

DUPUIS: Yeah, [Ed: in July 1965] I ended up in a part of AID [AA/AFR] that dealt with West Africa: Togo, Sierra Leone, Dahomey, the former French colonies, because we wanted to maintain some American presence in that area. We weren't trying to replace the French, we just wanted to give these people an opportunity, as I look at it now, to see what we had to offer.

We were doing a lot of little projects, like well drilling, training in the States, latest things in agriculture from the U.S. standpoint in all these countries, to provide an alternative to the French connection.

And I was an assistant area operations officer, in short I was desk officer for Dahomey, which became Benin, eventually. And all we did was make sure that, whatever projects we had, we had the spare parts and the technicians to come in to do their job and give these people another view besides the French view, which is all they'd ever had.

In Dahomey, apparently there was an overthrow of the government every December. The current president was Christophe Soglo and he owned the building where the embassy. And one day I was there and who comes in but President Soglo. He wanted to see the ambassador. We all had lunch. And what Soglo wanted was to raise the rent. The ambassador certainly resisted. Such was life there. I spent a month there.

Every December, we had to write a position paper, because the head of government had changed. It was almost like clockwork. I was there two years and I wrote several position papers about the change in the head of government in Dahomey.

In fact, my last one, I wrote in advance, I just filled in the names when it happened. Soglo would be ousted and then reassert himself the year after. I assume it was all prearranged, but it doesn't make for much progress

Q: Did you feel you were becoming, or want to be, an African specialist in AID? Was there a possibility in becoming a specialist in a region?

DUPUIS: I wanted to become a program officer. In AID, the program officer is next in line to the mission director, tries to understand all the project in the mission and that seemed to be the route to promotion, instead of being a technician, because I didn't have my PhD in education, I had a master's in political science, so I was more inclined in that area. By that time I was more interested in moving up from being a desk officer, in my mind, anyway.

Q: So how did things develop in Washington, with respect to your career?

DUPUIS: After three transfers with my family, I was getting a bit weary of packing. So there we were, in USAID Africa Bureau. It was very interesting, to say the least.

In fact, I was in the Ivory Coast, on my way to Dahomey, to replace the area operations officer, who was on leave and I remember reading a headline, "In Accra, They All Like Nkrumah," the leader and he would be there forever and the next day he was overthrown. So that's how firm these regimes were over there.

Q: You went out to the Ivory Coast for a while?

DUPUIS: No, I'd go out periodically to Dahomey to replace the area operations officer assigned there. I worked with Ambassador Clinton Knox, a black guy, very nice, very well educated, very sophisticated.

Q: What were we doing?

DUPUIS: Well, we were maintaining a U.S. presence in West Africa. All these countries had just gained independence not too long before. We had a saying, as things crumbled there periodically, WAWA, "West Africa wins again."

The French were very, very suspicious. They wanted to maintain their presence. I don't blame them. We wanted to maintain ours.

The French had just granted independence to their former colonies about that period time and they weren't accustomed to not having colonies, I guess and the French government of course was very wobbly.

So there we were out there, sort of trying to maintain little education projects. Mainly our projects were digging wells, providing textbooks, training people in the States, for instance electrical technicians or whatever, which they didn't have, there was no way to train them over

there. Matter of fact, some of them came over to be trained in use of heavy equipment, to build roads, which the French apparently managed to avoid.

There was some resistance to the American presence, there always was, no matter where you are.

Every now and then I had to go out to the countries I was responsible for to replace the resident AID officer stationed in Dahomey. Whenever he went on leave I went in to sort of help the ambassador. These were small posts.

That's what I did for two years, presenting alternatives to the French connection for these countries, who were just trying to find out who they were.

Q: How did you find working there? Was it easy to get projects going and carry them out in these countries?

DUPUIS: No, it wasn't in fact. But it never is, really, because no matter how you put your assistance package together it would sort of run into problems due to various factions in the country who were trying to organize politically.

The Cold War was on and the Russians were there with their embassy. We'd come up with an assistance package, they'd come up with a package.

And then overall of course the French embassy was, they'd been there a long time and they knew how to get around. I spoke French, so I was able to get around and do things.

Dahomey is a small country which is on ocean and nobody goes to the beach because you don't have time. We did our little projects, such as training people in the States, especially vocational training, welding, heavy machinery, road building equipment, all these things that countries need to build up, to have some kind of infrastructure from which they could make the leap into development and that's what we did. We had medical teams come in and so on.

A busy little outpost, really. Sometimes I felt like Gunga Din, in an outpost somewhere, away from the civilization we know, but that's foreign aid work.

Q: In the two years you were dealing with it, did you feel that these projects were making any progress, or not?

DUPUIS: Oh, that's hard to call, in a way. I think they filled a void which had to be filled. Whether they made progress or not, like, for instance, if we send trainees to the States to learn how to weld or learn how to do books, we felt we contributed.

And the problem with AID is that we try to measure too quickly. We think we'll have a measurable impact very soon. I don't think it works that way. At least, I haven't found it works that way.

So you have to wait. But my response would be that we were very useful and I'm glad we spent our taxpayers' money to do that. Geopolitically speaking, if you're going to be a world power, you've got to project your power somehow.

So that's what we did, I guess. That's what I thought I did and I think the projects were useful. They had a lot of old equipment which we handed over to them, from way back when, old jeeps. They had no transport.

The problem always was that these people had no system to keep vehicles repaired. You'd send them a tractor and they didn't have any system set up to repair it, to provide gas for it. It's always, "We're working on it."

Well, you have to put money aside to pay for spare parts, which had to be bought in the States. Our programs used all Caterpillar or John Deere equipment or whatever. But it's very difficult to get them to establish the backup systems that make you a country: how to maintain what you have, equipment and so on, that's how a country is run.

That was a constant battle. They wouldn't get the parts, the parts would take a long time coming in and we had what we had long pipelines: we put in money for two year periods and three or four years later there was still money in the pipeline, in other words they still had several thousand dollars floating around which should not have been floating around.

The basic document was a project agreement. We agreed, the United States, with Dahomey and it was signed by their president or their ministers and then the ambassador or someone in Washington to provide tractors to be used for whatever. And then you would have to negotiate with the people providing the tractors and then get them there and get parts and so on.

Same thing with training, you train the people and you'd have an agreement with the government that people coming back who were by then *bona fide* teachers would be given a promotion, I suppose and moved into a prearranged position.

Well, frequently, that didn't happen, because the government had changed, it had a new minister who was not in on the initial deal and so you did a lot of wheel spinning. But we do that in the States, too. So it was that nature of problem that sort of took up my time.

Q: Were these countries relatively stable during this period that you were dealing with them?

DUPUIS: No, mine wasn't, Dahomey wasn't stable. The first December I was there, the older guys told me, the government will change, probably. The former president, who was in Paris, will now come back and become president again and the president who's there now will depart.

And I didn't believe them, but it was sort of true. Each December there was a sort of overthrow of the government. But it wouldn't change anything in the country; just change the people who were running the country. I don't think it affected the populace, much.

Q: Did you feel that the money invested was sort of going into real project], or was it going into private bank accounts?

DUPUIS: Well, you know, that's always the question. Some of it, of course, was lost. But we could count, if we ordered several D-14 Caterpillar tractors, well, we could count when those came in. But sometimes, you ordered them and you were gone before the tractors arrived.

When you trained people, you send five, six students to Ohio State or technical school, to train how to become typewriter repairmen, pretty mundane, but that's what these countries did not have and when they came back they were trained.

The only problem was, they were frequently not given positions that we had agreed upon they went. It's fairly costly. But, still, what they don't have is trained people. The colonial powers were keenly aware that if they had trained people, there would be no need for the colonial powers.

So I think the U.S. position was train people and bring them back and hope they use them, because we never threatened to cut aid over such issues. Well, we don't work that way.

Because I think aid is supposed to provide economic sustenance to a country. Yeah, I think there are many negatives, but you have success stories: Taiwan was a success, Korea was, Turkey. Not entirely due to us, of course, but we had something to do with it.

In other words, you have to feel that you're accomplishing something. Otherwise, it's ridiculous.

Of course each administration would change the tenor of AID. In the Sixties, Seventies, you had the Alliance for Progress. This was a new impetus to rescue Latin America.

For a while there our foreign aid was like one tenth of one per cent of our gross national product and the political payoff, I think, of that investment paid big dividends.

And some money went into somebody's pocket. The problem there was if you had all these clauses in the project agreement, which we did, well, then if you inquired too closely about the money, where is it going specifically, well then you could be accused of being an imperialist power undermining the domestic stability of the country. It's sort of a balancing act which is sometimes very difficult.

In Guyana I did some of the same things. I was the assistant program officer, I rose to great rank there, but there, the politics always intrude.

Q: I've heard many stories, the French looked upon us as poachers and we were really not interested in replacing them.

DUPUIS: There's an American fallacy, I think, which I've come to recognize more and more. We were the most powerful country in the world then, as we still are and, as someone once said,

just the fact that we could invade Iraq, get there physically, move your troops there, is awesome and we don't seem to understand our latent power potential just scares people out of their wits.

As the German Chancellor said once at the UN, "It's absurd that anyone could think that Germany would invade anyway, because we can't even get there," wherever "there" is, whereas the Americans can get wherever they want.

We seem oblivious to that, that we have such immense power that people respect it, but they're afraid of it, too.

PERRY W. LINDER
Administrative Officer
Cotonou (1968-1970)

Perry W. Linder was born and raised in California. He attended San Jose State College and the University of California at Berkeley. He entered the Foreign Service in 1957 and held several positions in Germany, Jamaica, Honduras, France, Benin, Belgium, Jordan, Greece and Spain. He was interviewed by Raymond Ewing in 1996.

Q: In a very large embassy, in Cotonou you were, what, you were Administrative Officer, you were the only American in the Administrative Section? Or did you have some others?

LINDER: When I got there, there was a budget and fiscal officer, but that position was being phased out, and they were regionalizing the budget and fiscal operation out of Abidjan at that time. After I'd been there a short time, three months, I did most everything. I had a General Services Officer working with me.

Q: But it was a pretty small embassy.

LINDER: As I recall, there were about 13 of us there; that included a couple of AID contractors. We had Peace Corps there. It was the second generation, I think, of Peace Corps.

Q: Who was the ambassador to Dahomey?

LINDER: It was Clinton Knox, a black Ambassador, Foreign Service Officer.

Q: He'd been in Civil Service.

LINDER: As I recall he had a Ph.D., and had been in the INR, and I don't know whether he had had a previous Foreign Service assignment, but anyway, he was the ambassador when I got there. And I was there during the Biafran War.

Q: Which was very close, in Nigeria, next door.

LINDER: Right, next door. And the International Red Cross ran a relief operation out of Dahomey. They used the port of Cotonou to bring in supplies and things, and then they would take them into Biafra.

Q: Biafra was in the western part of Nigeria, or more to the east, closer to Cameroon or to Dahomey?

LINDER: Closer to Dahomey.

Q: Okay.

LINDER: And we had a National Guard air group over there from Glendale, California as I recall. They flew the old former double decker passenger planes.

Q: Cargo planes.

LINDER: They had been converted to cargo planes. They had been used as commercial airliners. They had two decks. Anyway, they were all old planes, and I think there's a National Guard unit out of Glendale that brought them over there. The mechanics were all Israelis. I think it was a CIA operation.

Q: Was it to provide food, or move refugees?

LINDER: They took in food, we'd also get some Congressmen and others who fly in to Biafra. They would get shot at. I mean, it wasn't a free fly zone. The Nigerians would shoot at them, and of course, the airstrip in Biafra was under artillery bombardment. There were a lot of stories and a lot of interest and excitement over all of that.

Q: Did you go into Biafra yourself?

LINDER: No, no, I never did that.

Q: And how about Lagos--did you...

LINDER: Yes, I used to go to Lagos quite often. We used to drive up over rough old roads, through a backwater crossing point between Dahomey and Nigeria.

Q: Two or three hours, maybe?

LINDER: As I recall, it was about a three hour trip. You had to go through military checkpoints. You felt you were in some jeopardy when you did this, but we used to buy a lot of stuff up there, and you had WACASS at that time, which stood for the West African Commissary and Supply System--they had big warehouses up there, and they used to run trucks and planes carrying supplies throughout Central and West Africa. Yes, we used to go up there, we'd buy a lot of stuff on the commercial market, and I made an arrangement up there with a guy I'd met in Jamaica

who worked for Foremost Dairies and opened up and was running a reconstituted milk factory, processing plant, in Lagos. We used to buy our milk and other supplies from him and arranged to have them delivered to Cotonou. I made a lot of trips to Lagos, and they were very interesting.

Q: Was that one of your main challenges as Administrative Officer, to make sure that there was supply, just of food and commissary items?

LINDER: I opened a commissary while I was there. When I arrived they had a bulk buying arrangement, they'd buy things by case lots and then split it up. I set up a commissary. The main job was keeping the post going; you had to hustle around and make do, but it was a friendly little post, and the French leave behind a lot of amenities. I mean, it had a wonderful patisserie, you could get good bread, and they had a couple good restaurants there, and we got to know people in the French community quite well. They still ran things there.

Q: Okay, Perry, we're talking about the French presence and influence in Dahomey and Cotonou in, this would have been the late 1960's, and the French community was sizeable and influential, and it was still very much part of the French Zone.

LINDER: Yes, that was the case. The French ambassador there, he was the real Dean of the diplomatic corps, in the sense that he was very, very influential within the country.

Q: US interests were somewhat limited, I suppose.

LINDER: They were minimal. Another interesting aspect of the time I was there was that Union Oil was exploring offshore. There was oil in Nigeria, which was part of the reason for the Biafran War. But there were no producing oil wells in Dahomey. Union Oil opened an exploration operation there, and that was a great day for the embassy, because they brought in a school; up to that point, my kids went to a French school, they were young, kindergarten, no English school. They opened a school, they brought in a doctor, and we had an arrangement with them for medical services. They built up the port and put in a operation there to handle the ships that were drilling offshore. It was all very exciting, and it added a lot to the tour having Union Oil. That was the main US economic interest in Dahomey.

Q: I visited Cotonou in the late 1980's, and I remember that there was a Sheraton Hotel, a very nice American Club connected with the Embassy, and I remember a very pleasant, small but very appropriate residence for the United States Ambassador. Were any of those things there in your time? Probably not.

LINDER: No, no, there was the Hotel de la Plage, which was kind of run down--everything was run down there. The French had made some investments when those countries became independent, when was that, in 1956?

Q: No, it was about 1960.

LINDER: 1960, yes. The French had built a large square, with some buildings around it; the presidential palace, and a conference hall, quite elaborate. I don't know what they expected from

this conference site, but it didn't materialize. The Presidential Palace was still used, but weeds were growing up in the central plaza and the buildings were in disrepair. It was said that the French selected its civil servants from Dahomey. Dahomians were all over West Africa, and in positions of some responsibility...

Q: In other countries.

LINDER: In other countries. They were educated and selected to support the French civil service throughout West Africa.

Q: That was before independence.

LINDER: That was before independence, and to some degree after independence. These people were in positions throughout West Africa, and in international organizations as well. I know they had somebody in the ILO and in the United Nations and they were in influential positions. As time passed, of course, the other French West African countries moved these people out and put their own people in, so there was some regression of these people back to Dahomey. Dahomey didn't have any means of supporting itself. I mean, there was the hope of some oil, and that never really panned out. Union Oil found some oil there, but they capped it off. There wasn't at that point in time sufficient flow to make it commercially viable.

Q: What else did Dahomey have economically? It had what, cocoa, and nuts, and...

LINDER: At the time, palm oil was its biggest commodity. It didn't have much in the way of cocoa; I know they had that next door in Ghana, but it was not an important commodity in Dahomey.

Q: What was the government like? You mentioned some of these very educated, qualified people, some of whom had come back. Was the quality of civil servants and government generally fairly decent, or...

LINDER: Yes, it wasn't bad.

Q: Was it a military government?

LINDER: No, when I got there, they had an elected government, and while I was there they had another election, and that election had three people running for the presidency, and their support was regionally based. The election was indecisive and they decided that all three would be president. But, one would be president for two years, and then two years, and then two years. A crazy scheme, which didn't work out. I left before the end of the first two-year presidency, and there was a military coup, and a major took over the government, and I think ran it for the next eight years.

Q: For a long time.

LINDER: Longer than that perhaps.

Q: And then he left office and somebody else succeeded him, and they allowed that to happen and now he's president again, elected this time.

LINDER: Anyway, that's while I was there. The embassy at that time was right next to the military camp, and maybe it still is, I don't know. We rented a compound; it was the embassy, and the ambassador's residence, and the USIS center. It was all in a big block, owned by Socolo, who had been the president before I got there.

Q: And became president later, or was that his son?

LINDER: It was his son. We used to pay the rent and correspond with Madame Socolo, who was in Paris all of that time.

Q: I think that may be the same place where the embassy was when I visited in 1988, but the ambassador's residence was elsewhere, and I think USIS may be in a different location, or at least was at that time.

LINDER: It was a suitable operation; we didn't have any Marines when I was there, and would lock the place at night.

Q: The compound got a bit ramshackle; you would wander around from one place to another.

LINDER: That's right; it had been a private house that had been extended and added onto. We added a communications room and a vault, and while I was there we built a warehouse onto it.

Q: Dahomey has, of course, a very small coastline on the Gulf of Guinea, that extends quite a distance to the north, fairly narrow; did you travel inland quite a bit, to see Peace Corps volunteers or other business?

LINDER: Yes, I used to go to Parakou, which was up north. It was a good day's drive. It was an agricultural center in the interior. I went up there to an agricultural conference once, I flew up there with the French ambassador; he was the conference moderator, I was just a participant, represented the embassy.

Q: Did he have his own plane?

LINDER: No, we flew up on Air Afrique; they had a small aircraft resembling a little Dakota; I remember when we took off the windows all flew open, and we sat on bench seats; it was just a small plane, two-motors operated by Air Afrique, for internal flights. There was a game reserve up north, I went up to the game park, it was pretty rough and ready, but interesting. While I was there our embassy and Niger ordered a Peugeot, and it was delivered to the port of Dahomey. They needed someone to drive it to Niamey, so Roy Haverkamp, who was the DCM at the time, and I did that.

Q: In Cotonou.

LINDER: From Cotonou, we drove up to Niamey. Actually it was a lot of fun. It wasn't trackless, but it certainly wasn't a road, either, just a track across desert land.

Q: You got the Peugeot there safely.

LINDER: We got the Peugeot there safely.

Q: Did you, as Administrative Officer in Cotonou, have to do quite a bit in support of Embassy Niamey, or...

LINDER: No, that's the only incident that I recall. We were pretty self-sufficient. We had some contact with our Embassy in Togo, but I don't recall that we provided much support.

Q: How about the embassy in Abidjan--was it services throughout West Africa?

LINDER: Yes, as I recall, we had a regional security officer, and a regional budget and fiscal officer based in Abidjan. The B&F officer was a great person who really taught me budget and fiscal work.

Q: And the Defense Attaché, I think, was in Abidjan, probably.

LINDER: Yes, that's right.

Q: Okay, anything else we should talk about with reference to Cotonou?

LINDER: Maybe a mention of the Peace Corps. The Peace Corps operation there was fairly sizeable; they were into animal traction and grain storage, wells, providing water. It was interesting; I would visit some of them. Those were good projects, you know, projects which produced results.

Q: Very specific.

LINDER: Yes.

Q: Concrete.

LINDER: So you get something done, and I think the volunteers had a feeling of satisfaction. They lived in pretty primitive conditions in countryside. Even in Cotonou, parts of it were very primitive, people still lived in tribal compounds. The blocks were fenced in, and people lived in these communities within the city, block by block.

Q: Ethnicity and then tribal origin or ethnic origin was very important in the capital, but of course, even more so...

LINDER: Even more important than in the countryside.

Q: And the Peace Corps volunteers not only were able to do something concrete and perhaps limited, realizable in a two-year or whatever time they were there, but also probably did a lot of good for them in terms of the experience they had.

LINDER: Oh, I think so, I mean, it was a broadening cultural experience, an experience in getting along and dealing and surviving in a strange, primitive environment.

Q: Did the administrative section of the embassy support them, or did they have their own...

LINDER: We provided a lot of support to the Peace Corps. They had a doctor; at least some of the time. We worked very closely with them. There were a lot of health problems over there at that time, there were a lot of reasons for concern about living in West Africa, not a healthy place.

Q: Did the embassy have a doctor or a nurse?

LINDER: No, we didn't have a nurse; our doctor was in Lagos.

Q: And who would visit periodically if there was a need.

LINDER: Right. But we had medical evacuations; that was always a big concern, that and giving inoculations and serums and antidotes for snake bites. Fortunately, I never had to administer any of them, but we had black mamba, green mamba, all of this serum at the ready. But as I said before, the Union Oil Company set up a clinic, and they had a great doctor. He was an Irishman. He drank, not only drank, but he used to eat the glasses. I mean, he could eat a water glass. If you went to see him in the clinic in the morning, he wasn't in very good shape, but he was a good doctor. His wife, I remember, came out at one time; she was a doctor, too. She could only put up with him and conditions for about three days, and then she went back home.

Q: Sounds like characters out of Graham Greene.

LINDER: Speaking of that, *The Comedians*, Graham Greene's book was filmed in Cotonou.

Q: While you were there?

LINDER: No, unfortunately, just before I got there. I got there about the time they all left, but Elizabeth Taylor, and Burton, and Alec Guinness, they were all down there.

Q: They must have left some legacy.

LINDER: Yes, stories and impressions. I'm sorry I missed that.

Q: I'm sure I've seen the movie, but its been awhile. When Graham Greene actually wrote the book, was it about Dahomey?

LINDER: No, it was about Haiti.

Q: Okay. When you had to do a medical evacuation, where were patients taken? To Germany to an American hospital, or somewhere in Africa?

LINDER: We sent them to France or Italy. Up country there was an Italian hospital run by Italian nuns, and we used that. When we evacuated, I think we evacuated to Paris. We never brought in a plane while I was there and did an evacuation in that way, but we had several evacuations on commercial aircraft.

Q: And most of the flights in and out of Cotonou were to France, to Paris.

LINDER: Yes, that's right. So I think that was our evacuation spot.

Q: And Air Afrique operated to Abidjan and...

LINDER: Yes, Pan American also serviced Cotonou at that time.

Q: To Cotonou?

LINDER: Yes.

Q: A couple of times a week?

LINDER: Yes, once or twice a week.

Q: There were, could be, kind of several places in West Africa, then I think eventually they went across to Nairobi, or...

LINDER: Yes, they did Dakar, Monrovia, Lagos.

Q: Accra, I think.

LINDER: Yes, I think maybe one time a week. There was some problem; I think it used to go all the way down to South Africa, but you know, with the boycott there were restrictions on the service.

Q: Were there American missionaries in Dahomey?

LINDER: Yes, there were American missionaries; again, mostly up country. And Texaco was there. It was interesting. I come from a small town in northern California, the Texaco manager, a young fellow, was from my hometown. Unbelievable the way some things happen.

Q: Now Texaco was also doing drilling offshore?

LINDER: No, no, they had a commercial operation there.

Q: Were there other American business beside Union and Texaco?

LINDER: I can't recall that there were, no, those were the only two American companies. On the medical side, one interesting incident: up country there was a hospital run by nuns. I think it was supported by a Dutch Catholic organization. And they treated a nomadic tribe up there that had cattle, and they would move around in that area up north. I went up there and visited that hospital, and the doctor. He wasn't really a doctor, he was just what we would call a medical technician.

Q: A medical practitioner?

LINDER: He was a medical practitioner. But anyway, he regularly performed major operations and was very highly regarded. I remember they showed me what they used for bandages when they operated, for sterile bandaging, they used newspapers.

Q: Pretty basic.

LINDER: It was interesting to see how basic this was. The guy really did serious operations, under very primitive conditions. I guess he was the only source available. Needless to say, we never used that hospital.

Q: But it sounds like overall that your assignment to Cotonou was very positive both in terms of your experience there, but also in terms of doing administrative work.

LINDER: Yes.

Q: After maybe a, well, less than fully satisfactory experience in Honduras.

LINDER: Right, it really was; personally, for me it was a very interesting place, and professionally, I learned a lot, because I did it all, all the basic stuff: I did the security clearances and reports, and I did the budget, we had medical emergencies, theft and embezzlement.

Q: Personnel.

LINDER: Yes, and I learned the whole budget and fiscal operation; as I say, I had a really good teacher from Abidjan who would come down and help.

Q: How were your foreign service nationals--were they some good people?

LINDER: They were okay. We had one fraud case where one of the FSN's had gotten away with some money. It was a typical sort of thing; he used to pay all of the gasoline bills; everybody was giving him their money, and he was supposed to pay their bill. Well, there were a lot of problems: the bills didn't arrive on time, and it was always hard to match things up exactly, but anyway we found out that we were way in arrears. I had to investigate and work up a case to fire this guy. But overall, they were pretty good. I had one incident where an FSN came in to see me

because one of the other FSN's was trying to use juju on him, use magic to disturb or get rid of him.

Q: What did you do?

LINDER: I listened and I don't think there was really all that much I could do, although I don't recall that it ever became more serious. However, we had a nanny, a local hired African that looked after our smallest child, and we took her on to the next post from which she went back to Dahomey on a visit. She was back in Dahomey for about two days, and we got word from the embassy that she had been poisoned and died. There was a lot of poisoning, and it was--I won't say accepted, but I would say there was a fear of it and it was a common way of dealing with problems in Dahomey. People were very concerned and cautious about what they ate and who it came from. It was something not to be taken lightly.

Q: It was very real.

LINDER: It was a very real thing, yes.

Q: So you were in Cotonou about two years. You mentioned that Clinton Knox had been ambassador first and Roy Haverkamp was DCM. Did another ambassador come while you were there, or did...

LINDER: Yes, Matt Looram, and that was a wonderful experience as well. Matt Looram's wife, Bettina was from the Rothschild family out of Austria, and a wonderful person. I mean, he was a good ambassador and an impressive person in his own right, but I thought her even more so. She was very gracious and rearranged and made a big difference in the residence. You would visit her and she'd have champagne. She was just very helpful, wonderful for the community.

Q: Was he a career Foreign Service Officer?

LINDER: He was a career Foreign Service Officer. That was his first ambassadorial assignment. When Clinton Knox was there, the DCM was John Clingerman.

FRANCIS TERRY MCNAMARA
Deputy Chief of Mission
Cotonou (1972-1973)

Ambassador Francis T. McNamara was born in Troy, New York in 1927. He was in the U.S. Navy during World War II and was also stationed in Japan during the Korean War. He received a bachelor's degree from Russell Sage College and a master's degree from McGill University and from Syracuse University. Ambassador McNamara he entered the Foreign Service in 1956. His career included positions in Rhodesia, the Congo, Tanzania, Vietnam, Canada, Lebanon,

and ambassadorships to Gabon and Cape Verde. Ambassador McNamara was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1993.

MCNAMARA: I was looking for my next assignment, and they didn't seem to be able to find anything very attractive. Finally, I was offered a job as DCM in a little country in Africa called Dahomey, later called Benin. I was hoping that I'd get a better assignment than that after having been lauded for the job I had done as principal officer in Danang. But, that was all that was being offered. I had no option but to accept my fate in good humor.

On my way to Dahomey, I passed through Paris. Dahomey's relations with their former colonial masters was especially close.

The Dehumanize, especially the people in the south of the country, are well educated by African standards. In fact, Dahomey was called the Quarried Latin of Africa because of the number of intellectuals the country had produced.

It's a funny little country. It's very much like Nigeria in microcosm, divided into three major regions--the east, the west, and the north. The basis of the divisions is tribe and religion. In the east, there is a tribe, centered on Porto-Novo, the old capital of the country, which is an offshoot of the Yoruba in Nigeria. In the west, you have the FSN tribe. The traditional kingdom of Dahomey was based on the Fon tribe. During the 19th century, the French, when they finally took over Dahomey as a colony, had a very short military campaign against the Fon kingdom. The Fon kings were guarded by an Amazon guard made up of tough female warriors. But the French had no trouble taking over Dahomey, despite the martial reputation of the Dahomians. Muslims dominate in the north. They are closely allied to the Hausa in Nigeria. Because of these ethnic and religious divisions, the country remains very unstable. Indeed, there had been 8 or 9 coup d'etats during the 12 years since independence in 1960.

Q: *You went out when?*

MCNAMARA: I went out in September of 1972. On my way out, I passed through Paris. The ambassador in Dahomey, Bob Anderson, was also in Paris. And he and I and the Africa-watcher in Paris at the time, Tony Quainton, went to the Quai d'Orsay to talk to the man who was in charge of Africa. He'd been ambassador, I think in Tunisia, prior to coming to this job at the Quai. He said that the French were very worried, and that they'd had indications of an impending coup d'etat in Dahomey. Anderson pooh-poohed this. I remember his saying, "Oh, no, it won't happen. That's nonsense." When we left the Quai, Quainton and I walked back to the embassy. Anderson had gone off on his own. As we walked we talked about what the Frenchman had told us about the possibility of a coup d'etat. I told Quainton that he should report our conversation.

He said, "But the ambassador doesn't agree."

I rejoined, "Well, maybe not, but surely the French have excellent sources in Dahomey. Just to be on the same side, I would report it."

So he said, "Yeah, I think you're right."

As far as I am aware, he reported the coup prediction. The Department, therefore, was not caught unawares when the coup later took place.

It was a dusty little town with large numbers of unemployed. A well-educated population, certainly by African standards, yet not enough jobs for the educated who had completed a good lycée education. Some of them had even finished university in France. There just weren't any jobs for them. This was a major factor in the country's chronic instability. Not only was there serious ethnic and religious differences, but there was a large group of unemployed, educated, unhappy people in the capital.

So, a deputy assistant secretary for Africa named Smith arrived on a visit just after I got to Dahomey.

Q: Yes, there were a couple of Robert Smiths, and one was from AID. I'm not sure if it was Robert S., but anyway, Robert Smith.

MCNAMARA: To try to deal with the chronic instability and the fractiousness of the country, the Dahomians had decided upon a bizarre system of government. They chose three presidents representing the three major divisions of the country. These three formed a collective executive. The position of head of state rotated among them. Each one came from a different region: the east, the west, and the north. I'm not sure, but I think the northerner had already served his term as chief of state, and at this point, Ahomadégbé, from the west, was the chief of state. Ahomadégbé invited Smith to visit the old Fon royal capital at Abomey. Both the Ambassador and I were along on the trip. We had spent the day touring the town and being entertained by traditional dancers wearing tilts. Suddenly Ahomadégbé came to us and said, "You've got to get right back to Cotonou. It looks as though there's going to be trouble. I don't want anything to happen to you. Get in the car and go right now. I think I can protect you. You'll be all right if you leave now and get back to Cotonou." So we left in a great hurry. The high speed drive back only took about two hours.

It then became obvious that there was a real threat of a coup d'etat. In any case, these things had happened so often in the past that it should have come as no surprise to anybody that there was likely to be another coup d'etat in Dahomey.

Nothing happened for a day or two. Smith left the country and I was settling into the embassy routine. After lunch one day, I was returning to the embassy...

Q: The ambassador wasn't there at the time?

MCNAMARA: Yes, he was there but he had injured his foot and was staying in the residence. I was returning from lunch on a side road. When I came to the main road that came from Ouidah and the Togo border, there was a small military convoy passing. I waited till they passed, and I pulled in behind them. An officer in a Jeep at the end of the convoy made signs to me to slow down and stop. I thought, "I've got to get back to the office. I don't see any reason why I shouldn't proceed behind these guys. I won't pass them. Maybe that's what he means." I couldn't

understand why he seemed to be so nervous. As we were driving along, the head of the convoy came abreast of the presidential palace. Suddenly, the lead armored car turned to the right, into the driveway going into the palace, broke through the big wrought-iron gates into the grounds of the palace, and started firing machine guns. That was the beginning of the coup. I had a ringside seat.

Q: You were part of it, part of the armored convoy.

MCNAMARA: I was right there; I saw the whole thing happen. There was some shooting back, but not very much. I waited until the shooting died down. Then I went to the embassy and told the ambassador. He was immobile having injured his leg playing tennis. I then sent a cable alerting the Department of the coup. It was a classic coup. The streets were empty and martial music was being played on the radio. Anderson couldn't leave his house, so I brought information and draft messages to him before sending them to Washington. Finally, we were getting no new information and were without a clear idea of what was happening. I told Anderson that I thought I should do a reconnaissance around town. I was used to such things from Vietnam, Elisabethville and Dar es Salaam. He agreed. "You may take my car and driver," he said. I got the chauffeur to put the American flag on the car because driving around town, I wanted to be sure the car was clearly marked to avoid somebody shooting at me. We drove around town very slowly. The roads were empty aside from soldiers manning road blocks or guarding government buildings. None of them bothered us. They were nervous when they stopped us, but they didn't bother us. When I returned to the embassy, Anderson found out that I flew the flag on the car. He was furious. "Only the ambassador has the right to fly the flag!" He shouted making a complete ass of himself. I explained as calmly as I could why I had used the flag. He finally quieted down.

Q: Oh, God, I find that...

MCNAMARA: Really childish. But, anyway, that was his way.

Q: I take it, from what you say, this wasn't the most comfortable relationship.

MCNAMARA: No, I got along fine with him. I suppose I am one of the few people who worked for him who has ever gotten along well with him. He needed me, and I tried never to be threatening. I did all the work, while he played tennis. He also absented himself from Cotonou as often as possible. He didn't want to be there, really.

Q: What was his specialty?

MCNAMARA: France. He had been the political counselor at the embassy in Paris when Watson, from IBM, was made ambassador. In a fit of temper, Watson cleaned out the embassy hierarchy. He fired the DCM; he fired the political counselor, Anderson; he fired the economic counselor; and he got rid of the consul general. He just cleaned them all out, and promoted their deputies who were much too junior for the principal embassy posts. When Anderson was fired from Paris, his friends in the Department got him the ambassadorship in Cotonou. Africa was of no interest to him. He was appalled by having to go to Africa, even as ambassador. He was really

focused on France and French politics. His ambition was to be the minister, the DCM, in Paris. He was hoping that that would be his next job. The post as political counselor should have led to the DCMship. Watson ended Anderson's dreams of glory on the Place de Concorde.

Q: Watson himself eventually got fired for...

MCNAMARA: Propositioning an air hostess.

Q: It was a drinking problem, wasn't it?

MCNAMARA: As I recall he was on a flight returning to the U.S. with his son. He had a few too many drinks and offered money to one of the hostesses if she would sleep with his son. I am not sure I have the story absolutely right. In any case, the scandal was hot enough to end his diplomatic career. He might have gotten away with such things as an IBM tycoon. But he wasn't just an IBM tycoon, he was the American ambassador in Paris. Anyway, it got into the newspapers.

Q: And he was gone.

MCNAMARA: And he was gone, it was very embarrassing for the administration.

Q: Terry, at the time, what did you see as American interests in Dahomey?

MCNAMARA: Almost none. You'd have been hard put to find any interest, aside from sentimental ones. Quidah was an old, well-known slaving port. Obviously, a lot of black Africans were taken through Quidah to the United States, or what became the United States. From that point of view, there was a cultural and sentimental tie. Other than that, there wasn't any interest of any consequence. Dahomey had nothing in terms of natural resources. The French were the dominant outside force. We recognized this, if not overtly, implicitly, in everything we did. The country was dirt poor with no strategic importance. The only importance for the United States was cultural and sentimental.

Q: Well, while you were there, you had a coup, and one rushes around, but is this mainly to keep busy?

MCNAMARA: Well, when you have a coup in a country, and you're there at the embassy, obviously you report it. It's of some limited interest to the State Department, to the people who deal with that particular country in the State Department. They want to hear about it when there's a coup. It's also of some passing interest to others. Dahomey is geographically next to Nigeria, and Nigeria was important to us because of its oil. Moreover, it is the biggest country in black Africa. Nonetheless, nothing in Black Africa is of great interest to the U.S.

Q: Because of the prevalence of coups, was there almost a coup procedure as far as the embassy was concerned?

MCNAMARA: Not that I know of.

Q: Did you have any problems reestablishing contact with the new ruling people and all that?

MCNAMARA: Not a great deal. However, this was a new group. This coup was a little different from the previous coups, because it was staged by relatively junior officers in the military. Previously, the coups had been staged by the senior officers. This time, people who were unknown to us, or to anybody else, had suddenly come up from the ranks and staged the coup.

There were two principal coup makers: one was the captain of the lone parachute unit in the small Dahomian army, and the other was the commander of the armored-car unit. Both were young captains and had been at Saint-Cyr, the French military academy. They were very much different from the kind of people who had staged the previous coups--the old boys in the army, who were mainly former sergeants from the French colonial army who had been commissioned just prior to independence. Obviously, when they formed a national army, these were the only people who were available to officer it. But these younger men, who had had a proper military education, looked down on the more senior people, whom they saw as uneducated, unsophisticated, and coming from a colonial tradition. Oddly enough, neither one of the captains assumed top leadership. Precisely why, I'm not sure.

They put a man named Kérékou in as president. He was involved in the coup, but was not, as far as I know, one of the principal initial leaders of the coup. He was put up as the front man, because he may have been the most senior person involved. Also, he was a northerner while the two captains were from the south. Kérékou was a major and had been a sergeant in the colonial army.

The two captains became ministers; they and a lot of other young officers took over portfolios as ministers. At first, we had some difficulty in getting to know them, but eventually we did. The relationship was always a little strained. It was never the easy relationship we'd had with the previous governments. These gents, I think, distrusted us and were unsure of themselves. They were also very nationalistic. We didn't have the easy access and the easy personal and professional relationships that we'd had with the previous governments.

Q: Were there any other developments until you left?

MCNAMARA: Yes, a couple of things. The regime started getting more and more radical. Some of the young officers were Marxists, or at least interested in Marxism. They wished to break the neo-colonial connections with the French, and, by extension, with us. The French, however, were the principal target. The French still had tremendous leverage in Dahomey. Among other things, they supplied a subsidy to the Dahomian government. Without that subsidy, it was difficult to run a country in chronic deficit. To meet civil service payroll, they often had to ask for help from the French.

Anyway, the regime became increasingly radicalized, and Kérékou showed more and more signs of being unstable. Surprisingly, he began to emerge as the clear leader of the government. He assumed more and more personal power. The young captains and their friends who had organized the coup were on the decline.

Another thing happened not long before I left. Anderson left to become the Department spokesperson for Henry Kissinger. I was left as chargé d'affaires for the best part of a year. They had a lot of trouble identifying a new ambassador. Then the country director delayed the new Ambassador's arrival in Cotonou until I was just about ready to leave, because he thought I deserved a prolonged tour as chargé d'affaires. We had become good friends.

The Sahelian drought hit while I was acting as chargé. Cotonou became one of the principal ports of entry for supplies for the countries in the interior--Mali and Niger. We organized an effective transport system, despite the rickety facilities that Cotonou possessed. One, the port didn't function very well. Also, they had a single-track railway that went to Natelongu in the middle of the country. From there, goods were transshipped onto trucks and carried up to Niger and to Mali. There were serious bottlenecks in these points of transfer. The port was not efficient and the transshipment in Natelongu was primitive and time consuming. The road to Niger was dirt. In the rainy season, it developed potholes, especially with constant heavy traffic moving over it.

When the crisis hit, I got money from AID and hired some Peace Corps volunteers who were terminating from the Peace Corps to act as expeditors. I put a couple of them in the port, and a couple of them at the transshipment point. They proved effective in expediting the unloading of ships and dispatch of rail wagons. At the transshipment point, they worked equally well in unloading rail cars and loading trucks. Ultimately, we had the most efficient port on the coast, in terms of grain and foodstuffs coming in and being shipped up into the interior. In addition to the Americans, the World Food Program representative, a Belgian, was very effective. We worked together as a team.

I also got some money from AID to pay for patching of the road to Niger. We gave the money to the Dahomian government who cooperated as well as they could with their limited resources. Unfortunately, the AID engineer who came to look into the grant of money used the wrong exchange rate, and gave them far too little money. The Dahomians had to eat a lot of the expense themselves. During the heavy rains, I patrolled the road in a car filling the potholes with a shovel, and reacting to any slow down with immediate heat. We kept the grain moving.

When the crisis first began, a UN delegation arrived in Cotonou. One member was a particularly obnoxious Englishman, with a double-barreled name. He had been involved in all of the Sahelian crises. I noticed his name again recently in relation to Somalia. He started throwing his weight around, half drunk most of the time. Simplistically, he decided that the only way to move grain was by airplane without first looking into what was already being done.

The Canadians were asked to provide aircraft. Being the nice, naive people that they are, they offered five or six C-130s. The Englishman then came to me demanding, "You've got to get this grain out to the airport."

I informed him that, "All the grain in the port was already on a train bound for the interior. It will be in Niger within a week," I promised.

Very agitated, he insisted that we recall the train and send the grain to the airport for shipment by aircraft.

I refused. It would have taken far longer to fly the grain to Niger than it would have taken on the train-truck route. Moreover, the cost was infinitely cheaper.

He was furious that we would not unload a train for him so that he could play air marshal.

As the grain moved through the port in Cotonou the rainy season began. I frantically sought tarpaulins to cover the grain so that it would not spoil. Finally, I found tarps in Nigeria that we purchased and brought back to Dahomey.

Cotonou was more successful in moving grain to the Sahel than any other port on the West African coast. There were awful stories from Dakar and Abidjan of mountains of grain germinating on the docks, left in the open without proper cover for long periods.

An Indian from FAO, who was in overall charge of the movement of grain to the Sahel and our airplane man decided that a conference was needed to discuss the problem rather than doing something about it. At great expense, a conference was called bringing people from all over West Africa, Rome, Washington, New York, etc. Sadly, this was a typical UN response. Cotonou was chosen as a site for the conference because of our success in moving grain without losing vast amounts to spoilage. I was invited to the conference.

After hours of long-winded, theoretic discussion I intervened calling on the conferees to stop talking and to roll up their sleeves, "Action rather than talk is needed." My interjection got a mixed reception. The practical doers liked it. The professional international conference goers were furious. A USAID type from Washington denounced me later as being insensitive to devoted UN civil servants.

The Sahelian crisis ended for us in Cotonou just as I was coming up for reassignment at the end of my two year tour. A personnel officer from Washington named Don Norland called me.

ROBERT C. ANDERSON
Ambassador
Dahomey (1972-1974)

Ambassador Robert Anderson was born on January 6, 1922 in Massachusetts. He attended Yale University until 1943 when he joined the U.S. Army, where he served as a 1rst lieutenant from 1943 to 1946. Throughout his career he has held positions in countries including Thailand, China, France, Benin, Morocco, and the Dominican Republic. Ambassador Anderson was interviewed by Horace Torbert on March 12, 1990.

ANDERSON: Yes, they had a lock on it. My assignment to Dahomey, which was one of the 26 poorest countries in the world, was a fantastic experience for the two years I was there. I set three or four objectives; to see if somehow we could help the people of this country--about 2,500,000 at the time--survive and make a go of it. There were, believe it or not, things that *could* be done economically, and some projects which we developed. But that's all written down in history and it's not that earthshaking.

But there's one or two points that I do want to make here.

Q: *When you went there, Kerekou had not yet made his move?*

ANDERSON: When I went there, it was a country that had three sitting presidents, which is rather unusual. They were from three different tribes. The agreement was that they would change, peacefully, every six months. The poor French had to pay for three palaces, three sets of cars, three sets of everything. One change did take place, peacefully, while I was there. But then just before the next one was supposed to take place, a military coup occurred and Kerekou took over. As was usually the case with Dahomian coups, no one was killed and virtually no shots were fired.

One might ask, why does this ridiculous situation of three sitting presidents exist? One of the reasons is certainly to maintain tribal peace. Another reason is that the Dahomians were far and away the most intelligent people in all of West Africa. The French used them to administer French West Africa. Dahomians ran Senegal, for instance. After all these countries, Ivory Coast and the rest of them, became independent, the Senegalese and the Ivorians and others, wanted to run their own countries. They didn't want these Dahomians there. So you had an influx back to little Dahomey of a large number of very intelligent people. What do you do with them? That was another reason that they were creating this three-headed monster. They had to do something with some of these people, and that gave them a few extra jobs, etc.

Another point I wanted to make here--I'll go into Kerekou in a minute--is the question of how the United States should operate in a Francophone country. When I arrived there--and this holds true for Morocco, too, which I'll discuss later--the French Embassy in Cotonou, was a large, imposing embassy with a well funded Cooperation Mission (the equivalent of our AID), and hundreds of personnel. We had a little, tiny mission with minimal resources. The two sides weren't even speaking to each other. There was constant French suspicion of the United States that we were trying to do something on their turf to undermine them.

I worked from the outset to changed this. Because of my long experience in France, I knew Jacques Foccart very well. He was "Mr. Africa," as you may recall, for General de Gaulle in the Elysée, he was all powerful on anything to do with African policy. Before I went down there, I went and saw him in the Elysée. Every time I was in Paris, I would call on him and his people; not just those in the Quai d'Orsay, but Foccart in particular. Through Foccart I was given an introduction to the French Ambassador in Cotonou. And eventually became very close to him.

I made it very, very clear that we were not in Dahomey to try to replace, supplant, or be in competition with the French, but that there might be some things we could help indirectly French

policy in economic, social ways. I said it seemed to me the best thing to do was to work together: "I will tell you anything we're thinking about. And I would like your ideas on what we're thinking about before I send my comments back to Washington. Another thing we might think about, Mr. Ambassador is the other nations active here. The Germans and the Swiss have Peace Corps type programs. The Dutch are also here. And the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) are here. Why don't we try and have the U.N. office find out from all of us what aid is being sent to this country, so that we don't duplicate each other, waste funds, and avoid having the Dahomians play one country off against the others?" The French Ambassador liked the idea, and the UNDP instituted the system while I was there.

And after the coup took place, in late-'74, no late--I got there in '72, I left in April, '74.

Q: *I think it was '73, the fall of--*

ANDERSON: The fall of '73, yes. There was another French ambassador there by then and he and I couldn't have worked closer.

Q: *Wait a minute. October of '72, pardon me, October, '72.*

ANDERSON: You are absolutely correct.

Q: *Six months after you got there.*

ANDERSON: That's right. There was one peaceful presidential changeover, and then the military took over. The second French ambassador and I became extremely close. We would see each others, probably four or five days a week. Before I went to see Kerekou, I would check with him and he did the same with me. The confidence we had in each other was total, and certainly served the interests of both our countries.

I'll jump forward to Morocco now, on this very subject.

JAMES R. BULLINGTON
Chargé d'Affaires
Cotonou (1970-1982)

Ambassador James R. Bullington was born in Tennessee in 1940, and received his BA from Auburn University in 1962, when he entered the Foreign Service. His assignments abroad include Hue, Saigon, Quang Tri, Chiang Mai, Mandalay, Rangoon, N'Djamena and Contonou, with an ambassadorship to Burundi. In 2001 Ambassador Bullington was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy.

BULLINGTON: In the summer of '79, and came back in late spring of '80. They gave me a nice post, perhaps as a reward for my being in danger so much from Vietnam and now surviving another war in Chad. I went to Benin, which many people wouldn't think of as a reward I guess,

but the job was as Chief of Mission and Permanent Chargé. It was the same as being Ambassador, but without the title. Three or four years before we had downgraded the level of our representation from Ambassador to Chargé, because the government was so nasty and hostile. It was run by Matthew Kerekou, a former sergeant in the French colonial forces who had successfully mounted a military coup. At that time he was in his rabid Marxist-Leninist phase and was very anti-American. He had all kinds of Russians and Chinese and North Koreans and Cubans and Libyans around. He subsequently became a militant Islamist for a few years, and then mutated into a born-again Christian, his latest persona. Currently he's again the President.

Q: Well you were there for how long?

BULLINGTON: Two years.

Q: In Benin?

BULLINGTON: In Benin.

Q: Again, what did you do?

BULLINGTON: In spite of poor U.S.-Benin relations, we still had a Peace Corps program, but we didn't have any foreign aid program. There were a few American citizens around to take care of. There was oil exploration off the coast, and in fact they found some. But there was not an awful lot you could do with that government other than to try to stay out of its way. We were not entirely successful in that regard, unfortunately. Toward the end of my tour, in late '81, we had another interesting adventure. Cotonou was a small Embassy, with only one communicator. At this particular time our generator needed some maintenance. The centralized maintenance facility was in Monrovia, so we had a generator repairman from Monrovia come in. He arrived on Thanksgiving Day. Our communicator met him and the two of them went off that evening to a Thanksgiving dinner that some other Americans had organized. On their way home that night, about 9 p.m., they took a wrong turn on a dark, unmarked road into what turned out to be a Beninese military base. When they approached, the gate guards did not say 'Halt, who goes there?' but simply started firing their AK-47's. They shot up the car pretty badly, and wounded our communicator. His ankle was basically destroyed. They took him to the hospital and put the generator repairman in jail, even though he had a diplomatic passport. He had all his generator repair tools in the car, so the Beninese said, 'Oh, we're sure this guy's a spy, coming in to do nefarious things at our military base, and we caught him red-handed.' The most immediate problem was that with our one communicator shot and in the hospital we could not communicate because he was the only one who knew the code to get into the communications vault to operate the equipment. We had a Collins KWM-2 radio outside the vault for emergency communications and we called on that, but nobody was listening. Lagos, less than a hundred miles away, about a two-hour drive, was our backup facility for emergencies. It was a big Embassy, but for some reason they didn't turn their KWM-2 on that evening, so we couldn't communicate with them. I'm a ham radio operator, and because I was Chargé, I had been able to talk the Beninese government into giving me a license. I'd set up a good ham radio station in the Ambassador's residence, where we were living. So when we couldn't communicate from the Embassy I went home and got on the ham radio. I contacted a ham in New York and had him call the State

Department operations center and tell them our situation, that our communicator was shot and the generator repairman from Monrovia was in jail, and please first thing tomorrow morning have Embassy Lagos send us a doctor and a communicator. This worked, and the message went right through. So early the next morning the doctor, a senior officer from the Agency who was looking after the communicator, and a new communicator arrived. The doctor and the Agency man went into the hospital and managed to spirit our communicator out under the noses of the Beninese, who weren't guarding him very carefully. (We often called Benin a police state poorly policed.) They took him back across the border to Lagos, and were able to save his foot, which the Beninese doctors had been on the point of amputating. But the government kept the generator repairman in jail, and it was over two months before we finally got him out. This was 1981 and early '82, very close on the heels of the Iranian hostage crisis, and we were very sensitive at that time to nasty governments putting Americans with diplomatic passports in jail. But we didn't want to publicize the incident and kept it out of the press, because we knew if it became public that would cause lots of complications and likely make it harder to get our man released.

Q: And of course the state, I mean one of your provinces was such a small state, that you know a military action against it would not have been precluded. Which is not a good idea.

BULLINGTON: No, we didn't want to take that path. We wanted to use diplomatic means to get him out. We tried everything. We got the local Ambassadors to make a demarche on our behalf, and we got the UN representatives in Benin to do the same. In Benin the French were by far the most influential. So eventually the Department enlisted French President Francois Mitterrand to call President Kerekou directly. Mitterrand persuaded him to let our generator repairman go. That was an interesting adventure for me, perhaps less so for the communicator and generator repairman.

Q: I take it you didn't get your generator fixed.

BULLINGTON: No, not right away. By that time I was approaching the end of my tour.

Q: Did you find much contact with the people of Benin?

BULLINGTON: The people were friendly, but the government was so nasty that it limited the amount of contact we could have.

Q: I take it there's no real political reporting to be done or anything like that?

BULLINGTON: I could do quite a bit. As I said, it was a police state poorly policed. There were a lot of people that you could talk to, a lot of information that one could develop, and it was possible to travel.

Q: Around Benin...

BULLINGTON: Around it?

Q: Bounded, what, to the South was...

BULLINGTON: Nigeria.

Q: Nigeria. To the north...

BULLINGTON: To the north is Niger and Burkina Faso, and to the west is Togo.

Q: Togo. Were there any problems with these states?

BULLINGTON: Not really, no. Benin served as a vast entrepot for smuggling into Nigeria. We benefited from that. You could buy Johnnie Walker scotch for three dollars a bottle. Luxury goods of all sorts were legally imported into Benin to be smuggled into Nigeria, where at least some people had lots of money to spend on them.

Q: One thinks of the Benin bronzes.

BULLINGTON: No, that's the Benin state of Nigeria. Benin, the country, was the former Dahomey, under the French, a part of French West Africa.

Q: How about tribal problems, any?

BULLINGTON: Benin is so fractured that there weren't any major ones. In that tiny country of perhaps three million people, there are something like twenty different ethnic groups, and none of them dominant. So they have to get along one way or another if they're going to have a government at all.

Q: Were they a trading people?

BULLINGTON: Not particularly.

Q: Because some of these smaller countries end up either producing traders up and down the coast or good clerks or something...

BULLINGTON: The Beninese were regarded as the intellectuals of French West Africa. A lot of them had relatively more education and served in the colonial civil service as clerks and teachers.

Q: How about again, was this a place where the French were dominant?

BULLINGTON: Very much, yes.

Q: Did we sort of keep out of it, were they looking at us suspiciously, the French?

BULLINGTON: Not at that point. We got along quite well with the French and didn't have any real problems. I sent my two daughters to the French school there, since there was no American school. The school at first wouldn't let them in because they didn't speak French. I went to the French Ambassador, and he was nice enough to intervene and cause them to be admitted.

Q: How did they find that?

BULLINGTON: They were in the second and third grade at that point, and it was traumatic for a few weeks, but only a few weeks. Within five, six weeks they were speaking French pretty well, and after three or four months they were speaking like little French girls.

Q: Did social life, was there much social life?

BULLINGTON: Within the diplomatic corps there was. There was little other entertainment. Some of the Beninese would occasionally join us. As Chief of Mission I was obliged to give the Fourth of July receptions and other official functions. Tuy-Cam and I enjoyed doing that at first, but it was a lot of work.

Q: Did the Cold War intrude at all there?

BULLINGTON: Not much. We got along well with the Russians there.

Q: The Soviets in those days.

BULLINGTON: The Soviets in those days, yes. And with the Chinese. The only people we didn't get along with were the North Koreans. They had an Embassy there, and they were just nasty. They would turn away when they saw me coming. I didn't want anything to do with them either.

Q: But our interests there were...

BULLINGTON: Minimal.

Q: Minimal.

BULLINGTON: In fact toward the end of my tour the Beninese government told us to relocate the Ambassador's residence and the Embassy to a diplomatic compound where they wanted all of the Embassies to relocate, better to keep control over them. Because of Tehran and other Embassy security problems we had already had the Inman report and imposed greatly increased security requirements. To build a new Embassy, the security for it has to be such that it becomes an enormous and very expensive undertaking. We had a preliminary survey team come out, and they concluded it would cost something like five million dollars to build a suitable Embassy and Ambassador's residence where the Beninese wanted us to put them. These would have been the grandest buildings in town. My recommendation was that we simply close down rather than do that, because in my opinion our interests in Benin did not justify that kind of expense and having that kind of Mission there, particularly with all the ongoing costs of operating and protecting it. It never came to that, because the government backed down and didn't make us move.

Q: Were you beginning to be part of the African Mafia by this time?

BULLINGTON: Yes.

Q: I would think that, you know, there are a lot of these Embassies that one could shut down.

BULLINGTON: Yes.

Q: But it would mean no more Ambassadorial ranks for the African corps, you know. It's a potential problem.

BULLINGTON: My closure recommendation was not taken well, I think, in the Africa Bureau. But the only effective counter-argument I ever heard was that the Congress, specifically the Black Caucus, will not let us close. I think that's probably still the case.

Q: Anybody, any visits from anybody?

BULLINGTON: We did have the Pope come. I lined up on the airport tarmac to greet him along with the rest of the diplomatic corps. No senior visits from the U.S.

Q: So you got out of there in what, '82?

BULLINGTON: '82.

CHARLES H. TWINING
Chargé d'Affaires
Cotonou (1982-1983)

Charles H. Twining was born in Maryland in 1940. He received his BA from the University of Virginia in 1962 and an MA from the School for Advanced International Studies in 1964. After entering the Foreign Service in 1964 his assignments included Tananarive, Dalat, Abidjan, Bangkok, Cotonou, Douala, Ouagadougou, and Honolulu with ambassadorships to Cambodia and Cameroon. Charles Stuart Kennedy interviewed Ambassador Charles H. Twining in 2004.

TWINING: Things happen in the Foreign Service in one's career. I received a phone call from the Africa Bureau, from Deputy Assistant Secretary [DAS] Jim Bishop. He said, "Charlie, we need you." I said, "What for?" He told me the story of Cotonou, Benin. He said, "We badly need someone to go to Cotonou. The Reagan administration wants to close the post." In late 1981, two of our embassy people had been fired upon by the military. Benin, formerly Dahomey, had a revolutionary regime that didn't like Americans or the West. The Reagan White House told State that it was time to get out of there and close the Embassy. Dr. Chester Crocker, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, proposed to the White House the following: "Give me six months to send someone out to Cotonou, and if he or she after six months wants to close it, we will close. If, on the other hand, that person recommends that we stay open, then I want to stay open." As a result, Jim Bishop asked if I

would be that person to go out for six months, as the Permanent Chargé d’Affaires. We hadn’t had an ambassador there since 1977, when we had a bad diplomatic incident, and pulled out the ambassador. After that, we had permanent Chargés. So, in mid-1982, I gave up going to Perth, much to my wife’s chagrin. My wife, boys and I went to Cotonou in 1982. It was an interesting experience. I had never been posted to a revolutionary regime before.

Every morning, the radio would wake you up by broadcasting the Communist “Internationale”. Beneath the revolutionary veneer, Benin was very West African, with friendly people. It wasn’t their fault that they were under a tough revolutionary government. I learned something that stood me in good stead: revolutions run their course. Benin adopted Marxism-Leninism in 1975; its revolution had been going on for seven years. The revolution was running out of steam. The country had gotten poorer. Cotonou, in the old days, was a vibrant city with one of the best educated populations in West Africa. By the time I arrived, there was no longer a bookstore to be found. If you found any publications to buy, they were communist propaganda. That was it. The educated Beninese had left the country or were lying low. The government was in the hands of a colonel, who was president, and a bunch of young military officers, or radical civilians, who didn’t have much feel for what they were doing.

The other thing I discovered is that these embassy people who had been fired upon in November 1981 had been partying and had turned stupidly, if mistakenly, into a military camp at dusk. The military couldn’t figure out who these foreigners were. Cotonou had been attacked by mercenaries in 1977, creating paranoia and a hunt for enemy secret agents that had not abated. Soldiers panicked and fired on our people. No one ever told Washington was it was our fault to begin with. If these people hadn’t been drinking and had watched where they were going, they wouldn’t have turned into a military camp. It was verboten; we all knew that. We couldn’t go into that military camp. So, with the revolution getting tired out and the population increasingly poor and unhappy, plus my realization that the problem with this incident was, at least in part, ours, led me to recommend after six months that we keep the embassy open.

Q: When you went there, could you sit down and talk frankly with someone in the ruling circle at all?

TWINING: I tried. Absolutely. What you do as a diplomat is you always try and make contacts. I realized how badly we needed more contacts with people. My predecessors weren’t able to have the contacts because the officials weren’t open to their contact. By the time I got there, people were starting to open up a little, at least to have exchanges of views. Whether it was the foreign minister or high-ranking official who, until just before I arrived, had been serving as the radical gatekeeper to the President’s office, there were people with whom it was possible to have frank conversations. As time went on, their number increased.

A hint of things to come occurred when I arrived in Cotonou in mid-1982, and the President named a young, dynamic official from his village as Director of the Americas Department at the Foreign Ministry. The official, Georges Timanty, assured me that President Kerekou was sincere in wanting to improve ties with the U.S. and asked him to work toward this end. We

agreed to cooperate. It was certainly worth a try. Besides his becoming a very good friend, he was also an excellent channel through whom to transmit messages. Timanty and I sought areas where our two countries had common interests, whether it be at the UN or in developing Benin, and worked to increase our cooperation. With time, things started to improve, but again, I was fortunate to have arrived when the revolution was “tired”, and authorities realized they had to start opening up again to the outside world.

Q: Were you able to make the point to anyone that you are on a watching brief, deciding on whether to stay open. If we pull out, there will be consequences, not nasty ones, but lack of opportunity for development, or for being part of the “civilized world.”

TWINING: Absolutely. There were ways you could pass that message to people with whom you had particular contact, such as this young man from the Foreign Ministry, who I am sure passed it much higher up. You did it in a way that was not threatening, or confrontational. I think that helped, absolutely.

Q: Could you locate Benin for me, and talk about the relations with its neighbors?

TWINING: Benin is a sliver of a country, next to Togo. In those days, Togo was the liberal, wide-open place where we all went to to buy our groceries. Little being available in Cotonou. Togo was headed by a military officer, President Eyadema, who needed to keep decent relations with President Kerekou, the Colonel (later General) who ran Benin. But, at the same time, Eyadema was very critical of the radicalism that he found in Benin. On the other side of Benin was giant Nigeria. If you have ever served in the neighborhood of Nigeria, you know that when that giant sneezes, you shake, because its economy, its politics, always impacted on its neighboring states, including Benin. At one point the Nigerian Government decided to expel illegal immigrants, and I suddenly had 200,000 people camped on the beach in front of my residence. We authorized \$25,000 in emergency assistance for them, to be distributed through Benin’s Red Cross, a good gesture.

Thomas Pickering was Ambassador in Lagos during my year in Cotonou, and I would go over and seek his advice. He was a terrifically experienced diplomat and very helpful to me. North of Benin, then you had the Sahel states of Niger and Upper Volta, countries that were the poor relatives, I suppose, of the neighborhood. Benin was the only revolutionary state among them all and stood out like a sore thumb. Benin was the object of suspicion by all the neighboring states.

Q: Where did the revolutionary spirit come from? Was it the French left, or from Moscow, or was it really homegrown?

TWINING: I think that President Kerekou and the group of young, fellow officers who together waged their coup d’etat in 1972 were looking for a magic bullet that would result in rapid economic development; this after a round of musical chairs among civilians to be president was getting the country nowhere. The coup opened the door to radicals and communist country representatives to come into Benin.

The Libyans became important and poured money into places that they thought would do their bidding. They had a huge Embassy in Cotonou and were giving aid, often through the formation of joint state corporations. Libya's influence was very important on these young military officers. The other important player was the Soviet Union. The Soviets had a large embassy. They were also giving aid and teaching the Marxist philosophy. They lost no time in trying to make sure that Benin's military officers knew what Marxism was, even if they may not have understood it. You had officers who were basically revolting against the right. So, where did they turn for their examples and their support? They turned to Moscow and they turned to Tripoli.

Q: Did Cuba play any role there?

TWINING: Cuba played a bit of a role, but it wasn't an important role. As I recall, Cuba had some doctors, but it wasn't a major role, at least not in my time. Cuba was too busy in Angola.

Q: Did you sort of cast a role in Benin as being a coward force to the communists, or was it part of the Cold War?

TWINING: I mentioned earlier that what I liked about the 1960s and early 1970s is that we tried very hard not to play Cold War games in Africa. Africa had much more important problems that needed attention. We didn't need to export our problems with Moscow into Africa. That changed. The rivalries we knew elsewhere also eventually took place in Africa. I saw no point, personally, in trying to make this a Cold War kind of confirmation in Benin. I think if I tried, I probably wouldn't have gotten anywhere with it. I thought it was more important to talk about the concrete problems they had, or problems we had, or misunderstandings of one side or the other, rather than to use it as a place to fight communism. The Soviet Ambassador was Dean of with the diplomatic corps. I had a very tiny embassy. In any case, I don't think I would have gotten very far playing Cold War games in a place that, with the revolution running out of steam, may not have been even interested in such.

Q: How did you wife and family, being deprived of Perth, for God's sakes, do there? It didn't sound like a very hospitable area.

TWINING: My wife and my two sons were not very happy the first three months we were there. The only school was a French school, and they didn't know a word of French when we arrived. My wife found it so hard to get groceries unless we went to Togo, that she said, "Why are we going through this?" After three months, my kids loved it. There was a beautiful beach to go swimming. The Beninese people were nice. In three months, my sons' French was beautiful. They did well in the French school. There was a Sheraton Hotel to visit and eat delicacies like bush rat paté. We had a beautiful house of our own, a beautiful swimming pool. A downside was health. Both our sons had malaria while we were there. The temperature of one of my sons went up to 106 degrees, which scared us all. It was at a time when State's medical officer claimed that there were no aralen resistant strains of malaria in West Africa, suggesting they must not be taking their aralen or it must be the flu. Finally, the

doctor of a Norwegian oil company working off the coast of Benin said, “My God, this is malaria,” and started treating aggressively both boys, especially the one with the 106-degree temperature, and stopped the temperature from rising. After that, the State Department started acknowledging the fact that there did seem to be some aralen resistant strains of malaria in West Africa. My sons had the aralen resistant strain. It didn’t help my wife’s feeling about Cotonou, to go through a difficult time like that. But my sons and I retain good feelings about Benin.

Q: How did you find your staff?

TWINING: The good thing about Benin, as I mentioned, was that people had been well educated until the revolution. The Embassy happily had some of these well-educated Beninese working for it, those who stayed in the country. The small American staff was composed of good, dedicated individuals with whom it was a joy to work, as well. So, staff wise, our situation was fine. Household staff was equally good, accustomed to working for foreigners for a long time. We had a head of household who was the best I’ve seen in any place I’ve been in in the world. Staff-wise, we were very well served in Cotonou. To bring an end to the Cotonou saga - because it ended prematurely for me – the post remained open. For our Fourth of July, a year after my arrival, we went from only having had a Foreign Minister the previous year, who went to every embassy’s national day, to having seven ministers attend.

Q: The upshot?

TWINING: In sum, what happened during the first year is that we went from a very difficult relationship with Benin to one that was evolving positively. We started to look more at things we could do together, where we might vote in the United Nations together, what we could do with our Peace Corps program and how to stretch our AID resources a little further to help Benin with appropriate gestures from that government in return. So, toward the end of the first year, Washington sent someone out to Cotonou to say, “Things had turned around so well, we want you to leave soon, to be replaced by a full ambassador.” I was disappointed, and my boys were disappointed. It meant pulling up roots after a year, after they learned French and made some good friends. I also had made good friends. But, things evolved so well and quickly that after one year, I was replaced by Ambassador George Moose, as chief of mission in Benin. I left Benin with a feeling of sadness, but also one of satisfaction that we saved the place from closing. I was glad to have been part of the improvement in the relationship.

Q: Wrapping up our discussion of Benin, what lessons were learned from the experience?

TWINING: Most of all, it is that it is important to “hang in there” when there is a downturn in a relationship, almost regardless of the reason, unless a place has literally fallen apart, as in Somalia, and one has to leave to save one’s skin. We could have closed up in Cotonou, but what would that have done? As we learned from Vietnam when we closed our post in Hanoi in 1955 due to harassment, terrible times and misunderstandings ensued, and it was a struggle to get internal U.S. agreement to reopen finally forty years afterward. Not only was the

decision made to keep Cotonou open but it was important to keep some semblance of an American program going during the difficult period of hostile revolution. The number of Peace Corps volunteers shrank to six at one point, but the program remained alive, as did small AID programs – although administered from Togo – and our small Cultural Center operation. Showing some goodwill, even if it sometimes means turning the other cheek temporarily, and maintaining steadiness in your operation while reaching out to those individuals who appear open to contact, and trying with those who do not, all are formulas that I believe are correct. I recall my first meeting with President Kerekou; he was suspicious, sometimes hostile, yet nevertheless willing to meet with me, hear what I had to say, and at least consider it. The next time was easier for us both. Revolutions go up and come back down, and we are “big enough” to take the ups and downs.

As my staff and I tried to reach out to the Beninese, it was also important that Washington supported us, and it did so under Assistant Secretary Crocker, DAS Bishop, DAS Princeton Lyman, and office director Keith Wauchope. The lesson I draw from this is that Washington should give an envoy its confidence or, put another way, enough rope to hang himself if things do not turn out the way he recommends. Had Washington been second guessing me and considering an occasional setback a fatal blow, then I could not have operated and we could well have given new wind to Benin’s flagging revolution.

JOHN ALLEN CUSHING
Public Affairs Officer
Cotonou, Benin (2004-2007)

Mr. Cushing was born in New York City and raised in New York and Hawaii. He graduated from Reed College and continued studies at a variety of institutions in the US and abroad. After service in the Peace Corps, he held a number of positions as English language instructor before joining the Foreign Service in 1988. Mr. Cushing served abroad, variously as Consular, Political, Economic or Public Affairs Officer, in the Dominican Republic, Korea, Benin, Papua New Guinea, and Trinidad & Tobago. In Washington, Mr. Cushing served as Korean Desk Officer. Mr. Cushing was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2009.

CUSHING: So I bid on a public affairs position in Cotonou, Benin in West Africa. So we went over there. I had public diplomacy training in Washington, DC from July to December, 2004. We had an apartment in Ballston and I walked over the Foreign Affairs Training Center every day for that. So we were in the States for the 2004 election.

Some of the things I did in Cotonou were, we set up an awards program for outstanding journalists and the ambassador awarded awards to them.

Q: Cotonou is the capital of?

CUSHING: Actually, Porto Novo is the capital, but most of the government ministries and the presidential mansion and so forth are in Cotonou, so it is kind of an unusual situation because Porto Novo is about an hour's drive to the east, not too far from the border. Benin is a little country just west of Nigeria.

Mathieu Kerekou, the president, originally took over in a military coup and eventually was elected in a presidential election; there were hangers-on who were encouraging him to change the constitution so that he could run again, but the ambassador made a few speeches suggesting that the constitution be adhered to as it was written and not amended and so the president very indignantly said he never had any intention of attempting to run again. He stepped down and there were presidential elections.

The ambassador had an extensive art collection, so I worked on the art in embassy brochures, took a bunch of photographs of those and worked them up in brochures.

We had a fair amount of staff turnover at the American Cultural Center. I hired a new librarian, a new student adviser and a new cultural officer. We had a bare bones budget so it was a fairly difficult post because there was rarely enough money to do any of the things I would have liked. I worked entirely in French.

The roof was repaired with tar paper but they forgot to overlap the seams so one rainy season I had about four inches of water in most of my office. I had a carpet, so they brought in some plastic sheeting so I just, I had a pool of about four inches of water in most of my office for several months, maybe about six months, and I had mushrooms growing there and stuff like that. There just wasn't enough money for anything.

We got completely blown away by the French because the French were the former colonial power there. They had a military mission and they had an enormous embassy and they had an enormous cultural center with two performance spaces, one partially indoors and one out and they gave performances really often, and also had a big library.

We were tucked away in kind of an out of the way location, off of the beach front road, and we got a fair number of people who wanted to study in the United States because we had a student adviser. We were also able to institute a program where students could take the test of English as a foreign language on the computer in Cotonou. We got that set up finally. Prior to that, they had to go to Lagos, Nigeria or to Accra, Ghana to take the test, so this helped a good bit. We had a fair number of students who went to the United States to study. We tried to help them get scholarships.

It was a very difficult post. There wasn't a heck of a lot to do. That is where my marriage finally came unglued. My wife left, so I finished that post by myself.

We had an English school and we had a lot of problems with that, but rather than cast disparaging remarks on the fellow who was the ambassador there, I think I might just leave it at that.

Q: Who was the ambassador there?

CUSHING: Wayne Neil. We had a lot of problems. It was tough, it was tough.

Q: Did we have any interest in Benin?

CUSHING: Preserving democracy, I guess. It is one of the 20 poorest countries in the world. I honestly don't know. Most of what the political section did, I think, was just presenting demarches and so forth. There was a moderate interest in having an orderly succession of presidents and so after the new president was elected, President Bush's public affairs person, Karen Hughes flew over and met the president and there was a little bit of hoopla about that. But other than that, it was a little backwater country, very primitive, a great deal of corruption, a small post and morale was not great.

Q: You are saying from a public diplomacy side that basically the French had control over that.

CUSHING: Well, the French pushed their message. They were friendly, we were tolerated, and so forth, but France being sort of the mother country, the former colonial power and so forth, and French being the official language there, they really had the inside track.

Q: Did it make any difference? In a way in some places, put our resources somewhere else.

CUSHING: We had a few good things. We brought a traveling group over that sang American folk songs and they were very popular. We had a couple of concerts in Cotonou. We went out to Porto Novo and gave a concert there and went out to Ouidah and gave a concert there. We had the international visitor's program so we were able to send some young professionals from Benin to the United States on study tours. We had a visiting speakers' program so we had people who spoke on various aspects of American politics and culture and so forth. It was very much a backwater country.

I think a lot of interest in Africa was formerly based on the Cold War, the fact that the United States was vying with the Soviet Union and China for influence there, and it was considered sort of a pivotal continent.

President Bush actually had a good initiative. The President's Emergency Program for Aids Relief, PEPFAR, and that was well received there. There was a Peace Corps program there and so forth, but it was by and large a small and unimportant country. I kind of remember it mostly as the place where my marriage came to an end and my wife had a breakdown and left. Let's just say it wasn't the highest spot of my Foreign Service career.

Q: You were there for how long?

CUSHING: I was there from late December of 2004 until about May of 2007, so about 2 ½ years.

Q: Did any students from Benin go to the United States and take a full course of studies?

CUSHING: Oh, yes, quite a few.

Q: And what did they do? Did they come back?

CUSHING: Some came back, some stayed there. There was actually a woman who was a professor at the University of Arizona. She came from a prominent family there. A lot of the elite had Portuguese names because there was a Portuguese business family there where the fellow had a lot of different wives and so there would be many Beninese who looked totally African but would have Portuguese names. So this lady was Dr. D'Almeida and we gave a presentation at a university there and she had a interesting experience because she was talking to the students in Benin and she said, "If you mention African American life in America and if you mention African Americans to people in Africa, and if you mention Africans to African Americans in the United States, they both respond with the same word, which is 'savages.'" So there was a total misconception on both sides as to what life was like for people, so we worked on that a bit. I think by and large, among a lot of folks in the United States, there is not a great deal of understanding about the vast diversity of countries on the African continent and so forth. Africa is traditionally viewed as sort of a hopeless place.

At any rate, that was my foray into public diplomacy. I did reasonably well with the limited resources that I had. It was a tough post in a lot of ways.

Q: Was there much interest in American culture?

CUSHING: Some, yes, there was some. Since the language of education was French and English was a second language, people primarily would get scholarships to France to study. There was some interest in American culture, but not a great deal. France just seemed culturally and even geographically quite a bit closer than the United States, so that was how it was.

Q: You left there in 2007?

CUSHING: Yes.

End of reader