

GABON

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L. MICHAEL RIVES
Director for Central African Countries- State Department
Washington, DC (1961-1963)

L. Michael Rives was born in New York in 1921. He received a bachelor's degree from Princeton University in 1947 and joined the Foreign Service in 1950. Mr. Rives' career included positions in Germany, Vietnam, Laos, Guatemala, France, the Congo, Burundi, Cambodia, and Indonesia. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1995.

Q: When you came back, you had a full plate of African countries, didn't you?

RIVES: Well, I was the Director for the four Central African countries.

Q: This included what countries?

RIVES: French Congo, Central Africa Republic, Cameroon, and Gabon.

Q: The Kennedy Administration came in fascinated with Africa. You're the desk officer at this time... Soapy Williams is in... it's really a most exciting time for Africa. What was your impression of (1) our knowledge of Africa, and (2) how the Administration was seeing Africa against, what you were supposed to provide, the political realities.

RIVES: Well, I think we were all naive about Africa. As I look back, more than when I was there, I guess, I think we all felt Africa was a newly independent country. [The

colonies] had all been given constitutions based either on the French, British, or American constitutions...

Maybe one of the most important aspects of the policy was fear of the communists taking over. And so, in a lot of ways, it was a question of who got in fastest with the most money, I think. Whether Soapy Williams entirely went along with that, or not, I don't know. I don't think he worried so much about the communists; he just wanted to help the Africans. And I must say, his policy in those days was not that exciting; I thought it was sort of naive. But if you go to the retirees' days in the State Department... I haven't been now for about four years, but the last time I went there, I went to a seminar on Africa, and it could have been Soapy Williams speaking. The problems were exactly the same. And the solutions offered were exactly the same. Only now, I think we're cutting back on the number of posts, and things like that. Congress in those days, of course, was much more receptive to economic assistance, so we poured money in various places.

The first thing President Kennedy did was to give every Chief of State a limousine, and every country either a mobile film unit or a mobile medical unit. And I must say, to me, it was fascinating in those days, because I had always believed in American know-how, and with every unit we sent a mechanic with a three-year supply of parts. Within six months we were getting frantic telegrams from those mechanics, saying, "Send us more parts. And please tell Ford, Chrysler, Jeep, and everybody else that they've got to have better springs." So we passed that word around, and the reply that came back from every one of the companies was the same: "Couldn't care less. We've got our market in America. Who cares about Africa?" That was the beginning of the end of American cars over there.

Q: The area you dealt with, did you find there was much in the way of files or knowledge about the area?

RIVES: Almost none. There was a little bit, you know, because we had a Consulate in Brazzaville.

Q: Were you there during the famous trip, or had it happened already, was it Williams who took a swing through all the African countries?

RIVES: Oh, I went with him on that one.

Q: Can you talk about that?

RIVES: Well, we had a special plane. In fact, I think it was Eisenhower's former plane, because it actually had bunks in it, whatever it was called. We visited all these countries... It was somewhat the trip I had taken with Ambassador Houghton, except we went to the Belgian Congo, which we hadn't in the earlier days. It was to show the flag, I think, and we had an Assistant Secretary of HEW with us, amongst other things. I always remember him, because in the Congo, when Soapy offered grandly, "What can we do to help you? Would you like some doctors?" And when we got on the plane again, this Assistant Secretary of HEW said, "For Heaven's sakes, don't ever let me hear you say anything like

that again! If it wasn't for all the foreign doctors who work at the hospitals in the United States, we wouldn't be able to keep our hospitals going. Don't offer any." We went to a place in the middle of the Belgian Congo -- this was after the fighting had stopped, more or less -- I can't remember which town it was, but I had never seen anything like it. It was completely empty. There wasn't a soul in it. Every building was empty. But the Congolese Government brought people in, and there were a few Belgian planters still hanging around by the skin of their teeth in the outskirts, and they gave us this feast which must have been flown in by special plane from Brussels. It was a huge meal, and the perspiration was pouring down our faces, no air conditioning, of course. Suddenly, "White Christmas" was played by a military band which marched outside the windows!

Q: When you got back and you were in charge of this Central African office, what was your analysis that you were passing on about American interests in the area?

RIVES: American relations in the area were very limited. In Central African republics, we did have interests: diamond people. Jackie Kennedy's boyfriend, Mr. Tempelman, was always putting pressure for help there. And in Gabon, U.S. Steel and Bethlehem Steel were interested, at one point, in developing huge iron ore deposits inland, but it meant building railroads and things like that; I don't think it's ever gotten off the ground. In the Congo, we had no interests at all, really. After a while, of course -- all the road-making equipment used to be American -- the French developed their own, and they started closing the market on us. The French were really very colonial. They still are, because they support local currencies so they can exert pressure, things like that.

Q: Did you have any feeling, in the area you were doing, about Soviet penetration at that time?

RIVES: I was very interested by that, because I think we had misunderstood it for a long while. As I said in the beginning, we had visions, fear of the Soviets taking over Africa. And a lot of the governments that took over, after a while, when all these constitutions were overthrown, each country followed much the same pattern. It was very much a Soviet pattern. Guinea was the first one to do it. What they were interested in, what they used the Soviet pattern for [was this]: If you were the Soviet communist regime, then you could go to the government and say, "Look, this is the way you do it: you organize cells, you spread out the power from the center, and in five years you will have such and such in place, in ten years you will have such and such in place."

They'd come to us and say, "How do we establish democracy?" "What does it mean?" "Can you explain?" It's hard to explain. You grow up in it. It just develops. You have to have education, that kind of thing. They couldn't find anything for us to give them concrete to hang on to. So they'd all go that way. What finally evolved, and I finally realized this when I was stationed in Burundi, the communists realized the same thing. They would use the Soviet system up to a certain level, and then they'd throw it aside, and either swing somewhat towards our way, or just be themselves. And that's what happened. The Soviets cut back on their aid; we cut back on our aid at about the same time.

Q: How did Assistant Secretary Williams use the desk? How did he operate within the Bureau?

RIVES: I'm not sure that he used it any more than any other Secretary, or any less. We wrote papers and think pieces, you know, that kind of thing, put forward suggestions. But he set the overall tone at the top, which we followed. When all these new African embassies were established, we all had to work with him like mad to find places to live, where they wouldn't be spat upon by the neighbors, and that kind of thing... Soapy, I must say, was very conscientious, and having a lot of money, he was able to do things a lot of Assistant Secretaries couldn't have.

You know he was a very good square dancer. He was a caller for square dancing, and very good at it, too. So he would insist on having square dances, which was something. At the first one, on the eighth floor, all the Africanists, of course, had to be there. We all arrived there, and when we headed for the bar, there was no liquor. He didn't believe very much in drinking, although he did drink a little bit. So after that one, we all used to tank up before we went to these things! They were sort of drawn out. I must say, the African Ambassadors were not very pleased, either, but we all did the dosido's and things like that! And he held special classes for us in the Department of Commerce Cafeteria for this kind of thing.

And then we went on that famous trip. I think it was in Fort Lamy or Ouagadougou, or someplace like that, they put on native dances, and -- this was in the middle of the night, mind you -- and suddenly he turned to us all, and we had to get up and do square dancing. I think the people thought we were absolutely insane. Soapy called for us, and, as I say, he was a good caller... You know, he used us as his staff...

DOROTHY A EARDLEY
Secretary to the Ambassador
Libreville (1963-1965)

Mrs. Eardley was born in Wisconsin and raised in Wisconsin and Illinois. She attended Rubican Business School before entering the State Department, where in 1951 she was assigned as Clerk-Stenographer at Djakarta, Indonesia. She subsequently was posted to Berlin, Chengmai, Paris, Libreville, Colombo, Ankara, Ottawa, Jeddah and Kigali. She also had temporary duty assignments in Djibouti, Reunion, and Johannesburg. She retired in 1980. Mrs. Eardley was interviewed by T. Frank Crigler in 2008.

Q: Well then, let's go on to Gabon. How did you get to Gabon?

EARDLEY: They assigned me. Oh! Lyon fought that assignment! No, they first assigned me to some island in the Caribbean. Martinique? Cecil Lyon wouldn't have it. I said, "Don't bother, I go wherever they send me." My car had already been sent, my clothes had been sent. I get home and Washington calls me and says, "You're not going to Martinique, you're going to Gabon."

Q: This was a favor that Cecil was doing for you?

EARDLEY: Yes, because Martinique wasn't an embassy, it was a consulate general. Boy, he didn't know Gabon! But anyway, there was one good thing that came out of it. I met Albert Schweitzer. I tried to turn him away from communism. He was a communist! I don't think most Americans knew that. He would scribble up the daily paper with red pencil, marking anything that was unfavorable to America. Every morning. Well, I went to visit him. I sent a telegram saying I would like to come and visit and he sent me back a telegram saying he'd love to meet me. He didn't know the half of it. Anyway, two other people from the embassy and I went. One was Irwin Hicks who became an ambassador later on, he was a code clerk at that time. The other one was a woman whose name I can't remember.

Q: A staff person in the embassy?

EARDLEY: Yes. We were in an embassy jeep, open air jeep, and we drove there, got into a storm on the way and had to stop a bit, but we got there. I didn't know anyone took pictures, but two years ago, on my 85th birthday we were all celebrating in Illinois, and there on the wall someone had posted a picture of Dr. Schweitzer — and me!

Q: Really!

EARDLEY: I didn't remember that picture. Evidently it was one that I'd given to my mother, but I don't remember ever having had one. After my mother died, evidently my brothers and sisters who cleared out her house picked it up. And so I saw it again.

Q: How did you get along with him face-to-face?

EARDLEY: I was civil. But ...

[Session was interrupted at this point.]

Q: Dorothy, tell me some more about Libreville, please, and the embassy there, and the ambassador.

EARDLEY: Is that what the embassy was called, Libreville, Gabon? *[Laughs.]* Sorry. Charles F. Darlington was the politically-appointed ambassador. I didn't care for him very much. I loved his wife though, and his son.

Q: Who appointed him? Must have been President Kennedy.

EARDLEY: I guess it was Kennedy. Anyway, Darlington had served in Brussels in his economic capacity several years, I think. But he was cheap, chintzy, and he even used the embassy's postage stamps. And for cocktail parties, he put down the name of a nonexistent waiter and collected money.

Q: For the waiter's services?

EARDLEY: Yes. He went down so in my opinion! Now his wife wasn't like that at all.

Q: What was her name?

EARDLEY: Alice. Alice Darlington. She was a marvelous person. And so was their son, who visited there, a grown son — I don't remember his name. Anyway, my reaction to Gabon was violent. I did things I absolutely would not have done under normal conditions. I bought a boat, for instance.

Q: Motor boat?

EARDLEY: It had a motor in back. It was 19 feet long, had no life vests, no insurance. I drove it twelve miles every Sunday to an uninhabited island.

Q: You drove the boat there?

EARDLEY: Yes. Outboard motor is what they called it. And I took a French family that I adored over, and we spent the whole day there. Nothing ever happened. But on the way back, every Sunday afternoon, a squall came up. Tossed that boat twenty feet in the air. But we never capsized or whatever they say. We all got back safely, and I put it away for another week. A miracle. God took care of me all the way.

Q: Could you start that outboard motor yourself?

EARDLEY: Oh, sure.

Q: Were there Peace Corps volunteers there when you were there?

EARDLEY: Let me think . . . I don't think so.

Q: I seem to recall reports that some had been expelled by the Gabonese government at about that time.

EARDLEY: I don't recall that. I don't remember much about Gabon because I've tried to erase most of it out of my mind and get on to better things.

ROBERT V. KEELEY
Congo-Leopoldville Desk Officer-Central African Affairs
Washington, DC (1963-1965)

Ambassador Robert V. Keeley was born in Lebanon of American parents in 1929. He joined the Foreign Service in 1956. His career included positions in Jordan, Mali, Uganda, Cambodia, and ambassadorships to Greece, Mauritius, and Zimbabwe. Ambassador Keeley was interviewed by Thomas Stern in 1991.

Q: Then you were assigned to Washington to the Congo desk.

KEELEY: That is right. It was Congo-Leopoldville, which became Zaire in 1971. The desk was part of the Office of Central African Affairs, which included the other Congo (Brazzaville), Central African Republic, Gabon, Cameroon, Chad, Rwanda, Burundi, Mozambique and Angola. The Office Director was George McMurtrie Godley ("Mac"); his deputies were Allan Ford and Matt Looram, who looked after the Portuguese territories--Mozambique and Angola. I was one half of a desk. Art Tienken and I worked as co-desk officers for the Congo. We were so busy with the Congo it needed two desk officers. Art worked on internal Congolese political affairs; I did the external side--i.e., the U.N. involvement, the Katanga operations, etc. Art and I replaced Charlie Whitehouse and Frank Carlucci. I went to see Frank, who was then working in Personnel, just prior to his assignment to Zanzibar. I wanted his advice and to learn something about the Congo situation. He had served in Leopoldville as well as on the desk. Prior to leaving Bamako, I had requested that I return to Washington via the Congo so I could get a feel for the country I would work on. I was turned down flatly; it was straight to Europe and then home. So I had never set foot in the country. A year later, in the summer of 1964, Mac Godley had become the Ambassador in Leopoldville; I then visited the post and Elisabethville, Rwanda and Burundi, and Brazzaville, all of which I was supposed to cover from the Washington desk. So I was actually half way through my tour before I could see what I was backstopping in Washington. This is a major defect in State's operations. It would have been so much easier and not much more expensive to route me through Leopoldville on the way home from Mali, just to meet the people in the Embassy and get a feel for them and a little bit of the country. Otherwise, the people at the other end of the communications line were just names. By a year later, I knew our Ambassadors in the two Congos, Rwanda and Burundi, and some of the other people in the other posts in the ex-Belgian Congo, because I had met them while they were in Washington, or I had visited their posts.

An assignment as a desk officer in the Department is an extremely valuable posting for a young officer, because it gives one the opportunity to learn first hand how the Washington bureaucracy works, how to get things done in the Department of State. It's a very intense learning process that everyone who aspires to reach the senior ranks ought to pass through, the earlier in a career the better. I'll give you an example, perhaps an amusing one, of just how much learning is involved. After a few weeks on the job as one of the two Congo desk officers, most of which time I spent trying to learn as much about

the country as possible, a bright idea suddenly hit me, and without giving it a lot of analysis I went straight to the boss, Mac Godley, with my idea. First of all, there seemed to be mostly incompetent leadership at the top of the Congo government in Leopoldville--this was after Patrice Lumumba had been killed--whereas I had come to understand that the leader in secessionist Katanga, Moise Tshombe, seemed to be a highly competent and efficient and decisive leader, a clever politician who could run rings around his opponents in Leopoldville.

So I said to Mac Godley, why don't we solve several problems with one dramatic move, by having Tshombe moved from Katanga to the capital of Leopoldville and put him in charge of the whole Congolese government? This would end the secession in Katanga, because in effect Katanga in the person of Tshombe would have taken over the leadership of the whole country, and at the same time we would have installed the most competent leadership possible in Leopoldville to run the whole show. Godley stared at me in disbelief. I surely didn't realize at the time how naive I must have sounded. It wasn't that we were incapable of pulling off this scheme. The fact is that we were running the show in the Congo at that time, that is, in Leopoldville at least and the whole UN operation, though we were not running things in Katanga--Tshombe and his Belgian sympathizers and his mercenaries were running things there, in defiance of us and the UN and everybody. I suppose my proposal displayed my penchant for trying to solve big, complex problems with one grand gesture, but it must have struck Godley as crazy. He let me down gently by explaining that Tshombe was currently the enemy, our enemy, the guy whose secession we were trying to put down, and it was clearly a crazy idea to in effect surrender to him by putting him in charge of the whole country. He was the bad guy, and the guys in Leopoldville, though perhaps corrupt and incompetent, were at least our guys.

Well, I went back and tried to learn more about the Congo, perhaps feeling lucky that Godley hadn't sacked me on the spot. But I did have a small victory eight or nine months later, when I made my first visit to my posts, in the summer of 1964, going first to Paris and Brussels, and then to Brazzaville and Leopoldville. Who should be on the same flight from Paris to Brazzaville but none other than Moise Tshombe, on his way to Leopoldville to take charge of the whole Congolese government, at the invitation of his rivals in the capital who decided the best course for the country was to put him in the driver's seat. At Ambassador Godley's invitation (by that time, as I said, he had become the new American Ambassador in Leopoldville) I stayed with him while I was in Leopoldville, and I had the good sense not to remind him of my grand scheme of the year before to "move Tshombe to Leopoldville." He had enough problems coping with the new situation created by Tshombe's "coup," which I should add was not our doing but had been engineered behind our backs. Godley got along fine with Tshombe after he took over and in fact the installation of Tshombe as national leader solved a lot of problems in the Congo for a while, though this solution didn't last very long. Mobutu then took over, but that was after my time.

Our Central African office was extraordinarily busy. It became so difficult that sometime later the Department set up a special task force, under Sheldon Vance, to handle Congo

affairs. It was one of the major foreign policy problems of the Kennedy era, starting in 1961. By the time I got to the desk, in September 1963, it was just a few months before Kennedy's assassination, but the Congo remained a problem for a long time. The Office of Central African Affairs, with Jim O'Sullivan as its head, replacing Mac Godley, was left as kind of a shell after the Vance Task Force was established. I had about half of the residual responsibilities: Congo (Brazzaville), Rwanda, Burundi plus some residual ex-Belgian Congo matters. Walker Diamanti was my colleague and he had the rest of the Central African states--Cameroon, CAR, Chad and Gabon. That was it! It became a very small office towards the end of my tour. During the Katanga war in the Congo, we were about the busiest office in the State Department. That is why we had two desk officers. Very little attention was paid to the other countries I was covering. There was very little interest in them. The desk officer in that situation becomes a key figure because he is about the only person in the Department, and much if not all of the government, who is giving any attention to those countries. If there is an assistance program, then AID has an office. But our interests in my other countries were quite minimal and the only attention paid to them was if there was a crisis.

Of course, we had a whole series of crises. One that occurred during my tour was in Burundi. A young Chinese diplomat walked into our Embassy in Bujumbura and defected. He happened to be the most senior Chinese communist official ever to defect to the United States up to that time. He was not that significant in himself; he was very new and young. He was on his first overseas assignment. But he was valuable because he had been assigned to language school and had studied French; our analysts were interested to learn how selections were made for the diplomatic service, how they were trained, what kind of ideological training they received; in general, he was very useful for learning something about a country which was essentially a big mystery to us. Furthermore, in those days, defectors were a major interest of our intelligence agencies and the U.S. government in general. So it was very important that the Chinese diplomat be well treated, on the theory that if he were well treated and the word got back to China, then there might be more defectors. There was certainly no chance if he had been mistreated. Our Ambassador was Don Dumont. I visited Bujumbura in the summer of 1964 while the defector was still in the Embassy. The whole episode took months because the Burundi government would not cooperate with us. It wouldn't let the Chinese official out of the country. We didn't dare let him out of our chancery; so he lived in the Ambassador's office. When I arrived in Bujumbura, I found a very upset Ambassador because the Chinese was living and sleeping in his office, using his bathroom and had just taken over the place. He couldn't be moved; there was no way he could be moved to another facility without leaving the chancery grounds. So the poor Ambassador begged me to get the guy out of there. We negotiated with the Burundis. The Chinese Embassy people surrounded our Embassy at one point. The Burundi government had threatened to come into our chancery and take him away; it was a horrible situation.

THOMPSON R. BUCHANAN
Deputy Chief of Mission

Libreville (1966-1967)

Thompson R. Buchanan was born in California in 1924. He received a bachelor's degree from Yale University in international relations in 1947 and served in the U.S. Navy during World War II. Mr. Buchanan entered the Foreign Service in 1948. His career included positions in Paris, Frankfurt, Moscow, Bujumbura, Libreville, and Leningrad. This interview was conducted by Charles Stuart Kennedy on March 15, 1996.

Q: Today is April 5, 1996. Okay, Tom, I guess it is Gabon. You were there from 1965-67. What was your position there?

BUCHANAN: I was deputy chief of mission.

Q: What was the embassy like?

BUCHANAN: It was a very small, equatorial African embassy of roughly 12 people. It was the absolute antithesis of Burundi. Burundi was the most heavily populated country of Africa, with very poor people, a place where people mutilated their children so they could become beggars. Gabon, as not all Americans know, is really the Kuwait of Africa, where American corporations own around 50 percent of the tremendously rich Belinga iron ore reserve and the manganese mines across near the Congo border. At Belinga, 500 miles into the jungle, a shovel full of dirt contained 65 percent pure iron ore. Incidentally, we flew everywhere in little Cessna planes flown by frustrated French fighter pilots, who would ask: "do you want to see an elephant?" and zoom down below the tree tops over the top of a bull elephant, who would flap his ears and run back into the bush. Because of its extensive lumbering operations, its original wealth, Gabon had more small air strips than any other comparable state in Africa. The uranium for the French *force de frappe* came, in part, from Gabon, and exploitation of onshore and offshore oil was betting seriously underway when I left.

It has onshore and offshore oil. We always used to joke about digging carefully in your garden because you never knew what you were going to find...diamonds or gold. It is understandably an area of very strong French interest. This became apparent as soon as I arrived. On my first day the ambassador, David Bane, took me down to meet the Foreign Minister and the Foreign Minister said, "Mr. Ambassador, as soon as Mr. Buchanan is free, Monsieur Gali would like to meet with him." As we went out I said, "Who is Mr. Gali?" Bane said, "I haven't the foggiest." Mr. Gali came over that same day and it was very clear quickly that this young energetic man was French counterintelligence. The conclusion they had drawn was that, since I had come from Moscow and had been thrown out of Burundi, that I must be the new CIA station chief. What they didn't know was there was no station chief in Gabon because there were no Communist missions there. But, anyway, we used to play tennis regularly and I probably should have made it clearer that I wasn't the station chief, but I wanted to take advantage of the rivalry between the French counterintelligence and the representative of Fouquet from the Elysée, who hated each other's guts. The fellow from the Elysée was right out of

Hollywood casting, sinister in appearance with a great gimp. The two would compete in telling me different stories about what the Cubans were up to in the neighboring Congo.

The ambiguity about my role also had its drawbacks. For example, Gabon asked for aid at one point. It needed aid like a hole in the head, of course. It was so wealthy and the French put in so much money, but nevertheless, President Bongo hoped by getting aid from us reduce his dependence on France. I went with the ambassador when he was turning down Bongo's request. After Bane had said "no", Bongo then turned to me, i.e. Mr. CIA moneybags, and asked: "And what does Mr. Buchanan say?" at which point I wanted to be seven feet under ground. Fortunately Bane seemed to understand the situation.

Q: Did you find this type of thing that somebody was whispering in Bongo's ear all the time for the French side saying to be aware of the Americans?

BUCHANAN: Oh, very definitely. While my personal relations with the French officials and military remained very cordial, there were certainly French officials trying to put sticks in the spokes of American-Gabonese relations. Bongo and his ministers were also victims of their own tribal superstitions and suspicions. Incidentally, Dr. Schweitzer understood this very well, and made sure that, in his hospital, patients could be taken care of by their own relatives. Many would have feared to be poisoned if their food was prepared by nurses from a different tribe. Voodoo or spirit worship played an important role among many in this nominally Christian society. I had ministers swear to me that, after drinking some of the aboga root extract, a sort of LSD, they were able to converse with their ancestors. I attended a ceremony once out in the jungle where the witch doctor played the role of psychiatrist with a woman who had been in deep depression since losing her husband. The patient was painted white, the basin, and the woman went into an apparent trance. In short, the Gabonese were less sophisticated generally than the Ivorians or the Ghanians, and I suspect that the French took advantage of this fact.

Q: *What was our Peace Corps doing there?*

BUCHANAN: We were building schools. We did a little bit of language training, but mostly schools. The Peace Corps borrowed the design for their schools from the buildings that Dr. Schweitzer put up at his hospital. They provided virtually no privacy, but were very simple in construction and efficient from the standpoint of air circulation. The areas where a money economy was not well established, the volunteers had success in getting the population involved in the construction, leaving them with an ability to build a school themselves. One volunteer, an architect from Yale, taught himself Bapounou in southern Gabon, and working with three dynamic young chiefs from neighboring villages, ended up building three schools for the price of one. But, in a well-traveled area like Lambaréné, villagers could not understand working for nothing, pro bono. I will never forget the sight of two lonely volunteers on top of a structure they had essentially built themselves, their lone Gabonese helper a tiny boy carrying a bucket of water.

The Peace Corps program was basically very successful. It became a political football in a way because every Gabonese politician wanted to have his own Peace Corps. Bongo was constantly pressing us, for example, to build a school near his hometown of Franceville. But, this, I suppose, is typical of Peace Corps ventures around the world.

Q: Often in these smaller countries votes in the United Nations become quite a factor. Was Gabon pretty much under the beck and call of the French?

BUCHANAN: Oh, yes, it was. We had to go in all the time, of course, on the Vietnam issue and the Gabonese couldn't care less about Vietnam. Now, a lot of the French cared about Vietnam because they had been kicked out of Indochina and Algeria. Unable to stand life in Metropolitan France, they had retreated to Gabon, as their last frontier. Some would urge us to "use the bomb" in Vietnam. Relations between the old timers who grew up in Gabon, the old "colons" with all their inherited racist attitudes, and the Gabonese were curious. The Gabonese would protest promptly what they saw as racial behavior on the part of Frenchmen from the Metropole, often obtaining their prompt expulsion by the French Ambassador, who still played the role of Governor General. But they shrugged off remarks by the old colons.

Q: Were there any other issues or events that happened during your time there that you think we should cover?

BUCHANAN: No, what happened was mostly little ventures. Well, my first assignment there was to write up a justification for a motor boat with twin '40s on the grounds that we needed something so we could evacuate the embassy in an emergency.

Q: Sort of a water skier's victory.

BUCHANAN: Exactly, it was for waterskiing. Probably my greatest achievement was to float building materials across the 12 kilometer Libreville estuary and construct a beach house for weekends, which I must say was better than the one the French embassy had constructed. It was amusing, we built a fireplace because your blood over time becomes so thin on the equator that when the temperature gets down to 80 you are shivering.

On the human side, I learned a bitter lesson. We had a communicator, basically a Pagliacci personality, who hid his great personal pain, he had serious family problems, under a booming laugh. I never saw through the facade. One morning, at 5 a.m. I was awakened to hear that he had committed suicide. Gabon had a rule that anyone who died had to be buried or out of the country within 24 hours, for obvious reasons being on the equator. We managed to get our man embalmed but the plane was waiting to take off at the airport while I was still at the palace, watching a police sergeant typing a long release document with one finger. The moral: look behind an excessively jolly facade for the pain it probably hides.

It was a post where you probably had to be a young man to enjoy it as much as I did, and not be upset by the lack of amenities. We had the giant crabs in my garden that

occasionally came into the house, or on one occasion chased my French ladies who were playing croquet. The dining room table would often appear to be in mat(?) from the millions of microscopic spiders on the surface. The air conditioning really didn't work, and I had to watch the staff carefully after a party to see what they might have scrounged away in an apparent bottle of scotch, on one occasion empty into it the dregs of all the glasses left by guests, plus a few cigarette butts. If you went dancing, you went outside after each dance to wring out your shirt. We made some wonderful trips, but probably the most exotic was after Easter at Lamb where we shook hands with the lepers. The laterite mud road home was so slippery that, even with four wheel drive, we arrived too late to go the two kilometer wide Ogoue River to catch the ferry. Under a moonlit night we piled our bags and German chopart dog into a long dug-out log canoe, and prayed we would not upset our very tipsy vehicle into the crocodile infested river.

JOHN PROPST BLANE
Desk Officer- State Department
(1966-1969)

Ambassador John Blane was born in Alabama. He attended the University of Tennessee and served in the US Army towards the end of the Korean War. He entered the Foreign Service in 1956. His career included positions in Somalia, Ethiopia, Austria, Cameroon, Chad, Kenya, and Rwanda. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on August 8, 1990.

Q: You were in Cameroon from 1963 to '66. Did that pretty well confirm you in saying, "Gee, I'm glad I'm an African specialist and want to stay in."?

BLANE: Oh, yeah, yeah. I was not looking to go anywhere else.

Q: You came back again, in sort of the traditional upward and onward assignment, as basically a desk officer in AF (AF being the African Bureau). What were you doing there?

BLANE: I had four and a half little countries. I had Chad, Gabon, Togo, Dahomey, and, for part of the time, Equatorial Guinea. I simply managed the Washington end of the telegraph line between here and there. Looking after the care and feeding of my ambassadors. Making sure that their concerns were brought to the attention of those back here in Washington. That was not always easy. It is very hard to get somebody's attention on Dahomey and that sort of thing. Those were good years. Again, no serious problems.

Well, some serious problems. At least serious at the time. For example, Dahomey had done something (and I don't remember what) to irritate the French. Dahomey is now, by the way, called Benin. It is a very poor country, and they were operating basically on French subventions to run their government. And the French became irritated and cut off the money for about four or five months.

The poor Dahomian Embassy were just in a terrible fix. They didn't have a nickel to operate on, so they went over to Riggs Bank and started borrowing. And for the last couple of months during this fiscal drought, the Riggs people would call me up to ask what I thought the chances were that the French would turn the money back on. I explained to them I couldn't give them any guarantees, but since Dahomey had always been in the French reserve, I was convinced in my heart of hearts that the money line would be reestablished, I couldn't tell them when. Well, ultimately it was, and Riggs got their money.

I also did a lot of care and feeding of African ambassadors at that time, too, because some of them weren't at all experienced in diplomacy or in living outside of Africa.

This was particularly true of the Gabonese ambassador, who was forever getting himself into one scrape or another because he simply didn't know how to cope with life in Washington. At one point I was called by the police, who asked if I would render them assistance in the matter of the Gabonese ambassador and his garbage. And I said yes.

It turned out that the ambassador was simply throwing his garbage out his back door. He lived in a very, very, very nice neighborhood in Washington, and his neighbors were beginning to take some exception to this. Because this garbage mound grew, and it smelled, and it attracted flies and all this sort of thing. The police said that they had sent the health folks over, and they had gone over, but the ambassador didn't speak any English and they had had no luck in getting their message across, would I undertake the job?

So I trotted over to see the ambassador, and I said, "Well, I'm told that you're throwing your garbage out the back door."

"Yeah, yeah, sure, that's what one does with garbage, you throw it out the back door."

I said, "Well, maybe you do in Gabon, but here we have a service, and you put your garbage in a can and twice a week they'll come and carry it away."

"Ah!" A revelation. An absolute revelation.

We got that taken care of, but we had a number of little problems like that.

Q: Joseph Palmer was the assistant secretary at that time. How did he run the African Bureau, would you say?

BLANE: Well, how shall I say, in a very collegial fashion. We had staff meetings every day at that time. We would get together and inform him of what was going on in our various countries; he would tell us what was going on in the upper reaches of the State Department; we'd get our marching orders for the day and we'd go off about our business. At these staff meetings, we'd discuss any policy questions that came up. This was a time

of lots of visits. We would talk about presidential visits over here, African presidents visiting the United States. But Joe ran a very open shop, he was very informal. He kept quite close touch with everything that was going on.

Q: How did you feel Africa weighed-in within the State Department at that time?

BLANE: Those years were the heyday of Africa. Those were the years Lyndon Johnson was president. Now most American presidents have been extremely loath to spend much time on African affairs or African leaders. Mr. Johnson, however, had a very open door. He would receive anybody anytime. During my two and a half years on the desk, I managed five state visits. And my colleagues were doing the same. So President Johnson was an extremely accessible president for our client states. That never existed before; has not existed since.

HARVEY F. NELSON, JR.
Deputy Chief of Mission
Libreville (1967-1969)

Ambassador Nelson was born and raised in California. He was educated at Occidental College, The University of Stockholm, Sweden and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. After serving in the US Navy and teaching at Bowdoin College, Ambassador Nelson joined the Foreign Service and served in Washington and abroad, primarily as a political officer dealing in Scandinavian and African affairs. In 1985 he was appointed Ambassador to Swaziland. Ambassador Nelson was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2000.

Q: What was your next assignment in 1967?

NELSON: I was assigned to Gabon as DCM. We went on home leave and then to Libreville.

Q: Did you feel that you were being made into an Africanist?

NELSON: It never occurred to me. My attitude was that as a Foreign Service officer, I went where I was told. It is so different today! But then, that was the way you behaved. I was a little concerned by the Gabon assignment because we didn't know what we could do about the kids and school. There had been a good international school in Leopoldville. Originally it had been a Methodist or Baptist school, but by mid-1960 it was essentially non-sectarian. It was a pretty good school. Our kids learned French pretty well. But the education in Gabon would be a different situation and that bothered us a little. We didn't know what problems we might have to face. But later on, we found out what we had to do.

Q: You were in Gabon from 1967 to late 1969. Who was our ambassador? How did he operate?

NELSON: David Bane. His wife's name was Patty. Bane had been mainly in the Asian sub-continent. He was in Pakistan as consul general. He learned to play polo. He was a prince of a man. Patty was delightful. The embassy was very, very small; that was great and I loved it. The embassy was quartered in an old bank building, which had a huge iron-grilled work for a door. It weighed a ton but could be opened by a little key inserted into a tiny lock. Anyone with a little strength could have opened that door. But every morning we would unlock the door and every evening we would lock it, even though we recognized the weakness of the door.

Gabon was an interesting and fun assignment. It is a tiny country of approximately a million people. It was not terribly important to us. But it was a great place for the kids. The environment was very secure as contrasted to the Congo where life was very dangerous. I think if the Department were to do it all over again, it might not have assigned officers with families to the Congo. The problems there were corrupt soldiers and policemen, who would stop you on the street and demand money. The population was very restive. Every time there was a automobile accident some one else got killed. It was bad situation, but we went there blindly and learned to cope with the problems of Leopoldville.

Q: What was Gabon like in the late 1960s?

NELSON: It was a country of major French influence. The president was Omar Bongo. The country had oil and wood resources. Very fine plywood came from Gabon. There is also a huge iron mine owned by U.S. Steel or another American company. That mine is way back in the jungle which made it rather inaccessible. There were plans to build a railroad from there to a port, which I think has been built by now. So oil, wood and iron were the major sources for income.

There was a small French colonial community - people who had lived in Gabon before it achieved independence. They were a delightful group. Also there were a few people from other former French colonies - Cambodia, Vietnam, Senegal etc. I think there were five members of the diplomatic corps - the Chinese, the Germans, the Israelis, the French and us. So it was a small diplomatic corps. There were in addition countries that were accredited to Gabon but whose representatives lived elsewhere and only visited Libreville.

Gabon was quiet and peaceful and as I said, very secure. There was no diplomatic enclave. We all lived in the city. So we had all kinds of neighbors. Our closest neighbors were from Vietnam; our youngest son developed a great relationship with the young Vietnamese. They were great explorers, so these kids wandered off into the city streets, but we never worried about that. It was fantastic. My wife once had her bicycle stolen; she reported to the police which caused an interesting episode. She had to fill out a massive number of forms, but the bicycle was never found. That was our only incident in over two years.

We first sent the children to local schools. That lasted only briefly because the children did not know French well enough to keep up with the lessons. The public schools were very undisciplined, so we tried Catholic schools. They were almost as bad; so we finally decided to teach the kids at home - the Calvert system. That was very successful because two of our officers had wives who were accredited teachers. Foreign Service officers were eligible for a 25% hardship differential. We used that to pay these teachers with those funds. My wife first tried to teach the children at home, but we soon found out that it's very difficult for a mother also to be a teacher. They have discipline problems. The teaching wives were very good; the kids loved them and worked very hard to please them. That was probably the best education they received in all of their lives. So that worked out well.

Our oldest child was not with us. He attended a boarding school in Switzerland. His younger brother attended the same school for one semester. That didn't work out very well; so he returned home which worked out well. We had looked at the Swiss school, which looked good to us. It turned out to be anything but; it was a money making device. The only positive part of his experience was that he learned how to ski. A lot of broken families sent their kids to this school. They didn't know what else to do with them. That did not make for a very good atmosphere. We had an allowance which paid for the costs of the school. There were a number of Lebanese children at the school and our son became friendly with them. They invited him to join them in Beirut where he could attend the American school. He decided he wanted to do that, and we permitted him to go to Beirut. Beirut at the time was not a sea of calm; there were constant shootings and bombings, but the school was kept open and so we let him go. It was crazy. We did have some friends who worked for Shell Oil in Beirut; they looked after him. He fortunately did not need much help; he was very self sufficient.

As I said, Gabon was comfortable situation for us and the kids. We had an "evacuation boat;" a high powered speed boat. We used to water ski. Libreville was on an estuary which was about twelve miles across. We rented a cottage on the water and spent our week-ends there, skiing, swimming and fishing That was our evacuation mode!

Q: In other places, we had emergency water storage places, which were a cover name for swimming pools. Those provided the only recreation in the country.

NELSON: We had this high powered boat - two 50 horsepower engines which would let you travel for a few hours. But where would one go? So we used the boat for recreation, which was wonderful for our whole family. We had had a small sailboat in Finland. I wanted to get another one, and we did. That allowed us to spend even more time on the water, which was great. That was a life-saver because the paved roads ended about 25 miles outside of the city. It was possible to drive over other roads, if they weren't too rutty. We had a terrible time convincing businessmen not to use these roads in the rainy season because they would be ruined and then would not be available any longer even in the dry season. I am not sure how many paid any attention to us. In any case, the lack of a

road system made Libreville pretty isolated; we could fly out - to Lagos for example - but it was very expensive.

Q: What was the political situation in Gabon when you got there?

NELSON: It was not very exciting. The country was pretty much under France's thumb. The French ambassador was in effect the governor-general. The political situation was quite calm. President Omar Bongo stood in good stead with the French. There had been some anti-American ferment before our arrival, but it was quite modest, and we never saw any such thing.

Q: What was the cause of such ferment?

NELSON: I don't really know. The French may have been behind that, but that is just speculation. When anything goes wrong, we blame the French. We couldn't prove anything. There was no CIA presence in Gabon. We had had a small assistance program and a had small USIS (United States Information Service) office. The assistance program had been terminated, although there was some residual work to be done to close the projects. I was given a small library of AID regulations which I was supposed to read and know in closing this program. I looked at the material and couldn't make heads or tails out of it. I suggested to the ambassador that we not waste much time on this effort. I suggested that he call the AID (Agency for International Development) regional office in Lagos and inform it that we could not do what was required and if that office wanted to follow-up, it should send someone to do the job. We were just not equipped to do the job, even if we had figured out what needed to be done.

Gabon didn't really need any aid. The French had a small police presence as well as a more sizeable military force which was there primarily there for regional purposes. The oil business was doing quite well. Gabon had no problems with any of its neighbors that I can recall.

We had a Peace Corps program in Gabon. It was a very good one. They worked in teams of two, working in the bush, building schools and housing for the teachers. The Gabonese had a teachers college in Libreville. The students would come to the college for a couple of years. Once they had lived in the big city, they didn't want to return to the hinterlands and live in a grass hut and teach in a mud school house which was washed away with every heavy rain storm. So the Peace Corps came up with the idea of building sheltered schools. The design was ingenious so that in the summer time, breezes could blow through the building. They also build some very nice small houses for the teachers. The Peace Corps volunteers worked very hard; they taught the indigenous population how to do this construction work - how to make the bricks, etc. It was a very successful program.

They also built shelters in various communities that could be used for political meetings or other functions. They set up a little TV arrangement in these places for the community to watch.

After we had been in Gabon for about a year, suddenly around Christmas Day, we were advised that the volunteers had to leave by the end of the year. No explanation. I talked to people in the President's office and the Foreign Ministry and they said that they were not at liberty to discuss the matter and that the volunteers would have to leave. Some of the volunteers were far in the bush and not easily reached. We did manage to contact all of them. They straggled into Libreville and most of them came to our house where they slept in the backyard. They used our facilities. We arranged for a plane to take them to Sierra Leone - hardly my choice as safe haven. Some of the volunteers had several days to kill before the plane would arrive. The kids had time on their hands. Although they were being kicked out of the country, they decided to go to help to finish a construction project in Libreville before they left. What dedication! I was impressed by their attitude. And they followed through and managed to get the building completed. Of course, the government never expressed any appreciation for this extraordinary effort.

But we did manage to evacuate all the Peace Corps volunteers. The ambassador was away in the U.S., so I reported the events in Gabon immediately. No response. So I reported it again. Silence. No response at all. Soon after I sent the report, I was called to the president's office to attend a cabinet meeting. I was asked what our protest delivered to the Gabonian embassy in Washington was all about. It was related to the Peace Corps. I had to confess that I didn't have a clue; nobody had told me anything, but I knew what the Department probably said. So I speculated what the protest might say. But I felt quite naked in Libreville because no one in Washington would keep us informed at all.

I assumed that the French may have had something to do with the withdrawal of the Peace Corps. I thought that someone in the France became very nervous about the Peace Corps presence in Gabon. It did have the reputation of stirring unrest. They kept preaching that people had to demand their rights, which probably made the French nervous. I assume that perhaps some of our volunteers had indeed talked about the benefits of democracy, but I think much was imagined. Crews of two are not likely to stir up any rebellion. But the French were nervous. In addition they had their own Peace Corps-like operation, but few of the participants were college graduates. They found it difficult to understand or believe that a college graduate would spend time in the bush; they would be concerned about a career and not some altruistic exercise. So the French concluded that the volunteers were probably CIA agents, which were a threat. That was our rationale for French attitudes. Some years later, the Peace Corps was allowed to start a program again.

At about this time, the Biafran - in Nigeria - war broke out. The French was on the side of the Ibos (the Biafrans). We supported the other side because our main goal was to hold the country together because if one country split along tribal lines, then it would happen in the whole continent. Ours was a quite justified policy. The French for some reason supported one of the Nigerian tribes. Gabon became a base of operations for the support of the Ibos. So we had an enormous amount of air activity. We began to keep track of air traffic; we hoped surreptitiously, but I don't know that we succeeded. But I doubt whether anybody cared. So we tried to identify the planes and noticed that many came from the U.S., which was very interesting. We reported our findings daily - all the details

we could muster - numbers and types. I even got my wife involved watching and identifying the planes. There was a little beach by the airport from where she could watch the end of the runway. From there she could watch the landings and departures; so she would lie on the beach with her notebook. At the end of the day, looking tan, she would give me her report. So we spent a lot of time on this effort. Whether it was useful or not, I don't know, but our reports were avidly consumed.

Q: Were American planes involved?

NELSON: These were planes belonging to private entrepreneurs.

Q: This is an interesting story because there many quarters in the U.S., including members and staff of Congress, that supported Biafra's independence.

NELSON: Indeed. Norman Cousins, of the Saturday Review, was one of the advocates. He came out to visit us. He irked me and my wife because he made a point of the "extended bellies" of Nigerian children. He had never talked about the children in the Congo who also suffered from starvation and malnutrition. There was a political group in the U.S. that became associated with the Biafra rebellion. We had a lot of Ibo friends both in the Congo and Gabon, and they were outstanding. They did their best to help the new fledgling African countries. We met a lot of others who were trying their best to make these new countries viable entities. They were also very kind to us.

Q: What were your thoughts about Bongo?

NELSON: He was a young man, a puppet of the French. He never exercised much visible independence during my tour at least. He was able to keep on top of things. He was not troubled by an excessive number of tribes. I think there were only two or three in Gabon. When OPEC was founded, he changed his name to Omar because he had joined OPEC; he may have become a Muslim around this time as well. One must conclude that he found some way to make a little money and be admitted to the right class of people. I think he is still alive.

Q: Were the Chinese or the Soviets at all engaged in Gabon?

NELSON: We had no concern for their possible activities. The French made sure that neither could play a mischievous role.

Q: How were your relations with the French embassy?

NELSON: Cordial. One day while my youngest son and I were sailing, probably getting ready to transport people to our cabin across the estuary. My son was about nine or ten. He was at the wheel of the boat. As he was looking around, he said that he noticed someone who appeared to be in trouble. Sure enough, there was a bow of a boat sticking out of the water. It was obviously sinking. So I said we should investigate and we did. As we got close to the boat we noticed two people in the water. They were being held up by

an up-side down cooler. By this time the boat had completely sunk. So we took them on board and thereby saved their lives, thanks to my son's keen eyesight and alertness. They were obviously grateful; we delivered them to their cottage and left them on shore safe and sound.

Some months later, we received a note from the French embassy saying that a medal had been struck in memory of our rescue mission. The French are great on medals and related ceremonies. Every week they would have a ceremony and sometimes we would go because friends of ours were being honored. If they had followed normal practice, they would have presented the medal in a public ceremony in front of Gabonese and Frenchmen. It would have meant honoring an American. We received the medal by messenger.

So we held our own ceremony, complete with press conference and an ambassadorial presentation. As I said, we had cordial relations with the French, but I am sure they would have preferred it if we had not been there. We made them nervous.

RICHARD FUNKHOUSER
Ambassador
Gabon (1969-1970)

Ambassador Richard Funkhouser was born and raised in Trenton, New Jersey. He graduated from Princeton University with a Degree in the Liberal Arts. He began working for Standard Oil but eventually moved on to the Foreign Service in 1945. During his active duty he has served in Paris, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Moscow, Gabon, Vietnam, and Scotland. This interview was conducted on February 2, 1988 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Q: *What were the issues in Gabon?*

FUNKHOUSER: There weren't any. I asked to leave.

Q: *Well Biafra was...*

FUNKHOUSER: Well, Biafra, I enjoyed that, because it was the only time we really had something constructive to report because Gabon was supporting the Biafrans. The French, of course, were still pseudo-colonists running Gabon. And they were supporting Biafra. So at least we had some useful reporting to do on the other side of the war. That was really the only issue that I thought commanded attention of the State Department. It was so uneventful there.

It's one of the richest countries in the world. It was well run. And unlike one of my predecessors, who wanted to make Gabon into a non-French controlled, totally independent country like many of its neighbors who have gone down the drain, I was not

interested in overthrowing in any way or participating in the overthrow of President Bongo, who was doing a reasonable job. I think I had, and this is for young Service officers, far more authority and far more interesting work as a Third Secretary in Paris doing the oil work, and certainly in the Middle East as Third Secretary, than as Ambassador. I asked to leave after a year, and was offered Vietnam. I accepted with relief.

Q: Interesting posts and interesting jobs.

FUNKHOUSER: Even Gabon, I loved it for one year. It is a tropical rain forest, the heart of darkness. I found out I had a distant relative who opened up the Schweitzer hospital at Lamberene on the Ogowe there back in 1856, Robert Hamill Nassau. I'd hate to live on the Earth without having seen Gabon.

EDWARD GIBSON LANPHER
Political Officer
Libreville (1969-1971)

Ambassador Edward Gibson Lanpher was born in Richmond, Virginia on December 8, 1942. He graduated from Brown University in 1966. He entered the foreign service later that year. During his years in the service he worked in Israel, Gabon, London, Zimbabwe, Namibia, New Zealand, Australia, Somalia, India, Pakistan and China. This interview was conducted on June 25, 2002 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Q: Talk about Gabon when you arrived there in '69.

LANPHER: Compared with Israel, Gabon was a low pressure, high heat place. When I got there in 1969, there was a very small embassy. For a couple of weeks, there was an ambassador named David Bain. Counting Bain, I had three ambassadors and three DCMs in the two year tour. Very small post. I was the political officer, the economic officer, and the consular officer. I remember when I got off the plane being struck – having never set foot in Africa before – this was tropical equatorial Africa. When the plane door opened in Libreville, the overwhelming smell of mildew. It was quite extraordinary. And the heat and humidity. Libreville got 120 inches of rain a year and it was green and moldy as it could be. That was the initial impression. There were so few new arrivals in those days that somebody invited my wife and me to dinner that night. I remember being offered French fried elephant trunk rings at this dinner. I was told that the trunk was the best part of the elephant to eat. One of my predecessors had shot an elephant. My predecessor was long gone. There hadn't been a consular or junior officer there for two or three months when I arrived. The next morning, I remember going into the DCM's office to get my marching orders. He was a very nice guy, Harvey Nelson. He said, "There is one pending problem on the consular side aside from the fact that no consular officer has issued a visa or passport for months. We had an American oil worker from an oil rig off the coast pitch

up dead and he's been in the embassy deep freeze for the last two or three months and we've got to get his body out of here and back to Oklahoma, but it's a very complicated process and we just haven't had time to get around to it with the government of Gabon, which insists on all sorts of certificates and otherwise because of the climate the bodies of dead people be buried the day they die or the day after." It took me two or three months and ultimately the signature of the President on the export forms for this cadaver. But that was a big difference between dealing with the problems of Israel and the problems of maintaining an embassy and a presence in Gabon.

Q: This was a rather peculiar situation where the Biafran war... In the United States, you had very strong supporters of the Biafran movement in Congress mainly more young staff aides who were pushing this, and also the glitterati from the Beatles to others. Biafra was sort of a cause. And also from the Catholic Church because the Ibos have a lot of Catholics in there. Also, they were damned good propagandists.

LANPHER: Yes, and Biafra, the eastern region of Nigeria, was, number one, Christian, predominantly Catholic. And it was probably the best educated region of Nigeria thanks in no small part to outfits like the Holy Ghost Fathers in Ireland that had been involved in the eastern region of Nigeria for a century. In fact, I met a lot of the Holy Ghost fathers who would come riding in and out on these munitions planes. This was DC-4s, DC-3s, Super G Constellations and that sort of thing. These Holy Ghost fathers because I had to keep my eyes and ears open, I got to know a lot of them. They'd come over and drink my whiskey and eat my good food. That's one of the ways I'd get my fingers on the pulse of what was going on in Biafra. But it was certainly not State Department policy to support Biafra. The reason was that we believed that the lines of independent Africa had been drawn haphazardly but we weren't going to be a part of changing them.

Q: What was the government of Gabon like?

LANPHER: Pretty dismal and, very much despite having achieved independence in 1961 a French colony or neocolony. Gabon is a tropical rainforest with oil off its coast, manganese and uranium in its interior, a big lumber tree exporting country. The population at the time I was there was probably no more than half a million people in the whole country, a country about the size of Colorado. Dense rainforests. Twenty miles of paved road in Libreville and Port Gentile to the south. Those were the two commercial locations in Gabon. This was the country where Schweitzer had had his hospital. There was still in 1969 a French person, a man or woman, behind every cash register in the country. The Gabonese were not very energetic. The president had clearly been anointed by the French. Both the first president and then the second president. The second president was appointed a year and a half or two years before I arrived and is still the president today. His name is Bongo. When I was there, it was Albert Bernard Bongo. He changed it to Omar and went Islamic after the '73 war in the Middle East and his joining OPEC. He's still in charge today. It was sort of the butt of regional jokes among other Africans. You'd travel north to Cameroon and the taxi driver would say, "Where are you from?" I would say, "I'm living in Libreville." The taxi driver would giggle. But it was in its own right and as a second tour it was an interesting assignment. I traveled into the

bush with a French ethnologist once for a week, serving no real U.S. government interest except showing the flag in the deepest, darkest rainforest in Africa. But it was an adventure. It was great when I was 25 or 26. I wouldn't want to go back there today. But we did have a U.S. economic interest. The U.S. Steel Corporation at that point got a lot of its manganese, an ingredient in steel, from Gabon. They owned a huge and impressive manganese mine, very rich deposits. The French also got all their uranium for their "force de frappe" out of Gabon.

Q: How about with your wife and yourself? How about the Gabonese and social life?

LANPHER: The Gabonese didn't mix very much. Aside from formal receptions, there was very little interaction with the Gabonese. Most of the social life was with the French expatriate community, the other expatriate community, which was relatively large given the small size of the country. We had two or three American oil firms represented in Libreville with small offices. I think they were Texaco, Mobil, and Gulf Oil. There was a UN office. There was a small diplomatic community. That was pretty much it. There was not a whole lot in Libreville. You'd play tennis, but you could only play for about a half an hour at a time because of the heat and the humidity and then you'd sit out half an hour and then play another half hour. And God knows there was a lovely beach. The embassy had a guest house across the estuary. I remember being at that guest house when our man landed on the Moon for the first time and hearing it on the radio. The embassy had a boat and I used to go out and catch barracuda and have barracuda barbecues. It was fine for a young officer.

NANCY FORBORD
Representative to African-American Institute
Libreville (1969-1972)

Nancy Forbord was born in 1943 in Syracuse, Kansas. She graduated from The University of California Santa Barbara (BA) and completed her master's degree at Trinity College. She entered the Foreign Service in 1967 as the spouse to Thomas A. Forbord, an Economic Officer, and DCM. She was interviewed in 1992 by Monique Wong.

Q: What were you doing?

FORBORD: I was representative for the African-American Institute.

Q: Oh, that's right.

FORBORD: Yes. So I think I almost immediately got a very different perspective, maybe from other people because I was immersed in the business of the embassy, trying to do things with a foreign government.

Q: So you were lucky.

FORBORD: I was so fortunate. I think for me it helped me create an idea of the possibilities in the Foreign Service that maybe some people didn't have. When I first went, there were a lot of unhappy people, a lot of spouses who did nothing but drink tea all day. That was okay, but I was just fortunate that I happened to get this wonderful job.

Q: But as a young spouse, how were you perceived? Do you remember anything specific that struck you one way or another?

FORBORD: I'll tell you one thing was, we had a really wonderful ambassador. He was very old school in a way in that he was very formal.

Q: What was his name?

FORBORD: Baine, David Baine. But a real gentleman, first class gentleman, and regarded everybody with the utmost respect. And so I think it never occurred to me that I was a little underling spouse because he never treated anybody like that. Everybody was important to him. And his wife as well. She never put anybody down, never announced any requirements of anybody. Never expected anybody to do anything they didn't want to. So I think that they were unique in that regard.

In fact, the embassy had a boat that supposedly we were supposed to use for evacuation. And we had a beach house eleven miles on the other side of the estuary. Well, the boat just happened to be for water-skiing and the estuary just happened to be like glass most of the time. It was perfect for water-skiing. And the beach house was located on this gorgeous white sand beach. It was perfect. And the ambassador would ask different people to go over across on the estuary every weekend with him and rotate it so that everybody had a chance all the time to do it. So I think that my experience was really unique. It was really wonderful.

Q: So you got to do it, too? Even on your first tour?

FORBORD: Sure, we did it all the time. He would call up Sunday morning and say, "This is David and would you like to go with us over to spend the day at the other side?" So we'd all go water-skiing together and have a wonderful time. There was never any discussion of people's rank or anything else. That just never entered into it.

Q: So you weren't conscious of that at all?

FORBORD: No, I wasn't conscious of it at all.

Q: And if you were to make a list now for somebody else coming into the Foreign Service of the things that one should consider in deciding on a post...

FORBORD: You know it's really interesting. I've thought a lot about this since our discussion prior to this interview. One of the drawbacks, I think, of all this planning that we all encourage might be that people are a little too careful sometimes. I don't think any of these posts we actually picked. It's strange. Not really picked. Either my husband was asked to go there for a specific reason or something. Except in the case of Australia where I would really, really suggest people check out the schools. And I would suggest you be extremely careful when your children are teenagers about any kind of moving. I guess that would be my recommendation.

Other than that, I would say don't try to find the perfect post because I don't think it works like that. I think a lot of it is luck. I think of it as a spirit of adventure. Being willing to go and take some risks maybe. You know, try some things you would never have tried otherwise. Kind of roll with the punches a little bit and just be willing to be open to whatever comes.

I think I would be a little careful maybe in terms of health. Right now, for example, I would be a little worried about going to some places in Africa because of malaria. When we were in Gabon we had an experience with malaria and with another tropical disease, and I have to say that, again, we've been very lucky. We could have been very sick. That certainly would change your experience. But for us, we've just been incredibly fortunate.

Q: Yes. Health seems like a big problem at times because it's something that you carry back.

FORBORD: That's right. It can haunt you for so long.

Q: It's not going to go away once you've got it.

What about the funniest story you ever had?

FORBORD: Oh, well, Gabon is loaded with funny stories. There are just so many of them from Gabon.

Q: Was there some romanticism from the first post? People often say that the first post was the best and the most romantic.

FORBORD: I don't think so. I think it was just a series of characters who were there, kind of the time of our life. There were just so many things that happened. I think being in a small post. Mostly young people there. We had a big turnover. When we first went to Gabon, it was a retirement post and most people were really old.

Q: Really!

FORBORD: And we thought, in fact, "Oh, my gosh, we're never going to fit in here." Because they were all old and we were real young. But then within six months, everybody turned over and we were all real young. We just had a lot of really funny

things happen there. It's hard to put my finger on one thing that was more humorous than another. Even just the place that we lived, which was right on the water. It was an old apartment called the "Hugo Building." And it was just kind of dilapidated. There were just so many funny things.

Just for an example. There were six apartments. And five of them were occupied. The sixth apartment was on the ground floor and was reserved for happy hour on Fridays. So that was the only time we used it. We got movies that would come in on these big old-fashioned movie reels. They would go from post to post in Africa. And we'd get them every Friday if we were lucky, they'd come in. And sometimes six or seven horrible movies would arrive. But Friday nights they would have movies at this happy hour place. Several funny things were connected with that. One thing was, this apartment had been inhabited by somebody with a dog previously. And it was absolutely loaded with fleas.

Q: Oh, my God.

FORBORD: And everybody - like everybody meaning even the Peace Corps volunteers - there might be a hundred people there in this apartment. We'd all be there ready for the movie. And people would be sitting on the furniture and as the evening went on, everybody would jump out of the furniture because they were being bitten by all these fleas. That was one thing.

And then I remember one night when the movies were on and there was a Peace Corps volunteer who was up country who had adopted a baby chimp. And this chimp became quite famous, by the way. He eventually ended up in the Zoo in San Diego. But this Peace Corps volunteer adopted the chimp as a child, not as a chimp, and clothed him in all this clothing. And I remember one night, the first time I ever saw the chimp. Everybody was sitting on the floor watching these movies and the lights were off, and you could just see the lights from the reflection of the projector. And I remember I had gone out of the room for a second. And I came back in and it was all dark and I was trying to see the feet as I walked back to my place.

All the sudden I saw this pair of incredibly hairy legs that were about this long that had little socks on, little baby socks with little tiny tennis shoes. And I thought, "My God! How could a baby have legs like that?" And I looked and it was a chimp. It was the chimp and the chimp was asleep in his lap with his little legs sticking out. But he had little rompers on and these little shoes with the white socks. And there he was.

And he was there for about four more months because finally he got so wrapped up in the chimp that the Peace Corps gave him the option of either leaving the chimp or leaving the post, and he chose to leave the post with the chimp. So that was interesting. But there were so many things like that in Gabon that I could tell you fifty stories about life there.

FERNANDO E. RONDON

**Desk Officer-State Department
Washington, DC (1970)**

Ambassador Fernando E. Rondon was born in California in 1936. He received his bachelor's degree from University of California (Berkeley) in 1960. His career has included positions in Tehran, Tangier, Lima, Algiers, Tegucigalpa, and ambassadorships in Antananarivo and Quito. Ambassador Rondon was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on June 4, 1997.

Q: You left Madagascar in 1970 and were assigned to Washington. What did you do?

RONDON: I was assigned to the Madagascar desk, which also included responsibility for Mauritius, Chad and Gabon. That gave me an opportunity to make my first trip to Black Africa. I had been in South Africa with my wife; that was an eye opener because we got in trouble twice while there. The first time we were found sitting on a bench which was reserved for blacks. The second incident occurred at a railroad station when we entered the wrong door, i.e., the one reserved for blacks. Our stay in South Africa was rather psychologically uncomfortable; we had a hard time dealing with apartheid.

On my way from Madagascar to Washington I visited Chad and Gabon. I was routed through Johannesburg to Libreville, Gabon. I was carrying a book in my briefcase and as I disembarked in South Africa, the customs officer asked me to open the briefcase. He then saw the book which was "Portnoy's Complaint." He told me that that book was banned in SA. In fact, I had stopped reading the book because I didn't like it, but I was shocked that someone would tell me that I was carrying a banned book. When the customs man saw my diplomatic passport, he asked me to make sure that I took the book out with me when I left SA. I was thoroughly irritated by that incident.

When I got to Gabon, I was quickly reminded about the problems of a developing country when the customs official held my passport upside down. I went to Cameroon, which I found to be far ahead of the Gabon. They were with it! That brought home the realization that every African country was different and that generalizations about Black Africa are stupid.

When I reported to Washington before starting my tour on the desk, I found out that Ted Eliot had sent my name to the NSC which was looking for an African expert. I was interviewed and was told that if I wanted to work for the NSC I would have to forego home leave and report for duty immediately. That I did and worked for Henry Kissinger for most of the next three years.

**LAURENT E. MORIN
Alternate Country Director- African Bureau
Washington, DC (1970)**

Laurent E. Morin was born in 1920 in Augusta, Maine. He attended the University of New Hampshire where he received bachelors degrees in economics and history. He entered the Foreign Service in 1948. In 1957 he received his master's degree from Yale University. He was posted as a Foreign Service officer to Algeria, France, Japan, Washington, DC, and Iraq. Mr. Morin was interviewed in 1992 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Q: Then you went into the African Bureau. What were you dealing with?

MORIN: I was the alternate country director for Central West Africa which included those Francophone states in the middle of the continent starting with Gabon and all the way over to Cote d'Ivoire. The bureau isn't divided that way anymore. I enjoyed being in African Affairs. I was liaison officer with AID and was exchanging information with them all the time. I also handled at that time a double-taxation treaty with the Cameroon.

Then I took a wonderful swing through Africa for two months or more. It was the only time that I've ever had orders permitting me to charter a plane. That was great. I went all over the place. From Libreville, Gabon, I chartered a plane and flew to Lambaréné which is Dr. Schweitzer's clinic. He was dead by then, but I called on his daughter and went through the whole clinic and walked around carrying a baby gorilla. I remember coming into the airport at Lambaréné...it was a one man show. The plane landed and we had to walk some distance to the river and then hire a canoe to get across to the clinic.

Bethlehem Steel in those days had discovered this fabulous iron ore lode way up in northern Gabon and the Gabonese government wanted us to finance a railroad up to this lode. It was just a fantastic deposit. I went up to look at it. I don't know if you know much about iron, but the ore was about 70% iron, which means it is almost pure from the point of view of working with it. It was granulated, you could scoop up handfuls of it. The Bethlehem steel man who took me up said the mountains were just full of it. But it was so far from the coast and too expensive to exploit. He thought it would be something that would be developed in the future.

Anyway we went up by plane, flew over the mining site where there were just a few people. The plane made a lot of noise and attracted their attention. Then we went down to a little clearing in the jungle. The plane left us and we waited for about a hour until finally a truck appeared and picked us up and took us up to the mining camp. I went through the mine with my host. Early next morning he took me gorilla hunting up in the mountains. We found a lot of nests but didn't see any live ones. Anyway it was very exciting being way up in the jungle where the long hanging vines reminded me of Tarzan. I tried swinging on them, and you really could go quite a ways up with them.

The next day on the way home instead of taking a plane we went in a very large dugout canoe with a motor on it for a five hour ride down this river, the Ogoué, a huge river with the jungle hanging over it. Saw no people...Gabon has no population to speak of. We

went all the way down to the first frontier town where the plane picked us up. It was a real enjoyable time.

JAMES K. BISHOP, JR.
Desk Officer- Office of Central African Affairs
Washington, DC (1970-1972)

Ambassador James K. Bishop, Jr. was born in New York in 1938. He received his bachelor's degree from Holy Cross College in 1960. His career has included positions in Auckland, Beirut, Yaounde, and ambassadorships to Nigeria, Liberia, and Somalia. Ambassador Bishop was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in November 1995.

Q: In 1970, you left Cameroon and returned to the US. What was your assignment?

BISHOP: As you said, I came back to the US. I got divorced; I had three kids to raise on the weekend--that is I spent as much with them as possible. I accepted a job officer to be a desk officer on the Office of Central African Affairs, where my responsibilities were Chad, Gabon, Mauritius and Madagascar--a cluster united by French language and little else. The diversity was a delight to me; it gave me an opportunity to learn something about countries whose history and culture were quite different. It gave me an opportunity to begin to understand more about the State Department and the Washington bureaucracy. I actually stayed in Washington for the next nine years. The Department was quite tolerant in allowing me to remain in Washington for that much time. It allowed me to raise my kids well into their adolescent years; I felt more comfortable serving overseas at that period of their lives. The work on the desk allowed me to travel extensively to Africa. I later became the desk officer for Ghana and Togo; then I was promoted to the job of Deputy Director of the Office of West Africa. That was followed by a year in the Senior Seminar which was followed by an assignment as Director of the Office of North African Affairs. In 1979, I left Washington to be our Ambassador to Niger.

Let me talk a little about the first assignment, which lasted for two years until 1972. In that period, we had to deal with an insurgency in Chad with which I became much more familiar later on. I had visited Chad twice while in Cameroon; I spent a month traveling in the North of Cameroon in each of two successive years.

In Gabon, our principal interest was market penetration. Gabon was one of West Africa's richer countries. The President, Omar Bongo, had an ambivalent attitude toward the French. He was heavily dependent on them and at the same time embarrassed by that dependence. He wanted greater American presence as a partial off-set.

JOHN R. COUNTRYMAN

**Deputy Chief of Mission
Libreville (1971-1975)**

Ambassador Countryman was born in New York and raised in New York and California. He was educated at Fordham University, Miami University and the Frei University of Berlin. After service in the US Navy he joined the Foreign Service in 1962. An Arab language speaker and Middle East specialist, Ambassador Countryman served abroad in Istanbul, Beirut, Dhahran, Tripoli, Libreville and Oman, where he was US Ambassador from 1981 to 1985. In his service in the State Department in Washington, he dealt primarily with Arab Peninsular affairs. Ambassador Countryman was interviewed by David Reuther in 2001.

COUNTRYMAN: The Department was deciding what to do with me. The old saying in the State Department is...the Department said you have been constructively PNG'd [acronym for persona non grata] to me. Of course, we had a lot of correspondence about why this had happened. We brought up the thing with Jeroud. There had been a lot of cable traffic on this. Anyway, I was pretty close to the expiration of my tour of duty anyway, so I was up for a new tour. I thought well, if I am in trouble for having gotten PNG'd...and there was a sense in the Department if you get PNG'd your career is over, or it is made, if you got PNG'd for the right reasons. Well, it became very clear that the Department didn't hold it against me because from Tunis I was in communication with Chris Nelson my personnel officer about planning my next assignment. You know, "Whatever you want, you can have within reason; whatever is appropriate for your rank." I held the rank of FSO-4 at the time. I had always wanted to be a DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission). I received a little management experience in Dhahran as DPO (Deputy Principal Officer) and I always thought it would be a good thing to be a DCM. So I said, "Look, I want to be a DCM." At that time there were very few posts in the world where you could be a DCM as an FSO-4. I was a pretty small voice. So the Department got back to me and said, "Well, we have consulted with the ambassador in Libreville, Gabon, and that is an FSO-4 slot, would you like to go as DCM to Libreville." I would be delighted. I knew something about Libreville. I thought it would be kind of fun.

On the other hand, I also thought for awhile I would take over Frank Wisner's job, who was leaving as the economic officer. Work in that job for awhile, and when they replaced him, I would take Jack McDonald's job as the political officer for a new two year tour. But that was sort of plan B or C. I liked the idea of DCM and being in Africa. As I say by that time I had some idea of who the ambassador was and the ambassador wanted me, which I thought was important. When we come to that we can talk about Gabon. John McKesson who was probably one of the finest Foreign Service officers I have ever worked with. Anyway, it was decided. My wife-to-be came back from Khartoum and we went to Malta and got married, and then went on home leave on our honeymoon to the west coast and continued the honeymoon in Libreville.

Q: Not exactly your standard honeymoon, but this is the Foreign Service. Let's go on to Libreville, and you are right, Africa does seem to offer the special experience of being a DCM as a younger officer. I take it you didn't take the DCM course.

COUNTRYMAN: I did, and it was very good. I had the full two week course at the training site in the Virginia mountains... Berkeley Spring? A very lovely place. They really worked us. I mean gosh, we came back at night afterwards and it was very intensive. But it was very good in two respects. I remember I would like to think I didn't need this, but they really made two points. They had this sort of scenarios of things that had gone wrong because a DCM had not fulfilled his job or did too good a job. The two things they stressed, number one, was your compact with the ambassador. You know, know what he expects out of you, because you are his man. Don't let there be any mistakes about what he expects you to do, what degree of authority he is going to give you, which of course varies tremendously. If you are DCM in London and you are DCM in Libreville, you know it is a very different kind of administrative management job you will have, quite apart from what the ambassador's preferences are. The second thing is to not shy away from making the important decisions. You are in a positions where you are going to have to make decisions and you are going to have to make them. The worst thing to do is sort of waffle and think that things will solve themselves.

Q: The DCM course as I understand it is one of the major rights of passage in the Foreign Service. I mean even yourself, you have taken language; you took training in the petroleum, but the DCM course is now to step you to a very special portal and open up some very special opportunities.

COUNTRYMAN: I was *the* junior person in the DCM course. Gleysteen was going out to Taipei. Roz Ridgeway was going to the Bahamas. There were a number of other quite senior people, some guy was going, I forget his name, to Poland as the DCM. I mean they all held the old FSO-1 or 2 rank. I was a 4, I was very, very junior. I benefited by...and a couple of them had been DCM's before, or had been political counselors in big posts and just had more experience.

Q: The course, then, is a series of case studies. For example, you are the new DCM; the ambassador has been there three years, how do you integrate yourself?

COUNTRYMAN: Exactly, or the admin officer you know, has had a fist fight with one of the communicators because he refused to give the communicator a particular apartment that he wanted, and the communicator's wife is in the hall crying, and the ambassador is down country, what do you do?

Q: I understand these case studies were actually commissioned by FSI from management consultant people at Harvard University. The consultants looked around the Foreign Service and they came up with these scenarios. They were very detailed.

COUNTRYMAN: That's right. They were excellent, and they ran the range of human things and arguments about reporting responsibilities. I mean they were very cogent and

very real. I mean you can identify with this. A couple of people said, "Oh, that reminds me of..." not that it was word for word or actor for actor, but I mean I think the names were changed to protect the innocent or protect the guilty as the case may be. But it was an excellent course.

Q: In addition to reading these case studies, was there any role playing?

COUNTRYMAN: Oh, yes, a great deal of that. Or, people would propose a solution. I would do this; I would do that, and these moderators would say, "Well, if you do that, John why don't you play the role of the admin officer," and you know the moderator would complicate the thing. He would add another dimension and say now what has happened is X. What you have done so far is okay, but now.

Q: This was during the Nixon administration. Vietnam is on going, did the course include material with a policy angle?

COUNTRYMAN: Nothing substantive. I mean not policy in places, but it was more of your role as a DCM. I mean it wasn't to educate you about foreign policy. It was strictly what do you do; what can we do to make you a more effective DCM. That's what it was, two weeks. At that time, this was a fairly recent course, fairly recent. It hadn't been in being very long, so maybe they changed it and made it you know, incorporate other things by now, but as it existed, I remember I gave it...we all gave it very high marks.

Q: I understand that one of the reasons they started that course was they had such a high disaster rate for DCMs who just made total fools of themselves or got entangled in their ambassadors and their ambassadors tossed them out. So, you got your wish to go to Libreville, Gabon. French speaking, so you are pretty good at the language?

COUNTRYMAN: My French was,...I had never really studied French formally. I don't think we mentioned this earlier on, but my first wife, I was married in Istanbul and divorced by the time I arrived in Tripoli, was French. We spoke a little bit of French, and when I was at the University in Berlin, I also took a couple of courses in French. When I had been in the tour business in Canada, in French Canada, I used it. I always wanted to have it as something that I could call on. So my French was fairly fluent. I pronounced it fairly well, but it was very spotty, and I made mistakes. But the French put up with it because I knew a lot of slang and I talked a good game, if we could say that. But my French was not particularly good. I remember corresponding with John McKesson who was the ambassador who sent me a very nice letter [Editor's Note: John Alexander McKesson was Ambassador to Gabon from February 1971 to June 1975]. He said, "I know about your career, and I am particularly anxious to have somebody who knows something about petroleum because Gabon has oil. There are a lot of other things I like in your background. You are a New Yorker." He had gone to Columbia. I mean it was a personal thing, it was not in the personnel files. "I look forward to working with you. The only thing I am a little concerned about is your French." He had every right to say this because he had gone to school in French, and was 5-5 in French. When I arrived there, people in the French community loved him, and the word was if he and the French

ambassador were called upon to speak at a function, the French ambassador's speech was the second best speech. His French was absolutely impeccable, and he knew all of the things, he knew all of the signals. So he was in a perfect place because, as I'll discuss, at the time I was in Gabon it was more of a French colony than it was when it was under colonial rule. It was a very special kind of place where the French were very strong. So anyway he said, "I am a little concerned about your French." At that time I was on the record with something like a 2+-2+. I wrote him back and I said, "I will do my very best. I will take tapes and take tutoring. I think I might be able to squeak by with a 3-3. I went and took the test at FSI. I forget who the gal was who gave me the test. Of course by this time I had been divorced from my ex-wife who had taught at FSI, French. I felt that they would maybe take it out on me because of the past. But this woman who gave me my test was very charming and very nice. She said, "You need a 3-3 because you are going to be a DCM, but we will see what happens." She gave it to me and said, "You deserve, vous meritez ça. Non, non, pas de question, trois, trois." So I got my 3-3. Then of course in Gabon where everybody spoke French, I used French an awful lot, and had a tutor three times a week, a Madame Capule whose husband was a forester. The French had the forestry institute there. She was excellent. By the time I left, my French was really quite good. I've forgotten whether I took a follow-on test in French; maybe I did and got a 4-4? Anyway, it was quite good.

Q: To set the scene now, how was the Embassy organized? How large was it?

COUNTRYMAN: The Embassy at the time was about the smallest Embassy we had. We had an ambassador, a DCM, a combination economic-consular officer. We are talking about American staff. One communicator, two secretaries, one for the ambassador and one the DCM shared with everybody else, a USIS officer, and that was it.

Q: When you went out, how did you see U.S. interests in Gabon? What was the Embassy to do?

COUNTRYMAN: We were...it was never put in these words, but it was do what you can for American business, and get along with the French. The French ambassador was ex-officio the dean of the diplomatic corps. It didn't rotate by seniority.

Q: That is unusual.

COUNTRYMAN: In downtown Libreville which was a charming little city, all of the stores and shops were run by French colon, colonial people. When you went in to buy groceries, there was a French woman behind the counter and you addressed her in French. There were a few Gabonese who were minor clerks or stacking things, but the whole commercial thing downtown - French. It was a French colony. There was a kind of a market outside, an African market with manioc and vegetables where Gabonese and the Senegalese, who were Gypsies in that part of the area, would run this little souk, this market place. The economy, however, was run by the French. It had a normal government. It had a chamber of deputies which was a rubber stamp because this country

was presidential, modeled after the French. The president's name was Bongo, Omar Bongo. He took an Arab name so that he could get Arab assistance.

It was one of the wealthiest of all the former French colonies. They had oil; they had manganese. That created an interesting American connection. I have forgotten the name, the French word for it is Union Minière, or something. Anyway it is the big French mining conglomerate, had a place in the interior for the mining of manganese. Thirty or forty percent of the concessions they had was with U.S. Steel. They were in partnership with United States Steel. But the French company, Union Minière, people ran the place. There was no U.S. Steel person there. But they were extremely nice. Jumping ahead, (Hank) Cohen, who was the country director for the Office of West Africa Affairs came out, and I took him on a trip to this comilague, which is an acronym. I have forgotten what that stands for, Companie de Gule or something else for manganese. The French couldn't have been nicer, just charming. They lived in this lovely sort of barrack type places with porticos on them and a lovely with vintage wines being served. Ah les Americains, they wanted very much to make sure that we went back with good feelings because of the relationship with U.S. Steel.

But it had oil, manganese, gold and okoumé. Okoumé is a tropical hardwood that is peculiar to Gabon that is very prized in Europe. In the Second World War, that was the big export. What they would do was Gabon, Libreville is at the head of an estuary, and the whole country is cut up by little rivers and streams. What they would do is cut this okoumé in the interior and float it down on the rivers to Libreville. Then they would hook it and put it on ships and send it off to Europe. When the Second World War hit they had a large amount of this okoumé that was held in chained pens in the harbor waiting to be loaded on ships. With the collapse of France and interruption of shipping and everything, that okoumé was not picked up literally for the whole period of the Second World War. The chains rotted and a lot of these logs broke loose. To the day I was there they were still floating around sometimes in the water outside. You were well advised to stay very far away from these logs as they were huge. If you got near one and it hit you...they had a case of a Frenchman who was out there swimming, and one of these big logs came and crushed him. He was just too close and didn't realize how fast the tide was coming in and it crushed him.

So the French had a lot to do there. The French also had a military presence there. The French paratroopers and Foreign Legion had a base there that was a tropical training base. There was always somebody there. They would rotate people every two months on a two month cycle. You would see these people in camouflage outfits, French going by in trucks and so on and so forth. So they were there. The president, President Bongo had been in the colonial administration and was clearly the choice of the French. There was one party, Parti Democratique de Gabonese. No opposition. In every ministry you would have a Gabonese minister and then a consiliere, a French counselor. Quite often I would go off someplace to see a minister or see somebody in the office, and he would say, "Ah, monsieur Countryman, un instant, je _____ la consiliere. And the Frenchman would come. _____ And sometimes the Frenchman would literally take over the conversation, or contradict him, or take over. Not unpleasant to me, but clearly...and

the Gabonese would smile. In other cases he would be very quiet and interpose or answer a question.

I arrived there...and the other big thing was that this was the time there were two border issues that were very important. One, Angola was in the final throes of gaining independence from the Portuguese, and Rhodesia had unilaterally declared independence. The Gabonese had a relationship with the white Rhodesian government. Of course the black governments in that part of Africa were all anti Rhodesian, but in Gabon...you could see it. There was an Air Rhodesia airplane that would come in to Gabon, and they were sanction breaking. You would go to the meat to buy beef and you would get this Rhodesian beef. There was a guy, a Rhodesian who lived in Libreville, who was really the Rhodesian representative. I mean he didn't have any...he wasn't a Rhodesian consul or anything, but he handled all the flights of this Air Rhodesia. It was from the Libreville airport they were running things back and forth to Rhodesia. These were things Rhodesia wanted to export to the outside. We knew about this.

When I arrived in Libreville, John McKesson wasn't there. He was on vacation, so I arrived as Chargé on my first day; I'd never been there before. The day after I arrived, I was told to go in and give a demarche to the Gabonese about the sanction busting, and do some probing around on it. I thought, "Oh my god, I have just got off the airplane" I had just called on the French ambassador who had been absolutely lovely. He said, "Ah, I know you are not here to undermine us. We have a good relationship with John McKesson, a wonderful person. I personally love Americans, and we look forward to working with you." I made some artful way of saying in French, "Yes, and we are not here to get in your way. It is delightful to be number two for a change." Now I have to go in and put this hot potato on the Gabonese. Ambassador McKesson had a very good relationship with the president. That really was the relationship. You didn't even deal with ministries. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was a cipher, was nothing. There was a Monsieur Adande who I finally cultivated, but the president was the minister of foreign affairs, you know, carried that portfolio. So there was no way to sort of get at them administratively, so anyway I went through the motions and marched off down to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and delivered this note verbale. I never got an answer from them, and reported it to Washington and got a you-did-well response and so on and so forth. I understood that nothing could be done, but we had done the proper thing. I think we had signed off on those UN sanctions against Rhodesia, so it was necessary when you saw a flagrant case of...I have forgotten all the details of why we knew this, but how it had been raised. The French had handled it in a similar fashion. The French said, "Oh, sure, we protest against the terrible, you know..."

Q: You were describing the two border issues.

COUNTRYMAN: The other issue, of course, we followed from Libreville was, since I was the political reporting officer in addition to being the DCM, we followed the Rhodesian-Gabonese relationship. Another issue was, of course, just to our south was Angola. It was still a Portuguese colony. Jonas Savimbi who was one of the two the UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, in Portuguese: *União*

Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola) group who lost to the more communist popular front. He made a state visit to Gabon when John McKesson was there. Of course there was a reception for Savimbi. That was a very ticklish problem for us because the diplomatic corps was invited, and the Portuguese of course, didn't recognize these people. The Portuguese were NATO and our friends and so on and so forth, so it posed a great problem for us as to whether to go or not. Again very elegantly John McKesson said, "Why don't I be sick. I will send John Countryman. You will be here." So I went as the DCM. We said, "Ambassador est malade, but we do want to make sure someone attends." So I went.

Q: Now, at some time, Gabon starts nationalizing some of the industries. Was that when you...

COUNTRYMAN: No that was...when I was there was a friendly atmosphere. There was an American oil company, the Compagnie Française de Pétrole was there with a little bit of oil. The French had a big concession for their okoumé. The manganese was still under Comilog. The French had never built up the interior, so there were these laterite roads and then there would be a stream. The only way you could get across was on a ferry. It was a terrible time to try and travel in the interior. So because they had some money, they wanted to build a railroad from Libreville to Port Gentil, a spur there where there was a port and then into the manganese mines. That took a lot of my time because the ambassador sort of turned that over to me. I mean he supervised it obviously.

We, of course, didn't have an AID program to Gabon. But we had a thing, I think it still exists. It is that thing in countries where you don't have an AID program where the ambassador in those days had a personal fund of something like \$25,000 that you could just give off. Well, I ran that program for John. We did some nice things with it. They had a forestry school where they taught Gabonese the rudiments of forestry, cutting down these okoumé logs. We built them out of cinder block a little medical facility, not a hospital but a clinic, an infirmary something like that. A couple of beds and a sterilizer and this sort of thing. We had Peace Corps there. The Peace Corps was doing a school construction program in the interior, as well as English language training. We worked out a deal where we parlayed some Gabonese money, Peace Corps using the construction and some of the extra cinder block that they had for the school for the little infirmary, and did the whole thing and gave them this functioning infirmary for about eight or nine thousand dollars. You know with some inexpensive autoclaves and sterilizers this thing from American medical supply companies. But literally we did this, nice little infirmary for about \$8,000.

Q: How big was the Peace Corps program?

COUNTRYMAN: Oh, small. We had a Peace Corps director, when I ticked off the Embassy staff, of course, we had a Peace Corps director. As I remember he had a deputy. We had 10 and 10. Ten in the English language program and maybe ten in school construction.

Q: Were there any particular circumstances come out of their presence in country?

COUNTRYMAN: No, the Peace Corps director was a very good, spoke superb French, and went on Gabonese TV to explain to the Gabonese the Peace Corps presence and vetted what he was going to say with Peace Corps and the ambassador. I sat in. Not with me but I sat in. He did a marvelous job. I remember there was a phrase he said in there about, “ne renein pour se plus grande par les Gabonese.” There was nothing in this program that isn't Gabonese. He talked about the people who were consulting with him. We sounded better than a French consiliere. We sounded like he was taking all his orders from the Gabonese. We were just there to, Monsieur so and so and Le Presidente. Beautifully handled for the Gabonese audience. The guys that did it, who worked in the interior, loved it. I mean they absolutely loved the job. They were out there working in the jungle building these buildings. Without putting too fine a point about it, the Gabonese girls were fairly attractive, and here were these guys out there who could squire them around the jungle a little bit. So that was taken care of. They were a nice bunch of guys and liked living out in huts in villages and building something. There was a program with the University of Libreville of English language training.

Q: Did you have an IV (International Visitor) grant program that kicked in from time to time?

COUNTRYMAN: Very small one. We again wanted to make sure to look like we weren't undermining the French, so we ran that by the French. I remember one thing they raised their eyebrows at about, and I remember having to explain it, I was actually chargé there for six months because John McKesson went back on leave and...

Q: Was this just after you arrived?

COUNTRYMAN: I was chargé for about two months when I arrived, and then just before I left, I was chargé for six months. He went back on leave, and then was very highly regarded in the Department. I think he was offered another ambassadorship which he turned down and retired. He was made head of the Cyprus working group or something.

Q: Oh, yes, that blew up in '74.

COUNTRYMAN: Yes, so he was gone for six months. The French... we used an IV grant to send a guy from their Ministry of Forests for exposure to American forestry techniques. The French were saying forestry is ours. But this was not so much somebody who was going to study dendrology or that sort of thing. This was more forest management and forest economics, this sort of thing. So we sent some guy back who was in that slot in the Gabonese Ministry of Forestry and had been to school in France, but knew English.

Q: Actually the embassy had a very interesting road it had to follow there to not only get along with the local government but not antagonize the French who I would suspect are quite sensitive about every book every...

COUNTRYMAN: Well, the French ambassador, I remember his words. He said, "Vous êtes trop visible." You are too visible. They were occasions when they came to us on this Gabonese railroad. They pushed us. I remember he coming to talk to John McKesson saying, "This place is not available for AID." They knew about this tiny program we had. "But can't the United States government do something to assist the building of this railroad?" He didn't say this, but what it meant was they wanted a broad international participation in this Trans Gabon railroad and wanted to be able to go to the Gabonese and say look, we the French, we got this for you. You don't have any clout out there in the world, but we went to our American and German and British friends and we have gotten all this for you. That is why we should continue to have this commanding position. That was the name of the game. But we were quite prepared to play that game. Due to John McKesson's knowledge of the system and brilliance, we got the Agency for International Development somehow, I don't know how they did this. My wife works for AID and she still doesn't know how we ever did this, to pay for feeder roads for the Gabonese railroad. We didn't pay for the railroad, but there had to be feeder roads for it. That gave us a look in to bid on everything connected with it. So General Electric had bid on and got the bid for the locomotives for the Gabon transcontinental railroad, over the French and Germans. We got it for General Electric.

Q: I wonder if General Electric used its Washington headquarters or its European headquarters. It probably came out of Europe.

COUNTRYMAN: GE people came and called on us and stayed at the hotel. I don't remember where they were from. I really don't know.

Q: But again it is another story of large and small how the Embassy is of great help to American business and finding opportunities overseas. The French are predominant. Were there, this is the Cold War, were the Russians roaming around?

COUNTRYMAN: The Russians, Gabon recognized Russia when we were there. There were a number of other diplomatic things before I come to the Russians. They broke relations with the Israelis. That was the time when the Israelis were all over Africa for the UN votes, and they booted the Israelis out. Very regretful. They also kicked out the Taiwanese, because of pressure from Peking.

Q: The Yom Kippur War was October, '73, so that is shortly after you arrived.

COUNTRYMAN: That was the reason. But the Israelis continued, the Israelis had an aid program there which continued even though they broke diplomatic relations. The Israeli head of the aid program was I think, Mossad, and had regional responsibilities there.

Q. You were going to talk about the Russians.

COUNTRYMAN: The Russians came when I was there.

Q: For the first time. Just newly recognized.

COUNTRYMAN: And the Russian ambassador was a fellow by the name of Filatov who spoke beautiful English, no French. His DCM whom I got to know fairly well was their French language officer, spoke very good French. The Russian ambassador had been in their Embassy in London two years before, 1971. Do you remember the British kicked out about 150 Soviet diplomats from London for spying? Filatov was one of those people. He was very friendly. I was surprised. I mean he got along with our ambassador. He is a very outgoing sophisticated guy. His wife is very attractive and laden with jewels as a good communist always would be. He was absolutely irate. He loathed the British. "My whole career was so I could serve in the United States, that's what do we want to do. Of course if you are friends with the British, now I can't get agrément [Editor's Note: agrément is the diplomatic process where approval from the receiving state is sought for an ambassadorial appointment, prior to an official and public announcement of the appointment]. I can't go. The foreign ministry...I will never go to the United States because of what happened." So he said, "This is my consolation prize. I get this terrible little place down here. Disease ridden, I obviously don't even speak French. Who are these people? This is terrible."

Nevertheless, he was a charming fellow. His DCM was a very good language officer. The third guy in the embassy who I don't think was their intelligence guy, I am quite sure he wasn't, came from Azerbaijan. Very few of the people in those days in the Soviet service came from their constituent republics. They were all Russian Russians. This guy looked like an Azerbaijani, had this slight Mongol oriental cast to his face, or he just looked like a middle easterner. I met him at a cocktail party, and we started speaking, you know, speaking French. His French was pretty rough although we were able to carry on a conversation. It came out he was an Azerbaijani. I said, "turki con..." "I speak Turkish." Of course, Azerbaijani Turkish is a little bit different than Turkish Turkish, but it is close enough. Turkish Turkish is the standard, and he was well educated. So we spoke Turkish. I was delighted that I had a chance to talk Turkish. Of course, what we talked about would be small, incidental stuff. His Turkish of course was native. He would come up with some strange things that I couldn't understand being Azerbaijani. But he and I would talk, and I would deliberately whenever he was around and the Russian ambassador was around, I would deliberately get him into a conversation and talk Turkish to him. It pissed off this otherwise very nice and charming Russian Ambassador. He didn't like this. Russian was the language of Azerbaijan, not Azerbaijani. At one time I said to this guy, I said, "Maybe we shouldn't speak Turkish." He said, "Oh you do that deliberately. Don't worry. We have our own agenda in Azerbaijan. We would never do anything to harm our Russian brothers, but we have our own agenda." This was way before everything thawed about the Russian empire dissolving. But it was a little snapshot of this guy. He was...those were the Russians; I am Azerbaijani.

I remember I duly reported that and got some kind of a snippet from INR (Bureau of Intelligence and Research) saying you know, "More of this, It wasn't as though you have saved the republic. It wasn't an intelligence coup, but well done and you know, anything

more you can do in this vein, do it.” It was a very pleasant place. I enjoyed it very much. There was not very much to do.

The other thing that Gabon's claim to fame was, it is less now, was the Schweitzer Hospital was there at, Lambaréné, the leper hospital, Albert Schweitzer's hospital. It was a pilgrimage spot. We went there, to Lambaréné, and spent a week there in this leper hospital. I have back what is called pierenbigou. It is a soapstone that was carved by one of the lepers there, of a Gabonese woman with a basket on her back. It is worth something in terms of African art, but I saw this place there.

The other thing we did is we took a month's leave and went to South Africa. That was very, because it was still in the old apartheid days. Gabon was one of the few places on continent... Air France stopped in Libreville and then Johannesburg. So we flew to Johannesburg. The Embassy got us a visa for South Africa, and we had a marvelous trip through South Africa. We went to the Umfolozi wilderness which as the name would imply is a wilderness of... I don't know what it is now, but in those days literally tens of square, hundreds of square miles of just wilderness. You are not allowed to go into it at all, nobody. Except once every two weeks, the Department of Parks would lead a safari through there which was limited to four people. My wife and I got on to this thing. We went and hiked for a week through this Umfolozi wilderness with a white South African guide and a Zulu. We had a very small backpack, and then they would have mules that would go with tents and food and some bearers. They would set up camp for you, have fires, cook for you, go to sleep, trek the next day. It was interesting, the other people on the treks, we read this all at the embassy. The other persons, there were five of us actually, my wife and myself and a fellow who was the editor of the Rand Daily Mail which was the English speaking liberal newspaper, and his wife and his daughter, and a guy who was the manager of Iling's Mazda in Johannesburg, a Mazda car company. That was our group. I always wondered about, this guy from the Rand Daily Mail was just delighted to be with an American diplomat. After the trip was over, he invited me to the Rand Daily Mail and I addressed the staff there and talked about Africa and he talked about apartheid and so forth, another story. But anyway one day we would trek out, it would be you know Indian file. The South African guide would be the one in front. He had a heavy duty .30 caliber because there were wild animals of every kind including rhino which was particularly dangerous. Then the Zulu had a shotgun. That was more because it was so loud, you know frighten game, and he would shoot it to frighten rather than to kill. These people were not out to shoot animals; they were out there to protect us. So we were on the third or fourth day out. We were told about rhinos and that the black rhino was not particularly dangerous, but the grey rhino could be irascible. The one thing you didn't want to do was to get between a mother and her cub, her baby because she would charge to protect you. If they charged, the thing to do was to climb or get behind a tree and don't go into the open. To make a long story short, the second third, or fourth day out, we came on a water hole. For some reason... the mother was at the water hole, and this guide put up his rifle, just stopped dead. He was just about to decide whether to disperse us or not when she charged us because her calf had strayed away. Our scent had gotten between her and her calf's scent. So the mother charged us. So we broke, and I went a different way from my wife. I was behind a tree that was really about twice this size, and this

enraged rhino charged the tree literally and then tried to turn around in the back. There were three of us behind the tree sort of a conga line holding each other. I had my hands around the wife of the Rand Daily Mail guy. The little girl was in front. This whole thing happened, and we were charged. No one was hurt, but it was very exciting.

Q: You are talking about a very thin tree.

COUNTRYMAN: I have it at home, the guy from Ilings Mazda had sense enough that he took pictures. There were pictures on the front page of the Rand Daily Mail of party charged by rhino. Of course the editor of the Rand Daily Mail, what is he going to do.

But that was a very interesting thing to see you know, what apartheid was like. I had heard about it, but to see what it was like and to see how little sense it made in every respect to say nothing of the morality. It was a very interesting experience.

We went all over the country. We also went to the other part. We went to Durban. We took the Blue Train, which is one of the most fabulous trains in the world, very deluxe train between Johannesburg and Cape Town. We went to Pretoria; we went to Cape Town. We traveled all over the place. Cape Town is, of course, a delightful place.

I think most people who went there, I wasn't prepared, and I thought I was fairly sophisticated, for what apartheid really meant. I mean when they said apartheid they mean apartheid! I remember the American South, I am old enough before integration. I remember black only facilities in the American South and segregation in the South as a child and as a young man. But in the Blue Train for instance that would go from Johannesburg to Cape Town, would pull up in the main station, and the station was totally segregated. I mean we went in through a whites only entrance, and the Blue Train came in, and there was a wire, it was a heavy wrought iron partition. The train stopped just here, and these are the white only cars. The porter who carried my luggage and my wife's was white. We were in that section. In the other section of that train were for Indians and coloreds and blacks totally. The taxicabs were white. We a couple of times took taxicabs that were driven by blacks. I would immediately establish that we were Americans and get a rapport going with him, you know. Because I think there was some problem about picking up a white South African, if you were a black taxicab driver. All the benches in the park would say whites only or blacks only. Indians were in a slightly different capacity. We stayed in a hotel in Durban, a lovely hotel. The people in the dining room were Indian and the staff behind them, behind the counter was Indian.

Q: Talking about Foreign Service life, back in Libreville you don't have an APO. All your mail comes to you by pouch. This is pre-DVD and everything else. What was entertainment?

COUNTRYMAN: We had what was called WACSC, the West African Commissary and Supply Commission in Nigeria in our embassy in Lagos. All of the posts like ours were serviced by this. It was like our PX (military term- post exchange). I mean you could order, you couldn't order everything, but you could order, we didn't order the meat

because the meat was so good from Rhodesia, but canned goods or special things that you wanted. We would get liquor from them. We had a WACSC flight about every two months or every six weeks. An old C-54, four engine prop plane would come in and supply us.

Q: So you wouldn't have a commissary in your embassy there, you were ordering everything out of Lagos.

COUNTRYMAN: Yes. We had a system with USIS, we had movies. We would have these in the auditorium of the USIS building. Twice a week we would have the movies.

Q: I know the military circuit does that.

COUNTRYMAN: Maybe it was the military, we got on it somehow. I forget. I think they arrived by pouch. I think you are right, I think it was the military, and it came out of Germany; it came out of Frankfurt.

Q: Then that would be the big thing for the American community or other English speakers.

COUNTRYMAN: You had to sort of go on a list so that you could invite people. We had a beach house. Libreville is a port, and there is a spit of land that extends out. On that spit of land we were given a little tract and a house. I forget who built it. It had been there for a long time. We had a boat, a little motor boat. So that was a very nice diversion. On the weekend you could make arrangements for the boat. It held about 10 maybe, so it was practically the whole embassy. You would go out, go out across the bay. There was a beach there and a house we could change with a little porch with seats on it. There was a village just behind. We would go in and talk to the villagers, so that was a diversion.

Q: Here you are a very young officer. Did you get a promotion out of this?

COUNTRYMAN: Yes, I was promoted to the old FSO-3 in place.

Q: That is now our current rank of FSO-1. So you have had a fair amount of administrative experience in your career so far, being the Deputy Principal Officer in Dhahran and now the DCM.

COUNTRYMAN: I had a lot of things to do there; you know that called on some administrative stuff. I told you we had a Peace Corps group there. I had an unpleasant brush with the Peace Corps that I survived. These Peace Corps people were playing football on the beach, you know touch football and throwing it back and forth. Anyway one guy went up for a pass or something and came down on another guy on his back. I was Chargé at the time, and I got a call from the head of the Peace Corps saying...I'll explain in more detail later, but health there was very bad. I mean the French had a military hospital that was a very poor hospital, and there were a couple of private clinics. I mean you really for anything more than a band aid on your hand you ought to get

evacuated. That was John McKesson's and the Department's view and certainly mine. Don't play fast and loose with someone's health.

So anyway the head of the Peace Corps called saying, "He is at the French military hospital, I think you had better go down. I understand he doesn't have any feeling in his arm and part of his leg. I am concerned about this." So I went down there and the head of the French hospital, who was a Colonel in the French army, was there. They had this guy on a board properly strapped down and so on. "Mr. Countryman, I am scared. I can't feel anything in my leg and my arm." I said, "Well take it easy and we will take care of this." Anyway to make the long and sort of it, the French said "I would get this guy out of here immediately." I said, "That is exactly what I am going to do." I talked to the one better private doctor in town. There was consultation...blah blah, blah. Anyway very carefully they immobilized this guy. They put him literally in a cast that had like a hood on it, and put him in a complete cast so he wouldn't move and kept him strapped on this thing. The only flight out was Air France, the first one. I went to my friend Philippe Berosai who was the premier consulaire, the DCM of the French embassy. I said, "Philippe I have got to get this guy out. My admin officer said the flight is booked." He said, "We will work out something."

Q: It is good to have friends in time of need.

COUNTRYMAN: Because of the way this guy was, he needed two seats. I wasn't going to send him off by himself, so I had the number two in the Peace Corps go with him to Paris to the American hospital. I sent him off, got him to the American hospital. There was a happy ending. He got there; we had done the right thing. It was a question of a broken vertebra that was touching some nerves. They were able to immobilize it. He had some slight gaminess for awhile. In six months he was perfectly fine. I got a lovely letter from his parents saying you know, thanking me and the government for taking good care of him. I also got a letter that had been sent to the desk, I mean the country directorate, not even the State Department by some deputy in the Peace Corps complaining about how I had handled this case, and that Peace Corps funds had been spent not only on the evacuation, which didn't seem to be necessary, but I had arbitrarily elected without any consultation with the Peace Corps to send another person at Peace Corps expense to Paris and back for a few days. Very nasty note, which concluded, this kind of thing doesn't bode well for cooperation between our agencies. The implication that you have overstepped your authority and we are an independent agency.

Larry Eagleburger was at that time Undersecretary, I think. Was he undersecretary? No he wasn't undersecretary. He was later on. What was Larry doing? [Editor's Note: Lawrence Sidney Eagleburger was Deputy Undersecretary of State for Management from May 1975 to February 1977. He later served as Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, February 1982 to May 1984.] Anyway, Larry got word of this. I had known him from way, way back. We had been on the seventh floor together when I was working for Averill Harriman. He got word of this somehow and tipped me off to this, and said "If there is anything I can do for you let me know. This is an outrage." I said, "Well other than run down the halls and say the facts speak for themselves, Countryman will stand by

this. Fly me back at State Department expense and I will explain exactly what I did. I wasn't going to send somebody who had a broken back off by himself, . . . or languish in Gabon and I wasn't going to send him by himself. So finally somebody in management wrote a very nasty letter back to the Peace Corps and carbon copied me on it. It in effect said he did absolutely right and you ought to be thankful that someone's life was saved.

Q: Those little bureaucratic things come out snapping off friend or foe.

COUNTRYMAN: We had a secretary, my secretary had a very bad infection, feminine problem. I didn't hesitate for a minute. I had her evacuated.

Q: I would take a larger question from this though that friends are important and can help you out like the French DCM who bumped a couple of people. That is pretty serious stuff. But obviously he had to be cultivated and be there and already be a friend of yours before your event happened. You don't order up friends.

COUNTRYMAN: His wife and he and my wife and I we were a team. We knew each other very well. He lived just down the street from us. We were comparable rank and comparable age. We kept up with them afterwards. When we left we stopped off in Paris and stayed with them and became pretty good friends.

JOHN A. MCKESSON, III
Ambassador
Gabon (1971-1975)

Ambassador John A. McKesson, III was born in New York March 29, 1922. He received a bachelor's degree and a master's degree from Columbia University. He then entered the U.S. Navy, where he served for four years. Mr. McKesson entered the Foreign Service in 1947. His career included positions in France, Iceland, Germany, Vietnam, and Senegal, and an ambassadorship to Gabon. This interview was conducted by Arthur Day on May 7, 1990.

Q: That must have made your work in Washington somewhat unsatisfactory. You did not have too much chance for contact with the Seventh Floor [where the Secretary and Under Secretaries have their offices].

MCKESSON: Exactly, the Seventh Floor was just not that interested. From a purely selfish point of view it had an advantage because you could sort of run things on your own; in the bureau in Washington most of the telegrams were approved at the office or assistant secretary levels. We rarely had to get clearance from the Secretary or the top people, only in a very unusual crisis situation.

I did have the opportunity - maybe this is worth mentioning as it ties in with my next assignment after Washington in Gabon - Gabon is a country where we had, during the time I was in Washington, increasingly bad relations. It started well before my time, from the day of our first ambassador to Gabon, Ambassador Darlington. There were essentially two reasons; Darlington has written a book about it. He was blamed for a coup that took place that was thwarted by the French, and somebody had to be a scapegoat and so word was passed that the U.S. was involved. Of course we had not been. From then on the Gabonese were very suspicious of the Americans and the least little thing would lead to the Gabonese being incensed and retaliating in some minor way and Washington, oblivious to what was going on, would retaliate against their retaliations and relations kept going from bad to worse. They would improve a little and then go bad again. They were bad under Ambassador Funkhouser who was ambassador before I was. To my mind, when I began looking at the dossier, it all seemed so totally ridiculous. Here was a small country, rather well off, with the highest per capita income in Black Africa, because of its natural resources of oil, manganese, uranium and so forth. With American firms quite active there, the U.S. controlled half the manganese ore and Bethlehem Steel had big investments in an iron ore mountain; we had Gulf Oil operating off-shore. The president of the country was very anti-communist, wanted to have good relations with everybody in the West, and there we were going on, for no reason at all, getting our relations in a mess. Finally it came to a head while I was toward the end of my tour in Washington when the embassy had recommended that we do something fairly drastic, I forget what it was, with regard to the Gabonese in connection with the fact that one of our officers had traveled to an area where he had been told not to and the Gabonese had retaliated in some way. Anyway it was all such nonsense, that I can remember recommending through David Newsom, to Secretary Rogers at the time, that we not follow the embassy's recommendation but try to see if we could patch up things with Gabon. It so happened that the President of Gabon was coming to Washington and the Secretary decided to follow the AF Bureau's advice and had a very friendly meeting with Bongo, the president of Gabon. Bongo was very pleased to be so well-received and that really was the beginning of a complete turn-around in our relations. It just so happens that shortly after that I was sent as ambassador to Gabon, and I continued that policy of trying to get good relations, and in a very short order relations improved tremendously and in fact got to be excellent and have remained excellent ever since, because there never was any reason why they should have been bad. To my mind it was just an example of how relations could get to be bad between countries at times with no real substantive reason other than because of little pinpricks that are misinterpreted by both sides.

Q: While you were there, was there much of a flow of Americans through, or was it quite isolated.

MCKESSON: No, as I mentioned Gabon does have economic interests with the United States so we had people coming constantly from the oil companies, Union Carbide, various engineering firms, and getting good relations did pay off. I can recall a couple of instances. Bongo wanted to build a railroad, which ended up costing a couple of billion dollars, from Libreville inland to where the manganese and uranium are, to evacuate the manganese which otherwise had to go out by Congo, Brazzaville. I persuaded AID to

contribute a little to it. When the Gabonese finally got the money together, mostly from other sources, the question came of letting out bids, and the first thing I knew the bids were all going to French, German and other European countries and I noticed that no American firm had received any contract. The president was out of the country; so I got on the phone and managed to reach him in Paris and said that he had very kindly mentioned on many occasions that Gabon was not the *chasse gardé* [closed preserve] of anybody and that he wanted good relations with Americans and wanted more American investment. I thought that one way he could prove this was by giving us some contracts in the building of the railroad. I noticed that he had just given the contract for all locomotives to some European firm. He thought for awhile while we chatted a bit, and then he took a decision on the spot that he would give half the contract to Americans and half to Europeans, so that General Motors, I think, ended up getting a contract for a number of locomotives as a result of this phone call. A type of call that could only be made because I had built up good relations with him.

MICHAEL P. E. HOYT
Rhodesian Desk Officer-State Department
Washington, DC (1972-1974)

Michael P.E. Hoyt was born in Illinois on November 16, 1929. He received a bachelor's degree and a master's degree from the University of Chicago and served in the U.S. Air Force overseas. He joined the Foreign Service in 1956. Mr. Hoyt's career included positions in Karachi, Casablanca, Leopoldville, Stanleyville, Douala, Bujumbura, Ibadan, and Washington, DC. He was interviewed by Ray Sadler on January 30, 1995.

HOYT: ...Anyway, my job as Rhodesia desk officer, my main job was to maintain the sanctions. Everything with any sort of exceptions, foreign assets withdrawal, had to go through my desk.

I remember one thing. There had been a Rhodesia mission in Washington, the Rhodesia Information Office. After UDI they kept one lower-grade officer in the mission. It became clear that we would make no move to expel him--given the furor over the Katangese office in Washington at the time of the secession. We couldn't even get the FBI to watch him in case he was breaking some law. Hoover just refused to have anything to do with it. So he stayed but he knew that if he ever left, he'd never come back.

But then the query came through, unofficially, they wanted to know if his wife could go on to Rhodesia for Christmas and come back. I said that we were not fight the families and pass the word that we would let her back in.

Q: In terms of ammunitions, was there any trafficking of munitions through the United States?

HOYT: I wasn't aware of it.

The only thing I was aware of was trying to keep the sanctions program going. I tracked down aircraft spare parts going to Rhodesia. In one case they took a couple of 707s out of the airfield in Geneva and flew them down to Rhodesia. I spent a lot of time trying to track down those people, trying to apply sanctions to them, the people that did it.

The Swiss were not cooperative. It was very difficult to work with the Swiss because you can't go to Switzerland and enforce any kind of sanctions. We did call them to Washington. They claimed, of course, that they had nothing to do with it. That somebody else grabbed the airplanes and pulled them out.

But, more important, were DC8 shipped to Gabon. There was a license working through to export a DC8 to Gabon. In fact, this was the second one that they were exporting. I was opposing it vigorously. Newsom supported it. For some reason, Kissinger supported it, he wanted to do it. I said, "I have proof here that the first DC8 you sent there is in the meat trade and they're flying meat from Rhodesia to Holland."

However, the export license was granted. Actually, it was Ferguson, the acting assistant secretary for African affairs, who issued the approval. When later the recriminations came down for having approved, Newsom said he hadn't approve it, Ferguson had. I had been to a staff meeting in which Newsom said he was in favor of granting the license. That did not set well with me.

Anyway, I continued to try and stop the actual export. When came across some later information, I brought it to the attention of the Central African desk, under Hank Cohen. He delayed action on it until it actually left the country.

But Hank Cohen was the also the fellow that gave me quite a critical report on my time as DCM and Charge in Bujumbura that I did not see until later. I complained to him that the report was not accurate. I pointed out that I had been really the leader of the diplomatic corps and had been responsible for the actions the US had taken. Hank sent in another report but did not retract the old one. When Ambassador Melady put me in for the Superior Honor Award, he was told it could never go through. That is the normal level of award when you're DCM or Charge and you do a good job.

ANDREW STEIGMAN
Ambassador
Gabon (1975-1977)

Ambassador Andrew Steigman was born in New York on August 30, 1933. He received a bachelor's degree from Princeton University in 1954 and served in the U.S. Army from 1955-1957. Ambassador Steigman joined the Foreign Service in 1958. His career included positions in the Congo,

Libya, France, and Nigeria, and an ambassadorship to Gabon. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1989.

Q: What were American interests in Gabon, if any?

STEIGMAN: American investments, at that point, primarily in manganese production.

Q: You're talking about 1975-77.

STEIGMAN: Yes. U.S. Steel had half interest in the manganese, a major source of manganese of considerable importance to the U.S., U.S. Steel at least. Oil, which we were keeping tabs on very closely. Gabon was an OPEC member producing about 230,000 barrels a day, very small production but prospects for more. Because there was an oil boom it was likely to be, though small, an interesting and attractive market. The country was going to be spending a fair amount of money. Gabon was one of the most moderate and Western-oriented states in Africa under fairly strong French influence but a state you could pretty well count on to vote with you when you needed some help. It was decidedly secondary, however, on the U.S. priority list. But, nonetheless, of sufficient interest to warrant maintaining a dialogue, at least.

It was interesting the year after we left, Bongo even became President of the OAU for a year. Bongo was interested in diversifying and showing the French that he wasn't 100% dependent on them without pushing them to the point where they would cut off his subsidies. So he liked to use the Americans for that. That helped keep the dialogue going. During the two years we were there, for example, we started a small military assistance program in close collaboration with the French to make sure that we didn't get their noses out of joint.

Q: Did you have any instructions when you went out or was it just go out and do your best?

STEIGMAN: One always starts with a basic set of U.S. policy guidelines for the country which in the case of a place like Gabon basically was , "Keep them friendly, keep them happy, keep them on our side." I don't even remember if it was in there specifically but certainly understood, "Don't get the French riled up because we're not going to replace them. Don't raise expectations too high because you're not going to get any major resources." This was supposed to be a low-key holding operation to the extent that if the Department did not have to think about Gabon, you were a success.

ARTHUR T. TIENKEN
Ambassador
Gabon (1978-1981)

Ambassador Arthur T. Tienken entered the Foreign Service in 1949 after serving in the U.S. Army and graduating from Princeton University. His career included assignments in Zaire, Washington, DC, Zambia, Addis Ababa, and an ambassadorship to Gabon. Ambassador Tienken was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1989.

Q: Well, back to Gabon. What was the situation in Gabon, and what were American interests in Gabon when you went there? We are talking about 1978.

TIENKEN: American interests in Gabon were fairly limited. We did have some mining interests. U.S. Steel, for example, was the majority stockholder in a manganese operation in northwestern Gabon. We did have some oil interests there. Gabon is a member of OPEC. The oil companies weren't particularly successful at the time, but they were there.

Gabon, was an ex-French colony, and maintained strong ties with France. The president, Omar Bongo, nonetheless liked to set his own foreign policy. Therefore, from our point of view, he wanted to listen and when it suited him, to support the American point of view on a variety of things around the world. He would be helpful, for example, when discussing the Libyan incursions into Chad or countering the radical influence in the Congo in Brazzaville. So Bongo did, in fact, try and stay somewhat independent of the French in foreign policy items. One of his favorite phrases was, "We are not a *chasse gardée*," namely, an influenced area, a closed hunting area, if you like, of the French. Meaning that we don't necessarily follow the French line.

Q: Can you give me how you saw him, how he operated as a leader, a president of his country?

TIENKEN: President Bongo, as a leader of his country, was virtually unopposed. Gabon was basically the only African country I ever knew where there was very little opposition either at home or abroad. There was no exile movement in France, for example. There was some tribal differences in the country itself, but Bongo handled those pretty well. Occasionally the students kicked up their heels, but found little domestic support. Furthermore, Bongo, his country, Gabon, because of manganese and oil and uranium was, in per capita terms, the wealthiest black African country--and still is--on the continent. So wealthy, in fact, that they didn't even qualify for U.S. aid or United Nations aid either, for that matter.

Q: Is that--

TIENKEN: I shouldn't say United Nations. I should say the World Bank.

Q: Was the wealth distributed fairly well?

TIENKEN: Reasonably well, yes. You saw very little poverty in Gabon. The main city of Libreville had some areas that were not particularly attractive in terms of housing, but the people would be well-shod, usually well-dressed, and fairly neat.

Q: Well, now were there any border problems that we got involved with there?

TIENKEN: Not in Gabon. At one time or another, Bongo tangled with the Cameroonians. There were a couple of nasty periods when Cameroonians were attacked in the streets and taxicabs turned over and some of them burnt. And earlier than that, West Africans--

Q: When you say West Africans, these would be from where?

TIENKEN: Well, places like Guinea, Togo, places like so. And these were essentially over--well, one of them was over a fancied slight between Bongo and--which president in West Africa? Benin, I think it was at an OAU meeting. And then all West Africans became Beninois, Beninese, and they got rounded up and sent back. And it was rather difficult business.

Well, after he had finally gotten all these people out, next thing we began hearing, and in some cases actually seeing, were truckloads of Togolese, in particular, or Beninese with Togo passports sort of filtering back. Gabon was a nice place for these people to be because it had money.

Q: And you could make money.

TIENKEN: And you could make money.

FRANCIS TERRY MCNAMARA
Ambassador
Gabon (1981-1984)

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.

Q: What were American interests there at that time?

MCNAMARA: Minimal. We did have some economic interests. Gabon is a relatively wealthy country. By African standards, very wealthy. Their per capita income is the highest in Africa, aside from Libya. It's higher than South Africa. They have a small population, and they are a major oil producer in Africa. So the country is well off. There

were some American oil companies that had interests in getting into the oil-production business in Gabon. There was also some American interest in the mining. And then there were some very big contracts being let. Bongo, the president, was building a railway right across the country, a major railway construction, through a tropical rain forest, costing an enormous amount of money.

Q: *What was the political situation in Gabon?*

MCNAMARA: Opposition to Bongo came mainly from the Fang, the country's largest tribe. They're located mainly in the northern part of the country where it overlaps into the Cameroons and Equatorial Guinea. In fact, it's the tribe of the present president in the Cameroons, and is the dominant tribe in Equatorial Guinea. They're a very aggressive people, a tribe that's very cohesive and aggressive. They look out for themselves and for each other. They have a feeling that they have a natural right to leadership in Gabon. The first president was a Fang.

Bongo comes from a little tribe in the southeastern part of the country, with lines going south into the Congo. It's not a threat to anyone. And that's one of the reasons that, just after independence, when Leon M'ba, the first president died of cancer, the French maneuvered Bongo into a position of taking over the presidency. The non-Fang in the country are all fearful of the Fang, and so one of the things that Bongo has got going for him is that he's not a Fang. He serves as a sort of bulwark against Fang domination.

Also, he shares some wealth with people from various tribal groups. In his system everyone gets a piece of the action. He retains a good hold on power as long as he has enough money to buy off oppositionists as they raised their heads and as long as the French continue their support. The country has some economic problems at present. The price of oil has gone down, and they've overextended themselves financially. Bongo finds it difficult to live within his means in the best of times. But for the first twenty years of his reign, he was able to quiet opposition easily by spreading oil money over any troubled waters.

Q: *How did you find your staff there?*

MCNAMARA: The American staff?

Q: *Yes.*

MCNAMARA: When I got there, I had a very good DCM, a man named Kevin Maguire, who was very good. Sadly, he only remained seven or eight months after I arrived. But I found a good replacement, Herman Ross, who was a very competent guy. Other than that, we had an economic officer, who wasn't much of an economist. We had a spook as the political officer. When I first got there, we had a very good admin officer, but then the admin officers changed and the quality declined. We had a consular officer, a guy named Chris English. What else was there? There was a USIS guy, who was a dead loss and incompetent. The USIS operation was well set up--presumably by the predecessor of my

PAO. We didn't have any AID. But we had a big Peace Corps contingent. Plus, we had the usual Marine contingent. I guess that was it. It was a nice little embassy.

Q: How did you find the Peace Corps?

MCNAMARA: Oh, the volunteers were fine. The volunteers were very good.

Q: Any accomplishments?

MCNAMARA: Oh, I don't know. About as much as they do in most places. But they were nice kids, and they certainly did their best. I can't point to any great accomplishments, but they certainly didn't do anything wrong. No doubt, they had some modest accomplishments.

The director, when I was there, was not worth much. He was a political appointee, a Yugoslavian-American for Reagan in the 1980 campaign. Thus, he tried to give the impression of being influential. Well, I don't know how many Yugoslavian-Americans there are in the United States, but I doubt they form a decisive voting bloc anywhere in the States.

HERMAN J. ROSSI III
US Deputy Chief of Mission, Gabon
Libreville (1982-1984)

Mr. Rossi was born in Florida and raised in Idaho. He was educated at Gonzaga University and Washington State University. In 1965, he entered the Foreign Service, specializing primarily in economic and African affairs. During his career, Mr. Rossi served in Kinshasa, Blantyre, Rome, Pretoria, Monrovia, Kingston and Libreville, where he was Deputy Chief of Mission. He was Economic Counselor at several of his posts. In his Washington assignments, Mr. Rossi dealt with both African and Economic matters. Mr. Rossi was interviewed by Peter Eicher in 2007.

Q: Who was your ambassador?

ROSSI: It was Terry McNamara. He was a very dynamic guy who had extensive service in Africa and two tours in Vietnam. He was something of a Cold Warrior. He was very professional and excellent in dealing with his high level contacts in Gabon. I sometimes thought Gabon was a little too small for his high energy level. He and his wife were very good to me. Because my family wasn't with me, I was a bachelor there, and they had me over frequently for family dinners. I got to know him very well.

It was a fairly good tour. Gabon is an exceptional African country. It has a small population, and due to oil reserves it has more wealth on a per capita basis than most

countries in the area. The French were very heavily involved there and had been for a long time. There were a very large number of French residents in Gabon, something like 30,000 when I was there. In a country of maybe 650,000 people, that is a lot. When you go to the downtown of Libreville, sometimes it looked like a small town in southern France. There were a lot of white faces!

There was a French battalion at the airport and French companies dominated the economy. Every ministry had several French advisers who were often the go-to people when you wanted to get something done with that ministry.

One of Terry McNamara's main endeavors in Gabon was to expand the American commercial and economic presence there and bring in American companies. Omar Bongo, who was the president of the country and one of the longest lasting African dictators, cooperated to some degree because he wanted another card to play with the French. He realized the French were important and necessary to him, but he didn't want to be under their thumb. He wanted to be able to play this American card. There was a three-way thing going on between Bongo, the Americans and the French where Bongo would announce he was going to do something with the Americans. The French would get mad and go see Bongo and say, "You can't do this, and we can do this and this and this if you do." Bongo would back down a little bit but in the process of backing down would get another concession out of the French. It got to be a little game after a while. Terry was into it and enjoyed it greatly. I was not that good at it, but he loved to tweak the French.

We did get some American business investment. One oil company came in. I don't know their concession turned out all that profitable, but they did get one concession. Most of the oil in Gabon is just slightly off shore. It was in small pockets rather than in large deposits but they were constantly finding more of these small pockets of oil. Thus there was a far amount of wealth in Gabon, particularly in Libreville, at least by African standards..

Q: Did it trickle down to the ordinary people?

ROSSI: Only partially. Obviously, a lot of it did not. One advantage Bongo had was a fairly small population. Bongo tried to arrange jobs for the educated Gabonese who came out of high school and college thus co-opt possible opposition. So there was some trickle down. An awful lot did not trickle down and was spent by Bongo and the elite.

Bongo had, I believe, the most coup-proof government in Africa. There had been a coup just before he came in, when he was a young man in the government and an aide to the previous president. This was the late '60s. The French had come in and put down the coup. Bongo seemed to learn a lot from this. After he became president, he established a Presidential guard which was officered by ex-French legionnaires and largely recruited from his own tribal group. This was a substantial and well trained military organization of around 1,200 men with light armor and an air force. Around Libreville, this was by far

the strongest military force. The army would tend to be spread around closer to the borders of the country.

For somebody who wanted to overthrow Bongo, the guard made it almost impossible. No army group could take on the Presidential guard which was loyal to Bongo and to my knowledge still remains loyal to his son who is now in power.

Q: How big was the embassy staff at that time?

ROSSI: Very small. Because of Gabon's per capita income, we had no AID mission there. I think we had about 12 Americans not counting the marine guards. We had another seven marine guards. All totaled, the total number of Americans in that place may have been approaching 15 to 20. We did have a Peace Corps organization there. It's actually one of the tougher jobs for Peace Corps because the volunteers tended to be out in small villages. Once you got outside Libreville, you were in the rainforest and the jungle. Libreville was a relatively modern city. The level of development went down very quickly after you got out outside of town, and the PC volunteers were out in these very small villages, usually on the rivers and in unhealthy places. It was a tough place for them.

The other thing going on in that period was Bongo was building a railway down to Franceville which was his home area in southern Gabon. They were cutting right through rain forest. The rationale was to bring manganese and other minerals in the area of Franceville up to Libreville and ship it out through that port. Previously it had gone over the mountains to Congo Brazzaville and gone out through the port of Point Noir. He spent huge amounts of money on this project. It was an amazing sight to see – a line of bulldozers cutting a swath 200 yards wide thru virgin forest. Of course, no one seemed to worry about the damage to the environment. The project was finished about the time I was leaving, and I think the railway is up and running.

Q: There must have been some remote, unpopulated areas if was only 600,000 people in the country. It's a fair sized country, isn't it?

ROSSI: It is. Most of the country is rain forest. Once you get out of Libreville and the few other large towns, the level of development and population drops sharply. It's near subsistence agriculture once you get out in the jungle. The rain forest is not a very easy place to make a living.

Gabon is where Lambarene is, Dr. Schweitzer's hospital. I went down and visited it as does everybody who serves there. It is the old Gabon, back to an earlier colonial era. The original hospital is preserved as a museum, and they built a more modern hospital there. It's still run by Europeans - largely well-meaning, dedicated, self-sacrificing doctors and nurses from Europe who had essentially given up much of their lives to work with the Africans here. It was a good hospital.

There was a certain amount of resentment among the young educated Gabonese in Libreville about Schweitzer in general and the hospital in particular because they felt this

had been a paternalistic system run by whites for the Africans, and that the Africans hadn't been brought into the management. That was changing then but perceptions change slowly.

Also the young college-educated Gabonese were pretty well paid, and usually lived in the two large cities, not out in remote places like Lambarene where they would have to depend on this hospital for medical care. The Hospital at Lambarene served the whole region there. Often people traveled by canoe to get there since Lambarene is on the country's major river. It is only about 20 miles from the equator.

I'll tell you my one equator story. Driving down to Lambarene, you could cross the equator. Thus I wanted to test the theory that in a funnel, water in the northern hemisphere spins around in one direction as it drains, and in the southern hemisphere goes in the other direction. Right on the equator, we stopped—I had a large funnel—and got out of the car. I poured a gallon of water through it to see which way it would spin. Sure enough, it didn't spin either way! I gurgled straight down! This is one of my poor Gabon stories.

My personal reaction to the Gabon tour was mixed. Libreville is of course very hot and humid but the large French presence meant that there were more amenities available than in many other African capitals. However this was the first time in some 17 years that I had been at post without my wife and family and that took some adjustment. In addition to the obvious things, I found I missed my wife's excellent entertaining skills. I had a fair amount of representational responsibilities and I was not at all good at organizing a dinner party.

I worked fairly long hours in Libreville and, since I was DCM, I tried to help organize some activities that would boost morale at post. I remember I organized a 10K run and also an "across the equator" boat trip. Libreville is only about 10 miles from the equator by sea and the embassy had an 18-foot E&E boat we could use on weekends. In view of the traditions associated with a sea crossing of the equator, I organized a boat trip and picnic down the coast to the equator. Halfway through our picnic, a thunder storm came up, and we had to make a run for home.

I left Gabon after two years there and went back to Washington to work in INR as a division chief.

LARRY C. WILLIAMSON
Ambassador
Gabon (1984-1987)

Ambassador Larry C. Williamson was born in Arkansas in 1930. He graduated from high school in 1947 and promptly joined the Marines. He enrolled in The University of Louisville and took part in the ROTC

program. Graduated in 1951 and then proceeded to get his Ph.D. from the University of California-Berkeley. He joined the Foreign Service in 1958. Ambassador Williamson was interviewed in 2006 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Q: Okay. In '84 where were you?

WILLIAMSON: I was minding my own business and Jim Bishop called me and said, "We have three posts, and we want you for one of them. What would you think of going to..." I forgot the other two, but Gabon was one. I said, "Can I call my wife?" He said, "No. We've got to know right now." I said, "All right. Gabon." He said, "Okay."

Q: You were in Gabon from when to when?

WILLIAMSON: I was in Gabon for three years: '84 to '87.

Q: You were an African hand, so you knew the territory. Describe Gabon, what it is bounded by and what were American interests? What was happening in Gabon?

WILLIAMSON: Gabon's a small ex-French colony, has about a half million people population, and is a pretty good size territory. It is mostly triple umbrella-ed jungle.. It's quite well-to-do minerals-wise. It has iron mines up- country. It has all kinds of lumbering prospects. It has uranium, and it has -- even more important in terms we are talking about-- it's got off shore oil in great abundance. On a per capita basis, the population is one of the most wealthy in Africa. That's worked itself out as a pretty swell standard of living for almost everybody. In fact, most of the manual labor in Gabon is done by immigrants coming in from surrounding African countries. It faces on the Atlantic, and it's surrounded on the north by Cameroon, then you come around to the old Congo Brazzaville, whatever it's called nowadays, and across the Congo River, and the base of a triangular piece of landscape is the old Belgian Congo, and Kabinda. It's got about a hundred tribes; no one tribe dominates.

The first six years of independence it had a French pensioner as President who was pretty well controlled by a French viceroy. The first president died in his bed, and his deputy, a guy named Bongo, became the first elected president. He is still the president. He's a very clever man. He's seen that the wealth has been spread around amongst his people, that is, amongst the Gabonese. His cabinet when I was there consisted of 52 ministers which is one for every clan in the tribal structure. They've got the money for it. They've got Mercedes and secretaries and offices and houses. Bright young boys, bright young people, actually, are sent off. Almost invariably, they are sent to French schools, although over the last 10 years that has been changing quite a bit as they've tried to set up some technical facilities. The pattern nowadays is a French lycée and to France for the what we call undergraduate university. Then usually America, Germany and, to a certain extent, Nigeria, for technical training and post-graduate training.

There is no doubt about it, it is a one-party, one-man government, and the boss can be a little overbearing at times. On the other hand, he's a very able guy. He started out in life as a member of the French air force, joined in the second world war, and turned out to be extremely well liked and effective, and climbed his way up the bureaucratic ladder of politics and French colonial service, and now has been president since the '60s.

Q: What were our interests?

WILLIAMSON: Our basic interests were twofold: One was continued access to the oil. We had three large firms in Gabon when I was there: Tenneco, Mobil, and an exploration firm. You've got to realize what these guys had gone through with the Nigerian experience, so they were not about to put anything on Gabonese soil. All of this was done on off shore rigs.

Q: What was the Nigerian experience?

WILLIAMSON: The Nigerian experience was you went in, you set up oil exploration on the mainland, and you exploited the mainland possibilities. You did offshore, too. Once you started work on the mainland, you came under tremendous pressure to build hospitals and provide all the social services things. You also had hostages out there as you see nowadays. People are always seizing offices and valuable property in order to put pressure on the oil companies, even their own oil companies. That experience has been instrumental in the way the off shore oil in all of West Africa has been developed: strictly offshore, strictly services by expatriates, hardly any job opportunities on those rigs for local employees. There's a lot of trafficking back and forth on the mainland in terms of supplies but hardly any signs of Gabonese or Africans at all.

Q: Does that mean that there isn't much in the way of exploration of mainland Africa?

WILLIAMSON: It certainly wasn't pursued. They pursued the offshore oil. There's no doubt there. More difficult to get at and more difficult to play with. They didn't have to stay on shore, that's the thing.

Q: You said twofold. One was oil, what's the other?

WILLIAMSON: The other was to keep Bongo as a friend of ours in dealing with the South Africans and dealing with a lot of other problems with the wilder politics of Central and East Africa. He was always a friend of ours for a price, but not a big price. He is a very conservative sort of guy.

Q: Were the Soviets involved there?

WILLIAMSON: No. This was a French chasse garde, hunting preserve. All the mineral extractions—not the oil—were run by French companies, which have been there since colonial days. Total, the French oil company was the agent for the French government in a lot of... Not necessarily just business transactions. The Presidential body guard, for

example, was composed in my day largely of fellow tribesmen of the President, officered and senior NCO'd by retired French Legionnaires paid by Total and I assume by the French government. They would send a number of jet aircraft for the use of the president and his wife. Scholarships were arranged. The life in downtown Libreville was easy. There were more French in Gabon than there were before independence, almost all associated in one way or another with minerals extraction or oil. A large military presence. A squadron of Mysteres in those days, a battalion of the old French colonial army and the marines, castile de bourdon, cops all over the place, and all the technical stuff: aircraft towers, controls, all done by the French.

Q: I would imagine then that half your representational thing would be to the Gabonese and the other half would be to the French embassy.

WILLIAMSON: It was. The fact of the matter is we didn't have very much there. Those interests—the oil companies—never came and asked me for help. Never once. They didn't need it. They had access to the president themselves. The president was clever, didn't make untoward demands on them. There were two private oil wells out there, one named for his wife and one named for the president. We were always under the assumption that there was another bank account in Switzerland, and I'm sure there was.

My job was to show the flag and be around. Frankly, it got very boring after a while. We were there for three years and there was nothing much in the way of crises to deal with. I got to know a lot of French military people who were always very forthcoming. Charming people. We would go to parties. I got to know the French embassy folks. I was a good friend of the French ambassadors. I didn't want to crowd in on my... It was a small post, and they didn't have any contacts themselves, so I didn't want to crowd in on their relationship with the DCM. The French consul general—they had several consuls—had worked for years in Washington and spoke English very well and was a great admirer of the Americans. He and I got along like a house afire. I went to a lot of their parties. I went to a lot of lycée parties, too. You had very little interface with anybody outside of the foreign policy establishment on the Gabonese side. The president didn't want to encourage that. The French had the intelligence thing all tied up. They had a huge recording telephone tap operation going including my phone. After a couple of three years, I was pleased to leave. I had done everything there was to do twice, at least.

Q: How did you find Bongo? You had all these UN votes. How did that come out?

WILLIAMSON: We had those, but Bongo said he didn't want to get involved in that. If he did, he'd let me know. The foreign minister who was his nephew would let me know and did every so often. By and large, however, they preferred to work through the UN mission up there. He said, "You might as well make up your mind to it. We're going to vote as the French ask us to vote." I said, "Yes, but sometimes I've got to come in and make the effort." He said, "Well sure, but tell the foreign minister." I'm sure the UN people and IO would have died if they heard this conversation, but it was simply reality.

Q: You mentioned his wife. Sometimes the wives end up by running the business. What was going on?

WILLIAMSON: Mrs. Bongo came from a wealthy clan in Bongoville. He married above himself. He didn't let that stop him for a second. He had numerous girlfriends. Mrs. Bongo had a pretty active social life herself. The couple had three official children; there were other little Bongos around. The boy went off to Paris and ran a jazz band in Paris for a long time. His two sisters, on the other hand, went over to the United States to get trained, and they got MBAs (Masters of Business Administration) from USC (University of Southern California). They also bought a house just off Rodeo Drive. Mummy came along and fell in love with Los Angeles.

Q: Basically Beverly Hills.

WILLIAMSON: Beverly Hills. You bet! Eventually the boy came back and took over as his father's maitre d' politically speaking.

Q: The jazz musician.

WILLIAMSON: The jazz musician. He speaks very good English—excellent English—and has a collection of antique cars.

Q: So many of these African countries, there might be wealth, but it doesn't translate down to the people. I take it that Gabon was an exception.

WILLIAMSON: It was and it wasn't. The French for some time after the second world war-- I don't know exactly the chronology of the log here-- decided that they had to regroup the tribes who were living in very small groups. This was one of the last strongholds of clan settlements. By the way the Pygmies were up in there, too. They had to regroup these people near their supply roads so they could offer medical services and schools. And they did. They regrouped. They ripped them right out of the jungle. There is nobody living in nine-tenths of Gabon. Gradually, people trickled down to the city. The people who stayed in the bush, most stayed there by their own desire. They had a pension. They had money. He pensioned everybody over the age of 55 or something like that which in Gabon was not a big population. He had jobs for everybody.

Students occasionally would fire up a letter from the Sorbonne to a newspaper denouncing the dictator. The next thing you knew, one of the Cabinet ministers was going up to Paris and talking to the kids and pointing out jobs and Mercedes, and other things that came to people who were patriotic and want to do their best for Gabon but not to disturb the old man right now because he's a little touchy and he's busy. He bought out the bulk of everybody. There's no reason for people to be disgruntled over the government. As soon as the ashtrays in the Mercedes got filled up with ashes, they traded them in.

Q: Were you playing the game of "After Bongo, whom?"

WILLIAMSON: Yes, we were, but it was not pressing. Bongo was in his early 40s. It became quite clear that whoever it was going to be, the dauphin, was going to be selected by the French. That's all there was to it. There wasn't going to be any attempt to gild that particular lily. This is a major source of French uranium, French oil, and you don't mess with the French on those kinds of matters.

Q: Who was the president of France?

WILLIAMSON: Mitterrand.

Q: Some of these places became quite a source of funds for the Socialist party.

WILLIAMSON: I'm quite clear that it was. There's no doubt in my mind. I didn't inquire into it; it didn't seem to be too politic to do so.

Q: Were you aware of a bank man descending?

WILLIAMSON: Oh, yes. Charlie Bray once described Dakar as a place where they fly in the ice cubes from Paris every afternoon. Gabon was the same way. Huge marche. It's a place where you could buy wild European boar. The forests are full of wood pigs, but you could buy European boar over the Christmas holidays. Oysters were flown in for the European holidays. There were French people coming in all the time: ministers of state, ministers of this or that, all kinds of military people. Innumerable chances for bag men. Also, innumerable chances for bedding down young Gabonese ladies in the Palais and having your activities photographed. More than a reasonable amount of that was going on.

Q: What you're saying is that French big-wigs would come, have a good time. There was a picture in somebody's file.

WILLIAMSON: Yes, usually. Not that it made a lot of... Judging by Mitterrand, it didn't seem to make a hell of a lot of difference one way or another. He would never invite Americans to overnight in the Palais. This was not to say that somebody could not come around to your hotel room.

Q: Did you have a problem with your officers in regard to the fact that it was, I assume, pretty expensive.

WILLIAMSON: Things were expensive. I had—it was a very small embassy—with a USIS (United States Information Service) mission of two. I had six American officers, two of whom were women. I had the world's worst admin officer, and I couldn't do anything about her. She had been Phil Habib's secretary, and I can reconstruct the conversation. "Well, what do you want to do, Charlotte, after I retire?" "Well, Phil, I always thought I'd like to be the admin officer." "Well, I'll arrange that." She didn't speak very good French—hardly any—and her managerial technique was to nag the hell

out of people. She alienated the Marine Guard almost right off the bat. She couldn't run things. She didn't have any ideas and was hampered badly by lack of French.

Q: That creates all sorts of...

WILLIAMSON: Oh, yes. The other officers were all second or third tour officers, and I had a political officer, an economic officer, and I had a DCM.

Q: Who was the DCM?

WILLIAMSON: I had two of them. One of them was there when I came. He was a good guy. His wife had been around in Africa a lot. She was British, and he had several tours in Africa. He spoke excellent French. My second DCM also spoke excellent French. The other wives did not speak very much French, and it was not a language post. There was us and the Brits, and a few people in the diplomatic corps who spoke English, so for four years my non-French speakers had nobody to deal with except themselves.

Q: You mentioned gorillas and chimpanzees. Was there protection thereof and how was that worked?

WILLIAMSON: They're completely protected. They're all over the place. Actually, the thing that is doing more damage to them than anything else is the logging that is gradually destroying their habitat. I can't emphasize too much how small the place is and how few people there are there. You can't get into those forests to hunt. You really can't. An army helicopter went down while I was there. They could track it. It took them four days to find where the damn things were with high class French assistance and everything else.

Q: The administrative office can be a terrible burden... This is not, "Oh, dear." This is a pain in the ass.

WILLIAMSON: It was a pain in the ass. We had some good French locals. Reasonable French locals. She always wanted to Africanize. I said, "It ain't broke. Don't fix it."

RONALD K. McMULLEN
Economic-Commercial Officer
Libreville (1988-1990)

Ambassador Ronald McMullen was born in Iowa in 1955. He graduated from Drake University (B.A.), University of Minnesota (M.A.), and University of Iowa (Ph.D.). He joined the Foreign Service in 1982. His overseas posts include the Dominican Republic, Sri Lanka, Gabon, South Africa, Fiji, Burma and as ambassador to Eritrea. Ambassador McMullen was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2012.

McMULLEN: In February 1988 we moved to Libreville, Gabon where I began my duties as econ-commercial officer and the small embassy's only reporting officer. Because there wasn't much political movement in Gabon, all the action was on the economic-commercial side.

Q: OK, you were there from when to when?

McMULLEN: We arrived in Gabon in February of 1988 and we were there until June of 1990.

Q: OK. What was the situation in Gabon at the time?

McMULLEN: Gabon was an interesting, strange place. It's a country of around 100,000 square miles, about the size of Colorado. Tropical forests cover some 85% of the country. A million people lived in Gabon, which was blessed (or cursed?) with lots of oil. At that time, seven American oil companies were producing or exploring for oil. There was a large manganese mine, a uranium mine, and a big forestry sector. But the Gabonese people were still pretty traditional. President Omar Bongo depended on the former colonial power, France, to help do almost everything. Gabon produced few consumer or industrial goods and almost everything was imported. As a result, prices were high. I was shocked when we paid \$14 for a cantaloupe. Tomatoes flown in from Morocco or France were two dollars each. The Gabonese had enough money to hire other people to do the work. In fact, of Embassy Libreville's 30 FSNs, only four were Gabonese. All the rest were from other African countries, such as Cameroon or Senegal. Thousands of Equatorial Guineans lived in Libreville, who, like the embassy's warehousemen, who took less-skilled jobs.

Mbolo, Gabon's modern grocery store, was chock-full of imported products. People from other central African countries traveled to Gabon just to shop at Mbolo for the array of goods flown in from France, Senegal, Morocco, and South Africa. Prices were sky high. Gabonese hunters sold live pangolins in Mbolo's parking lot. There'd be somebody with a small cage or sometimes even just holding a live pangolin, which looks like a cross between a lemur, a sloth, and an armadillo. I thought for many months that they were selling pangolins as pets or something. But no, it was for food. The Gabonese liked bushmeat and so some enterprising hunters brought in live pangolins to sell in the parking lot of Mbolo.

Because Gabon was so oil-dependent, the country was shocked in 1986 when global oil prices fell by over 50%. By 1988, when we arrived, the Gabonese found they had much less money than anticipated. The government had just built a very expensive railroad 433 miles from Libreville to the interior city of Franceville, near the president's home region. Due to the fall in oil revenue, the country's overstuffed and overpaid bureaucracy became quite a burden. Cabinet ministers made about \$500,000 a year, and there were lots of them, as there were civil servants in general. I worked with an IMF team to outline a structural adjustment package to help Gabon bring its revenues and expenditures into

balance. The IMF found that Gabonese civil servants, who were paid for a 40-hour week, were at work only 17.5 hours per week. Of that, they spent on average 45 minutes a day in the office reading the newspaper. That meant Gabonese civil servants worked only 12 or 13 hours a week.

When the ambassador and I called on Gabonese officials, we would be frequently be offered “Okoume juice.” The Okoume is a large tropical tree that’s the mainstay of Gabon’s forestry industry. Okoume logs are peeled and made into veneer and plywood. The British Mosquito bombers of World War II were made from Gabonese Okoume.

Q: Ah.

McMULLEN: Okoume was the original, pre-oil source of wealth for Gabon. When we called on Gabonese officials, even in the morning, they’d offer us Okoume juice. I wondered what part of the tree produced juice – some kind of fruit? The roots? The first couple of times the ambassador and I declined, but finally one day I said, “OK, I’ll try some Okoume juice.” I was surprised when “Okoume juice” turned out to be French champagne. In the morning. It was a bizarre place. Most of the work done in Gabon was carried out by highly paid expatriate Africans technicians or French technical advisors. Every minister had one or two French technical advisors who basically ran their departments and kept the country going. It was a strange economy and an odd system. The American oil companies were competing largely against corrupt and corrupting French and Italian oil companies. Due to the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, American companies of course couldn’t offer bribes. The European oil companies were under no such restriction, so the American oil companies found working in Gabon to be difficult — the playing field was by no means level.

Q: Well, how would you as a Foreign Service Officer get by?

McMULLEN: We did have an appropriately high cost of living allowance, as things were just so darn expensive. Even so, spending \$14 for a cantaloupe or \$65 for lunch galled me. Jane said, “You’re getting a cost of living allowance for this, so just get over it.” It was difficult and we lived somewhat frugally. We didn’t go out to eat very often and were careful about other spending, so we managed. Many people spent heaps of money, and made even bigger heaps, as wages were really high. The embassy normally had a booth at Libreville’s annual trade fair. One year we hired two night guards, who just had to stay awake during the night and watch the American booth and exhibits. The watchmen were from Burkina Faso and were mostly likely in Gabon illegally. We paid each of them \$800 for five nights of work, probably double the average yearly income in Burkina Faso. Those guys made out quite well.

In the late 1980s, as we were ratcheting up sanctions on South Africa’s apartheid regime, the United States was worried about access to manganese, much of which came from South Africa. Manganese is one of the ingredients in high quality steel and specialized metal alloys. Gabon had perhaps the world’s second largest supply of manganese, mined in the deep interior of the country. To visit the mine, I rode the Trans-Gabonese Railroad

from Libreville out to Franceville, along with Jane and toddler Owen. The trip was 10 hours via a newly cut rail line through thick rainforest. I visited the big manganese mine and asked the management if they could increase production in the event that sanctions cut access to South Africa's manganese. They said they could easily increase output. Previously all Gabonese manganese ore from this interior mine was transported via a contraption called an "aerial ropeway," a 75-mile long ski lift with buckets. The ore went by aerial ropeway from Franceville to the Congo, then by rail to the Congolese port of Pointe Noire on the Atlantic coast. But because of the new Trans-Gabonese Railroad, they said, "Now can send high quality manganese ore by rail directly to Libreville to meet increased world supply should South African manganese be cut off." That was good news, as in those days we worried that sanctions on South Africa would cause shortages of strategic minerals. On that trip I also visited a uranium mine. France, as you know, has quite a large nuclear power industry, part of which is fueled by uranium from Gabon. It was enlightening to visit the manganese and uranium mines.

In Franceville I also visited a center for primate research. HIV/AIDS was just emerging as a global concern and many suspected a connection to primate diseases, so there were numerous researchers interested. We visited a large research facility in Franceville where there were scores of chimpanzees, monkeys, and gorillas being used in HIV/AIDS research.

Q: Well, you as a reporting officer -- Bongo had been the President for life I take it?

McMULLEN: Correct. He'd been there for a long time. There were almost no politics at all when we got there.

Q: So did you have much contact with the government?

McMULLEN: We did, particularly the ministries of petroleum, finance, and foreign affairs. President Bongo was quite an active leader. He would ceremonially open trade fairs and strolled around the exhibits. He once stopped and talked with me at the American booth at the trade fair. Nothing substantive, but he made an attempt to be pleasant. He was from the Bateke ethnic group, which was thought to have some pygmy ancestry. Omar Bongo was very short and always wore elevated shoes to give himself an extra two or three inches. Even with those elevated shoes he was quite short of stature, but he struck me as a gracious man with a presence about him.

Two economic-political dynamics rocked Gabon during our time there. First was the plunge in oil prices that caused huge shortfalls in Gabonese government revenue. Second was the collapse of communism in 1989, with revolutions sweeping through Eastern Europe and affecting China. As a result, the call for democracy even reached Gabon. The country's one-party system was challenged by unrest, protests, and rioting. People demanded more freedoms, including multi-party democracy. Eventually President Bongo agreed to convene a national political conference to discuss reforming the one-party system. I wormed my way into the conference and witnessed the agreement that set Gabon on the path towards multi-party democracy, at least officially. Delegates at the

national conference also lifted restrictions on freedoms of press and assembly and abolished the requirement for exit visas. Further, they devolved some government revenue to the provinces.

In May 1990 an opposition political leader died under mysterious circumstances in Port-Gentil, the oil capital. Riots erupted across the country. As it turned out, Ambassador Keith Wauchope and I were on a canoe trip down the Ogooué River in central Gabon. We were out on the river, having left the ambassador's kids, Colin and Ian, my wife, and our son Owen at the ambassador's residence in Libreville. Linda Wauchope, the ambassador's wife, was providing logistical support for our canoe trip. While we were gone, the riots erupted. As we attempted to get back to Libreville, we had to talk our way through roadblocks and skirt rioting villages. Meanwhile, back in the capital, Jane secured the ambassador's residence and corralled the boys as teargas wafted through the neighborhood. There was a French military base in Gabon and the French intervened to evacuate French citizens and other Western expatriates. They flew military transports into the French airbase and evacuated any French or Western citizen who wanted to leave.

When the ambassador, his wife, and I eventually got back to Libreville through all the roadblocks and stacks of burning tires, Jane said, "Hey, we could hitch a ride to France with the French Air Force and then make our own way back here later." Jane is a Francophile and thought it would be a unique opportunity to visit France. But since we were departing from Gabon the following month I said, "No, we better say here, because if we're evacuated to France we may never get back to collect our household effects and properly pack out."

The Gabonese political system that was so frozen in 1988 became much more dynamic and volatile by the time we left in 1990. Gabon never did get a truly competitive multi-party system, despite the grassroots reform efforts of 1990. The next year, Gabon adopted a new, more liberal constitution with greater civil liberties.

On our trip on the Ogooué River we came out at Lambaréné, which was a mission station established in the early 1900s.

Q: That was Schweitzer, wasn't it?

McMULLEN: That's exactly right, yep. Albert Schweitzer traveled to Gabon as a young doctor-missionary in 1912. He could have been a successful theologian or organist. He was a very talented musician, and was particularly interested in Bach's organ music. He gave it all up because of his religious convictions. He decided he could best serve humanity as a physician, so he went to medical school, moved to Lambaréné, and established a clinic. Schweitzer's clinic in Lambaréné was accessible to people living in the interior, as a couple of rivers joined the Ogooué nearby. He lived and worked there for the rest of his life. He died in 1965 and was buried in the yard next to his modest cottage. We visited Lambaréné a number of times and were surprised to find the clinic still functioning, run by a Swiss NGO (nongovernmental organization) now. Interestingly, the Gabonese do not hold Schweitzer in particularly high regard. In his twilight years he

reportedly didn't keep up with modern medical advances and gave the impression that old ways were good enough. So some Gabonese saw him as paternalistic. Additionally, the French do not hold Albert Schweitzer in high regard because he was from Alsace-Lorraine and spoke German. During World War I, for example, the French deported Schweitzer from Gabon and interned him in France. In World War II Schweitzer remained in Lambaréné amid fighting between the Free French and Vichy French for control of Gabon. Schweitzer refused to segregate the Vichy French and the Free French wounded in the hospital at Lambaréné. The Free French authorities, who eventually triumphed, did not approve of this mingling of the wounded. Schweitzer's reputation among French expatriates in Gabon is not sterling and he's not beloved by the Gabonese. So, if it wasn't for the Swiss Christian medical NGO, the clinic would not be in very good shape. Albert Schweitzer is one of my personal heroes -- I think he's a remarkable person who lived his principles every day.

Q: Well, I know, you know, Lambaréné, as a kid growing up in the '30s was a name that we all knew practically, because of the newsreels from Lambaréné and all --

McMULLEN: Yep. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952 for his service to humanity. Nevertheless, in some French and Gabonese circles Schweitzer is not held in high regard. We enjoyed visiting Lambaréné. His living quarters were very spartan, but he did have an old pump organ on which he frequently played Bach music. Mosquito nets hung over his bed and the good doctor always wore a pith helmet when outside. His philosophy, "Reverence for Life," didn't mean that you had to be a vegetarian, but if you ate chicken, then you needed to remember that the chicken had been a living being. He walked the walk. His life was dedicated to service to humanity in ways that are remarkable. Visits to Lambaréné provided time to reflect on Albert Schweitzer's approach to living a meaningful life.

Q: Was there a Peace Corps program in Gabon?

Yes, and Rebecca Mushingi, the director, and her husband Tuli were friends of ours. Their daughter Furaha was about Owen's age.

One of the most interesting dinners I've ever experienced was with a group of Peace Corps Volunteers in northern Gabon. We had quite a large Peace Corps program in Gabon, and when I traveled upcountry I'd stop by the Peace Corps office and pick up mail to deliver to the Volunteers. I'd contact the Volunteers in the area and say, "Let's get together on Tuesday night after work. I'll buy beans and beer at a local dive of your choosing, and I've got some mail for you." I'd often take bags of Snickers or other treats for the volunteers, as many were isolated and working in very primitive conditions. In 1989, I traveled up to the far north of Gabon, to Bitam, a provincial capital. I met with a group of Volunteers at a grubby local eatery for beans and beer. We chatted about their work as teachers in Gabonese schools, where they were from in the States, and other normal expat topics. Then someone mentioned the breaking news about the two scientists in Utah who claimed to have developed cold fusion, almost on a laboratory countertop.

Q: Yeah, I remember that well.

McMULLEN: The world was abuzz with cold fusion, as it promised free, unlimited electricity. The Peace Corps Volunteers at the dinner were mostly math and science teachers, 24-year-olds working in remote northern Gabon. I asked, “If there were free, unlimited electricity, how would the world be changed?” I didn’t say much else for the rest of the night, I just listened to these young math and science teachers talk about how the global economy, world politics, and the environment would be changed by cold fusion.

One young teacher said, “You know, with unlimited electricity you could distill sea water into fresh water and grow food in the desert, like they do in California. Or you could grow crops hydroponically. The price of oil would collapse and the price of farmland in Iowa would fall because you wouldn’t need to grow food in rich Iowa soil.” The Volunteers came up with a remarkable range of radical changes the world would see with cold fusion. Of course, we found out a few weeks later that the miraculous discovery of cold fusion had been a measurement error, probably cooked up by these two scientists in Utah. Nevertheless, listening to bright Peace Corps Volunteers discussing revolutionary changes in the world in a seedy café in northern Gabon was a unique and enjoyable experience.

Q: How did you find operating in a country that was pretty well dominated by France? How did the American oil companies function?

McMULLEN: There was never a level playing field. We’d sometimes accompany representatives of American oil companies to meetings with ministry of petroleum officials. Sitting next to the Gabonese director general for petroleum was his French technical advisor, who probably had friends working with a French oil company. So it was difficult. President Bongo, maybe because he didn’t want to be 100% dependent on the French, allowed American oil companies to win some exploration and production contracts.

I didn’t know much about the petroleum industry before serving in Embassy Libreville. One time I went down to Mayumba, located where the Congo and Gabon meet the Atlantic. We flew to Mayumba and then helicoptered out to an Atlantic Richfield (ARCO) offshore oil platform. We landed on a little helipad and hopped off the chopper. The platform’s crew was drilling at the time. As I got off the helicopter an American wearing a hard hat rushed over and started yelling at me, but I couldn’t really hear what he was saying over the noise of the helicopter. He was right in my face. It turned out that he was the safety engineer. He yelled, “What the hell are you doing on my rig with a beard?”

I said, “What?” I had a full beard at that time.

He yelled louder, “You’re not allowed on an oil rig with a beard.”

“Why not?” I asked.

He said, “Because we’re drilling and if we hit gas you’ve got 30 seconds to get a gas mask on with a tight seal or you’ll die. I don’t want to lose anybody on my rig, it would be a black mark on my record.”

I said, “Well, I’m not going to go back on the helicopter alone, so you’ve got me for another two and a half hours while we visit your rig.” It was a rather unfriendly welcome, but the safety engineer was doing his job. Luckily, we didn’t hit gas. I didn’t know you shouldn’t visit an oil rig with a beard, and apparently the ARCO people who arranged the visit didn’t either.

One time I flew up to Malabo with a small American oil company that had spotted promising territory on the maritime boundary between Equatorial Guinea and Gabon. Because I’d served in the Dominican Republic, I was asked to translate between the Spanish-speaking Equatorial Guinean petroleum officials and the English and French speaking manager of the small American oil company. We did what we could and had some success, but by and large the French dominated due to their colonial legacy, the fact that they had a technical advisor in every ministry, the sizeable French military base just outside of Libreville, and because French companies used bribes to get what they wanted.

Q: Did you get involved in any environmental issues?

The first ambassador I worked for at Embassy Libreville was Warren Clark. He was interested in conservation and knew that Gabon had maybe 69,000 elephants, more than Kenya, and that Gabon’s huge tracts of largely untouched rainforest were environmentally important. He wanted to learn more about the rainforest and to be able to speak with some credibility to Gabonese officials about conservation efforts.

Shortly after I arrived, Ambassador Clark talked me into going on a jungle trek with him. The plan was to hike about 60 miles through dense forest with two Peace Corps Volunteers, a Canadian volunteer, and an American resident named Tom who had married a Gabonese woman and was teaching at a high school in south-central Gabon. We planned to cover the 60 miles in three days, which meant walking about 20 miles a day, not an impossible feat. One of the Peace Corps volunteers told me, “It won’t be hard walking because the trees are so tall and dense that there won’t be any undergrowth -- it’ll just be like a walk in the park.”

I thought, “Yeah, but it’s 20 miles a day in 95 degrees with 100% humidity. It’s going to be tough.”

We flew down to Mayumba, drove to Mimongo by jeep, and continued on a dirt track to an abandoned gold mining camp, where the road ended. There was a small village at the end of the road and a faint path heading north into the forest. This was our jumping-off point for the three-day jungle trek. We spent the night in the small village, which consisted of maybe 15 thatched huts inhabited by people of the small Mitsogo tribe. The Mitsogo maintained a deep belief in a traditional religion called Bwiti, one of the

forerunners of Haitian voodoo. The Mitsogo villagers were quite hospitable. They shared a dinner of gazelle, yams, and porcupine and as night approached, an elder explained, "Each visitor can have his own house." They took us through the village, assigning a house to each Westerner. I don't know where the family who lived in my assigned hut stayed that night, but I had the place to myself. After we were dropped off at our huts, the men of the village came and said, "Would you like us to put on a Bwiti ceremony for you?" They continued, "If you buy us some palm wine, we'll put on a ceremony for you." We agreed and spent the next couple of hours in their Bwiti long house, drinking palm wine and watching the men of the village perform a traditional Bwiti ceremony to wish us good luck on our trek.

We didn't know this at the time, but a couple months later a young Catholic seminarian from that village came home for a holiday between school terms and never went back. Eventually authorities went to his village and found that the young man had been killed because he converted to Catholicism from the Bwiti religion. On further search, the policemen found a cache of human body parts. Apparently human body parts are used in some grimmer sorts of Bwiti rites. So we'd spent the night in a Bwiti cannibal village. Someone later said, "Well, they probably didn't want Foreign Service Officer body parts."

Q: Yeah.

McMULLEN: The warm welcome the villagers extended to us became somewhat colored in retrospect when we learned about the grisly case of the missing seminarian.

Q: Did you wonder about what you'd eaten?

McMULLEN: (laughs) Yes. Well, they said it was porcupine and I'd never had porcupine before, so I didn't have any basis of comparison, but yes. The next morning we got up and began the hike. In addition to the two Peace Corps Volunteers, a Canadian volunteer, Tom, the ambassador, and me, we hired two guides. One was a Mitsogo man and the other was a pygmy named Rene. Rene, the pygmy, led the way playing a small bamboo flute as we made our way through the dense jungle.

I said, "I understand there are lots of elephants and other animals in this area, but if you play your flute we're not going to see anything."

Rene said in French, "Exactly. We don't want to turn a corner and bump into a startled elephant in this thick forest." So he kept playing his flute.

The trek was absolutely hell on earth. There was thick undergrowth the entire way. It felt like we were in a sauna. We often walked in streambeds because it was the path of least resistance. Towards the end of the first long day, my legs began to cramp up and I suffered from heat stroke. One of the Peace Corps Volunteers, Todd Mitchell, gave me a packet of Gatorade full of salts and sugars that helped rehydrate me. I thought, "Gee,

they're going to have to leave me along the trail here if I cramp up and can't move." But thanks to Todd Mitchell's Gatorade, I managed to carry on.

The Mitsogo guide carried a shotgun with which he occasionally shot birds and other animals, including a big, 30-pound monkey. He tied the monkey's long tail around its neck and used it like a carrying strap. That evening he butchered, cooked, and ate the monkey. He offered to share the meat, but I declined. The Canadian volunteer, who was a science teacher, took the monkey's skull, cleaned it, and picked the brains out of it. I think he planned to use it in the classroom.

The second night we camped by a little stream. As we were making camp, the pygmy disappeared, returning 40 minutes later carrying an elephant tusk.

"Look what I found!" Rene exclaimed, as he held the tusk up for us to examine. Finding an elephant tusk? We couldn't believe it. Later, Tom, the American teacher who knew the local area well, explained, "The local Mitsogo and Bapunu tribesmen pick on the pygmies. If pygmy hunters had earlier killed an elephant, they might have been afraid that the bigger neighboring groups would seize the tusks if they tried to carry them out. The pygmies might have hidden the tusks, in hopes of retrieving them later. Perhaps Rene thought our presence would make it safe for him to uncover the hidden tusk and carry it out." Made sense to me.

In the middle of the night elephants lumbered into the stream. Fearful of getting trampled, the Mitsogo guide yelled, fired his shotgun, and scared the elephants off. We heard them crashing through the dense underbrush for quite a while, but never saw anything.

The third day our bedraggled, soggy group broke camp and headed down the path, led by a jaunty pygmy playing a bamboo flute and balancing an elephant tusk on his shoulder.

A bit later we found a freshly graded track that didn't appear on our detailed topographic map. It eventually led us to an Israeli logging camp. There were five Israelis and about 150 African workers in a newly established logging camp. They were surprised to see seven mud-covered, absolutely drenched and exhausted Westerners walk out of the forest. We were equally surprised to find an Israeli logging camp on a blank spot on our map.

We said good-bye to our guides and spent the night in the camp. The next morning an embassy vehicle picked us up and hauled us back to Libreville.

If I had it to do over, I'm not sure I would. It was a miserable three days. As a Boy Scout, I'd gone on longer hikes, but never in conditions like those in south-central Gabon. I was chafed raw, covered with bites and cuts, and my back hurt from stooping constantly to duck under branches. However, Ambassador Clark was able to parlay his trekking experience into serious conversations with Gabonese officials and NGO representatives about the need to conserve parts of the tropical forest. In fact, Gabon has become one of the world's leaders in terms of national parks and forest reserves per square mile of territory. So maybe the misery was worthwhile.

Q: Well, did you run across Soviet embassies that were sort of stranded in Gabon, or not?

McMULLEN: Yes, there was a Soviet embassy in Gabon. As it became clear that the Soviet Union was going to allow the rollback of communism in Eastern Europe (it wasn't apparent yet that the Soviet Union was going to implode), our antagonistic Cold War relations with the Soviets began to warm. We engaged the Soviet diplomats in Libreville in a friendly manner. For example, we gave them a tour of the Harlan County and involved them in ship-visit activities. One Saturday we had them over to the embassy's beach-front housing complex, Sabliere, for barbeque and a volleyball match. The Soviet diplomats really didn't have much to do in Gabon, as there weren't specific Soviet interests in the petroleum or mineral sectors. They were glad to play us in volleyball, tour the Harlan County, and socialize a bit.

Q: I bet they beat the hell out of you in volleyball.

McMULLEN: Our A team beat their A team. We had a Marine Security Guard detachment, and they didn't.

Q: Ah.

McMULLEN: But our B team lost to the Soviets, so we split, called it a draw, and enjoyed the barbeque.

Q: What sort of social activities did the American community in Libreville have in this isolated place?

The Marine Security Guards were a good bunch and we always enjoyed working with them and getting to know them as individuals. The Marine Corps Birthday Ball was the social event of the year. On Friday nights the Marines showed movies at their house for the American community and their guests.

One of my best friends was a British diplomat named Ian Thom. When I learned that the Marines were going to show "Field of Dreams," which is about baseball and Iowa, I invited Ian to join us at the Marine House. We watched the movie, ate popcorn, and afterwards I commented about how much I enjoyed seeing a movie about baseball and Iowa.

Ian Thom said, "Field of Dreams really wasn't about Iowa. It was about being sure that your relationships with the people close to you are always in balance, because you never know when you're going to go." Ian thought the movie hinged on the main character's remorse of having been on bad terms with his father when his dad passed away. Well, the next morning Ian Thom died of a cerebral hemorrhage. He had a blood clot after playing soccer with a Gabonese team and probably died before he hit the ground. The British embassy was small. The British ambassador asked if we had a coffin that he could use to send Ian's body back to Scotland.

I said, "Not only do we have a coffin, but we know that Ian fits in it, because last Halloween when the Marines had a haunted house for the kids in the community, Ian was the corpse in the coffin. Kids would walk in, see a coffin, Ian would sit up, say 'Boooo,' and scare the daylights out of the kids." Ian Thom's parents traveled to Libreville and attended a moving memorial service in a little wooden Gabonese church along the river. This mutual support and friendship between American and British diplomats, in my experience, was the norm. Ian Thom reminded us all that you never know when you're going to go. It could happen in far off Gabon or somewhere closer to home and family.

Q: Well, did you get many visitors from Washington?

McMULLEN: You know, we didn't. The USS Harlan County visited and occasionally a desk officer or an office director dropped by. Herman Cohen came one time. Hank was the--

Q: He's Assistant Secretary for African Affairs --

McMULLEN: Yep. But that was about it. The USS Harlan County came on training cruise down the west coast of Africa and stopped in Libreville as well as São Tomé and Príncipe.

Q: I understand you also handled São Tomé and Príncipe?

Embassy Libreville also covered São Tomé and Príncipe (STP). I traveled there 20 times in two and a half years, becoming the American expert on this isolated microstate. Later Ambassador Wauchope visited 21 times, so I think he must hold the record for most visits. São Tomé and Príncipe was not an important country in terms of American foreign policy, but it was an interesting microcosm of developments affecting Lusophone Africa. As you may remember, following the socialist coup d'état in Lisbon in 1974, Portugal granted independence to Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, and São Tomé. The Portuguese socialist junta handed control to the principal Marxist group in each colony. So, from 1975, when São Tomé and Príncipe became independent, until the late 1980s, when we were there, the country suffered under a Marxist regime with a supposedly centrally planned economy.

The island of São Tomé is 30 miles long by 20 miles wide, and Príncipe is about four miles by 10 miles. Both islands are volcanic and have very rich soil. The originally uninhabited islands were settled by the Portuguese before Columbus discovered America. The population consisted of Portuguese planters and officials and slaves from Angola. The islands were fertile and soon became wealthy due to cocoa production on well-ordered Portuguese plantations. From about 1900 to 1930, STP was the world's leading cocoa producer. The prosperous Portuguese cocoa plantations were built up the slopes of volcanic mountains, complete with miniature gravity-powered trains to transport cocoa down the mountains.

At independence in 1975, all the Portuguese left, having never trained São Toméans in skilled labor of any kind. The group that took over in 1975 was a Marxist party called the Movement for the Liberation of São Tomé and Príncipe (MLSTP). The MLSTP didn't have a clue. Not surprisingly, cocoa production ground to a halt, as did everything else. The MLSTP's Marxist ideology meant that the government controlled everything, and thus was to blame for failures on all fronts. By the late 1980s, the early Glasnost period, São Toméans began to seek other potential investors or donors, with the MLSTP even hinting that better relations with the United States were possible. There was a Soviet radar site on São Tomé, but, unknown to Embassy Libreville, it was inoperable as the Soviets had abandoned some time ago. There were about 1,000 Angolan troops on the island to help shore up São Tomé's Marxist government. In the waning years of the Cold War, the United States began to wean STP away from Marxism and the Soviets and offered some development assistance.

I was tasked with developing an AID program in STP, as there was no AID mission in Gabon. Funding came through the regional AID center in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire. Working with Portuguese and STP officials, I helped oversee a \$500,000 AID program aimed at increasing agricultural production. As a result, I traveled to São Tomé and Príncipe about once a month.

As the Cold War drew to an end, the U.S. no longer needed the mothballed civil defense hospitals stored since the 1950s in the subbasements of Midwestern courthouses. When the U.S. began giving away hundreds of early Cold War pre-packaged field hospitals, Embassy Libreville requested one for donation to São Tomé and Príncipe. Washington agreed, and the U.S. Air Force planned to fly the 1950s vintage field hospital to Sao Tome in a C-141. Embassy Libreville previously sponsored a self-help project at a clinic at Monte Café plantation, where we had good relations with an Egyptian doctor, Ahmed Zaki, and a French NGO. I asked, "If we could fly over a complete American field hospital, could you use the materials?" They were keen on the idea, as was the government of São Tomé. So a gigantic C-141 came in, maybe the largest airplane ever to land in São Tomé up to that point. We unloaded a field hospital that had been stored in Kansas since 1959. An Air Force medical officer, when he saw the antique 1950s x-ray machine being unloaded, said "Stop. This machine is dangerous. It hasn't been maintained and was probably unsafe to begin with. We can't give it to them." So we threw it back on the plane, but all the other medical supplies and basic equipment was readily accepted for use at the Monte Café clinic.

The USS Harlan County visited STP in the summer of 1989. I was the only American from Embassy Libreville present in STP for the ship visit. The ship had a crew of about 250 and carried tons of material for civic action projects. I organized joint civic action projects in which sailors and São Toméans would paint schools, refurbish hospitals, hold coaching clinics, and the like. But what most impressed the MLSTP officials was a mock amphibious assault demonstration. The USS Harlan County was an LST (Landing Ship, Tank) and carried four armored amphibious assault vehicles. The Navy launched two of these behemoths off the end of the Harlan County. They drove off and dropped straight into the ocean, disappearing beneath the waves. Eight seconds later, they popped up and

churned onto the beach. The minister of defense had never seen anything like this, and was impressed by the U.S. Navy's capabilities and openness. I think the ship visit helped form a favorable opinion of the U.S. among the somewhat wary MLSTP elite.

In early 1988, shortly before I arrived at Embassy Libreville, STP experienced an abortive invasion by a group of exiles. Some 46 São Toméans and one Honduran -- I don't know why he was involved -- sailed in a fishing boat from Cameroon and disembarked in São Tomé on a lazy Sunday afternoon. Their aim was to overthrow the government. The invaders were armed with political pamphlets, a couple of machetes, and rabbits' feet. Their leader claimed that the rabbits' feet, when rubbed, would make the men invisible to the São Toméan authorities. The exiles landed right in the capital and saw a policeman walking down the sidewalk sporting a holster and revolver. Thinking they were invisible, they crept up behind the policeman, reached around, and tried to grab his pistol. Of course, he saw them, wrestled around a bit, pulled out his revolver, and shot one of them dead. The rest took off for the hills. I think one other invader was eventually killed, but all the rest were captured.

I wasn't on the island when this happened, but Ambassador Clark and I went over shortly thereafter to look into this bizarre development and to determine why a Honduran was involved. Near a small-town police station we saw a display of the mug shots and names of all 47 invaders. Ambassador Clark had a fancy camera and began to take close-up pictures of each of the mug shots in hopes of identifying the group, motives, backers, etc.

A local policeman saw us, hustled over, and said, "Halt. What you're doing is illegal. Give me your camera."

Ambassador Clark pulled out his business card and said, "I'm the American Ambassador."

The ambassador wouldn't give the policeman his camera and a crowd began to form to watch the standoff. Eventually more police arrived and Ambassador Clark had to surrender his film. We were worried because the police were quite agitated. When we got back to the capital, we received a note summoning us to the foreign ministry at 5:00 that afternoon. Ambassador Clark was fretting and said, "I could be PNGed (made persona-non-grata). This could be the end of my ambassadorship." He was quite nervous.

Another U.S. government employee who was with us said, "Ron, you're about the same size as Ambassador Clark. Why don't we tell the foreign minister that it was you who took the pictures and that the policeman was mistaken?"

As the most junior person involved in this, I agreed, but began to wonder if São Tomé had signed the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. If not, perhaps I didn't have diplomatic immunity and could end up in a São Toméan prison. At 5:00, we dutifully walked over to the foreign minister's office as instructed and had a very cordial discussion unrelated to the exile invasion or illegal photography. It never came up. As we

were leaving, the foreign minister stopped and reached into his desk, saying, “Oh, Ambassador Clark, here’s your film. Sorry about all that.” And we walked out.

Q: Ah!

McMULLEN: I had been sweating bullets through this whole thing.

Q: (laughs)

McMULLEN: The foreign minister handled the situation very diplomatically. We never were able to determine much about this quixotic, rabbit-foot toting exile invasion force.

During my time at Embassy Libreville there was only one way to fly from Gabon to São Tomé. I flew 20 times on Equatorial International Airlines, STP’s national flag carrier that operated a twin-propeller Fokker between São Tomé and Libreville. One of the pilots was a young Libyan and the other was an African. The plane had previously been the Nigerian presidential aircraft. During the Biafra civil war, the Portuguese flew arms and supplies to the Biafran secessionists from São Tomé. When STP became independent, Nigeria wanted to start off on good terms, so it donated the old Nigerian presidential aircraft as sort of a birthday present. The Nigerians didn’t include the flight logs or any of the aircraft’s manuals, so the São Toméans had no idea how long it had since the last oil change, etc. Somehow they managed to fly it to Libreville and back twice a week. Every time I left for São Tomé, I kissed my wife goodbye and hoped that I’d see her again. Thankfully, we never had any aircraft problems.

Q: Well, were the Libyans messing around there? They were doing it in a lot of places?

McMULLEN: Other than providing a pilot for the national airline, we were unaware of any other Libyan involvement in STP. As mentioned, we thought there was a Soviet radar base on Sao Tome, and we wondered about the contingent of troops from Marxists Angola. We were also concerned about apartheid South Africa. There was a small South African presence headed by a businessman named Chris Hellinger, who I encountered again when serving in Cape Town years later. Hellinger built a deep-sea fishing resort, Bom Bom, on the northern tip of Príncipe. He was also interested in volcanic-source oil, and was flying people in and out all the time. We were suspicious about efforts to circumvent sanctions on apartheid South Africa. It turned out to be pretty innocuous, nothing of a nefarious nature at all.

Because STP’s economy had ground to a halt, and with communism imploding in Europe, the Marxist MLSTP decided to hold a national political conference to discuss legalizing multi-party democracy. I was able to attend. The party conference was very raucous, but the MLSTP membership eventually agreed to give up their monopoly on power. In following years, STP has held contested elections won by several different parties and has become a fledgling democracy.

To see Gabon and STP, both one-party states, move toward multi-party democracy was encouraging. I wasn't in Beijing to see Tiananmen Square, I wasn't in Berlin to see the Wall come down, and I wasn't in Romania to witness Ceausescu's overthrow. But the democratization wave of 1989 was a worldwide event, even affecting places as isolated as Gabon and São Tomé and Príncipe. I was pleased to have attended national political conferences in both countries that opened the door to democratic change. São Tomé has made real progress in this area, but Gabon still has a ways to go.

Q: Well, had we ever had an embassy there?

McMULLEN: Nope. Because of our efforts, particularly those of Ambassador Wauchope, there was a Peace Corps program in STP and Voice of America runs a relay station there. We have quite good relations with São Tomé, but the policy of the Bureau of African Affairs is to have embassies only in mainland African countries with some exceptions. So there's no --

Q: Cape Verde.

McMULLEN: Cape Verde, Madagascar, and Mauritius are the exceptions. But we don't have an embassy in the Comoros, the Seychelles, or in São Tomé. We cover them from nearby embassies and that's probably appropriate. I mean São Tomé has less than 200,000 people and 372 square miles. It's really a dinky place. To build a secure embassy there would be very expensive and our modest interests are well-covered from Embassy Libreville.

I completed my tour at Embassy Libreville in June of 1990. Jane and I thought it might be my final Foreign Service assignment. Early in our marriage we considered doing three overseas tours and then leaving the Foreign Service to look for teaching jobs at liberal arts colleges in the Midwest. After Santo Domingo, Colombo, and Libreville, we thought, "Time for a career change?" I enjoyed the job and the lifestyle and was keen to stay in. Jane enjoyed it as well. Looking at the bid list for post-Gabon jobs, I said, "Well, here's a detail assignment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. I'd still be in the Foreign Service and yet I'd be teaching. It might be a good segue from the Foreign Service to academia." Jane agreed, so I bid on the West Point job, got it, and in the summer of 1990 Jane, Owen, and I moved from Gabon to the Hudson Valley of New York to begin my assignment at the U.S. Military Academy.

KEITH L. WAUCHOPE
Ambassador
Gabon (1989-1992)

Ambassador Wauchope was born and raised in New York, graduated from Johns Hopkins University and, after a tour in the US Army in Vietnam, in 1966 joined the Foreign Service. His specialty being African affairs, Mr.

Wauchope served in a number of African posts, including Ft. Lamy, Asmara, Bamako and Monrovia. In 1989 he was appointed Ambassador to Gabon, where he served from 1989-1992. In his several Washington assignments Ambassador Wauchope dealt with personnel, cultural, Latin American affairs and Sudan affairs.

Q: Today is the 4th of October, 2002. Keith, let's start, how did you get assigned to Gabon, or appointed to Gabon?

WAUCHOPE: I was interested in an ambassadorial appointment, and the folks in the AF Bureau, colleagues and friends, said that they would pursue a mission for me. I was considered for the Central African Republic. And at one stage for Mauritius, and the latter had a certain appeal for me. While it was not an area that I knew, and I thought it would be an opportunity to experience a different part of Africa. At the last minute the first Bush administration put forward a woman named Penny Korth for Mauritius. Her nomination revolved around whether her husband, a lawyer, would be able to find gainful employment. Apparently he could and that job fell through. Then they pressed me for the CAR and I was concerned in particular that my older son who was nine years old at that time would be disadvantaged because there was no English language school. I interjected that concern into the system and the system apparently didn't like it. Even people who knew me well and who were favorably disposed toward me, took some offense that I would turn down an offer of an ambassadorial mission. Nonetheless, Jim Bishop weighed in on my half, and they took another look. Gabon opened up at that point and there was an English-language school the oil companies. There were six American oil companies operating in Gabon. I was put forward as the Department's candidate. My nomination went to the White House and passed through that process. We left Liberia in the latter part of July and returned to the States in anticipation that the appointment would come through. As happens with many of these appointments, it got caught up in other legislative activities, and it became a question of whether I was going to get my hearing before the Christmas recess. Fortunately, there was a small envelope of time, which permitted them to schedule my hearing. The Department ran six candidates through at one time. I went up to the Hill, and there were only two senators present at the hearing. One of the other nominees was Smith Hempstone who was going to Kenya. Senator Sarbanes was leading the questioning. He went from one of us to the other. His principal question that he asked each of us was, "How come you were nominated to be ambassador to so and so?" So, when they came to Smith Hempstone, he said, "Well, I was at a cocktail party with the then Vice President Bush and I said to him, 'If you become President of the United States, as I expect you will, I hope you will appoint me to be ambassador to Kenya.'" He told it right the way it was. This approach pretty much disarmed the senator. My questioning was relatively gentle, and I was pretty well prepared and informed. The senators were also concerned about nominee's ability to speak the language. I said that I had a full working ability in French, and that seemed to assuage them. In any event, the confirmation process dragged on, and we didn't arrive in Gabon until early November, by which time there was already some political agitation in the country.

Q: This was in November of '89?

WAUCHOPE: November of '89, correct. There was a developing situation, which became quite extraordinary for Gabon over time. Before I get into that, perhaps I'll talk a bit about Gabon and our interest and our relations with Gabon. What is most striking about Gabon is that it's probably the most French-oriented former French colony in Africa. This residual French influence was really is extraordinary. The French are installed in command positions in the military, in the police, in the intelligence services. They run the power and water plants. They have advisors, "consignee technique," French government employees in every ministry of government. The result is that they simply make sure that the ministry works for the benefit of the French. In addition, there were some 35,000 French nationals in Gabon. At that time, the French population was increasing during that time rather than declining as elsewhere in Africa, and this was 30 years after independence. Historically France had a played very active role in Gabon. In the post-independence period, in 1964, there was a coup which unseated Leon Mba. His opponents took over the presidential palace and detained Mba. French paratroopers put him back in power citing the mutual defense treaty.. The French made it clear they weren't going to tolerate a leader that they did not control. The French were concerned about their oil revenues from the very substantial operation of ELF, which in that country is known as ELF Gabon. There were French-owned uranium and manganese mines as well. They also had a very active timber industry. These were very lucrative activities and they were not going to have them jeopardized by untried people that they didn't know. Mba was their man. The he got cancer and died in 1967. When Mba demise was inevitable the French began to groom his successor, Omar Bongo, a former sergeant in the French army. The French knew Bongo reasonably well and he was essentially anointed by the French to become the president. He's been the president ever since and is to this day, but from my perspective, it wasn't a bad choice. Bongo is from the Bateke group, from the southeastern part of the country. It probably has less than one percent of the population, and the larger part of his tribe were over in the Congo Brazzaville. As a result he didn't bring with him any of the animosities that the tribal divisions cause. The dominant tribe, the largest single group, was the Fang, who are about 38% of the population. If the Fang controlled the government, there would have been a intense resentment by the minority tribes in the middle and southern part of the country. In many ways Bongo was an ideal candidate from that perspective. Before my departure for Libreville I spoke with for of my predecessors about Gabon. They all said that Bongo was "the only game in town;" the power source of the whole government. They were absolutely correct. When you visit the Presidential Palace when Bongo is in town, people are scurrying around with dossiers under their arms, everybody's alert and active. When Bongo is out of the country or out of the city, people are literally asleep at their desks, and everything seems to come to a halt. Bongo is a very bright, street-smart leader. He long ago learned that Gabon's petroleum the resources, some 300,000+ barrels a day, are the primary source of his leverage on the world stage. Although Gabon is one of the smallest members of the OPEC, Bongo still has the money to co-opt his opponents. If they get out of hand or become obstreperous, his first inclination is to try to buy them off. He will either appoint them to posts overseas or he'll just give them a sum of money to keep them quiet. That approach had worked for many, many years.

By 1989 this approach was beginning to wear a bit thin. The pressure for greater political, which was going on throughout Africa to a certain extent at that time, emerged in Gabon in the classic manner. Agitation started at the university over the deteriorating campus and the students' inability to petition the government for redress. The urge toward democratic reform was a process that, in part reflected what was happening in the USSR and in Eastern Europe. How this movement infected the Gabonese body politic was exceptional. Bongo is something of a techno-freak. One thing that his money had bought him was a nationwide satellite television service installed by Scientific Atlanta. There was live, direct satellite television broadcast to all the nine regional capitals. They received live feeds from all over the world. One of these feeds in the latter part of November was the overthrow of Ceausescu in Romania. You may recall that Ceausescu was first challenged when a support rally he had organized turned against him. He came out on the balcony and everything and raises his hand expecting the crowds' adulation and instead of the cheers, he gets boos. He was flabbergasted, and quickly withdrew from the balcony. He immediately faced major strikes and demonstrations. He was then deposed and executed within a matter of weeks.

The Gabonese looked at these events and saw an extraordinary irony in that Ceausescu had been in power about the same period of time that Bongo had been in power, some 23 years. They thought to themselves, if the people in a police state like Romania can overthrow their ruler, why couldn't they do the same. By contrast to Ceausescu, Bongo was a relatively benign ruler. Why did they have to put up with a single party government? It really did inspire them to test the system. As I say, they decided that this was a time to challenge Bongo's hold on the country.

Shortly after I arrived this issue was becoming acute. Bongo kept saying, it's okay, we can work it out, we can accommodate all these different perspectives and points of view without having to revert to violence or street demonstrations. This approach worked for a while, then the university students defied him, and he closed the university. The university students then went to the lycée students, the elite schools from where most of them had graduated. They persuaded those students to walk out and go on strike. They shut the lycées down and went out into the streets. Then the kids from other secondary schools, even primary schools were out on the streets as well. The ambassador's residence at that time, as it had been since the time since we opened our Embassy in Gabon, was located above what was called the Carrefour de Rio. It was like the peoples' area. It had been developed first as a squatter area, now it was a commercial residential neighborhood. The main street below our residence was the primary route out of the capital into the interior of the country. These students and local kids, unleashed from school, installed themselves on the hillside just below us. They looted first a soft drink truck, then a beer truck, which was worse. They started throwing bottles of soda and beer at passing cars and trucks which had to run a gauntlet. From a kid's perspective, this was the greatest possible sport. We were observing this from up above them. We could see this whole process evolve. For a high school kid you can't imagine a more enjoyable time, especially seeing these cars weaving around below them dodging the bottles they were hurling down. Of course, they were taking a swig of beer from time to time.

Bongo was apparently stunned. He'd run a very efficient and tranquil regime for 23 years and he'd never really been challenged, certainly not by widespread street demonstrations.. At first he sent the police out to restore order. The police looked at the numbers of people on the streets, and realized that they could not handle this crowd, so they backed off and monitored the situation. This emboldened the rioters. During the daylight hours, they were mostly these high school students. They started getting rougher stopping car and sometimes dragging out the drivers and beat them or chase them off. Then they'd set the cars on fire. That became a more serious proposition. That first night was when events began to get out of control. They set fire to trucks that had been parked or that were stopped by the rioters. There were three trucks down below the residence that they set on fire. They burned all night long. At night he rioters were no longer high school students, but rather the indigent and underclasses who wanted to take advantage of the turmoil, especially because the police were not intervening. Bongo had mobilized the gendarmes as well, but they also kept their distance. We followed events from the residence on the hill above the crossroads and could see both the rioters and the police. Libreville is a very sophisticated town. There were mercury vapor lamps along the roads, and everything was still functioning. You could see the police massed on the far hill and all these vehicles burning below us. The rioters then started looting stores across the street from us. The first shops looted belonged to foreigners, Senegalese and Guineans. They were a small merchants and tailors. This attack on other Africans reflected the fact that Gabon, a country that claims a population of about 1.2 million people, in reality has probably no more than 600,000 to 800,000 Gabonese and the rest are other Africans who came to Gabon for the high wages. They kept the country going. Nonetheless, they were resented by the Gabonese who claimed that they took jobs away from the Gabonese, and as merchants, they became the creditors. So this unsettled time gave the Gabonese a chance to strike back against the foreign Africans.

The rioting that first night came to an end when a hardware store just down the street from us was set on fire. The fire ignited paint and turpentine, and the flames rose three stories into the air. Finally, the gendarmes and the fire department moved in before the entire neighborhood was destroyed. They brought the fire under control. It didn't pose a real threat for our compound as we had over seven acres, plenty of buffer between ourselves and the fire. The rioters had no animus toward the Americans. They knew that the Americans were there on the hill. I said to our the household staff and the family, let's not show too much interest in these events, just be discreet about our interest in it. I was radioing information in to the marine guard at the embassy and the security officer. Most of the activity that night was in our area. The first night wound down after the fire was extinguished. The next morning, it seemed to quiet down, and the military were out in force patrolling the roads. I went to work, and my older boy was at the American school, and my younger boy was in daycare. My wife went down town to do some chores. The trouble started again in the early afternoon. It really began to get out of control, so they closed the American School. My son was brought to the embassy and my wife had already picked up the little boy and took him home. She returned down town to bring home the older boy. The three of us were all at the Embassy, and the rioting was spreading. We waited as long as we could, but as the Libreville is just north of the

equator, the sun sets at 6:20 and its completely dark. The movement would be impossible. At about 5:00 we decided we had to choose what to do. We didn't want to spend the night at the Embassy because our younger son was home with the nanny, and we certainly didn't want to make the trip at night. Our RSO kept saying. . .

Q: RSO is Regional Security Officer?

WAUCHOPE: Right, she was a former DC police officer.. She said, "Well, if you have to get back there, you take the lightly armored vehicle." The ambassador's vehicle had bullet-proof windows. It was a big Impala with a bomb proof on the bottom. She said, "Here take my pistol." I said, "What am I going to do with a pistol? Who am I going to shoot for God's sake? I'm not going to take any pistol." I told her that security of the American diplomats is the responsibility of the government of Gabon. She was to call them through her contacts and tell them that I have to return to my residence and I need whatever they consider to be an appropriate escort. Sure enough at about 5:30 the gendarmes showed up with an armored car and a van with wire covered windows. They said they'd get us back home.

Q: You were saying the streets were either quiet or?

WAUCHOPE: Well, there were groups of rioters looking for trouble, and there were tires burning in the streets. We headed out in the direction of the residence and then we detoured. The next thing I know we're up at the headquarters of what was known as securitie mobile, the elite mobile security unit. I was surprised because I didn't see any French advisors. There was a Gabonese lieutenant colonel who said I should not drive to the residence in our own vehicle. Saying the vehicle will get all banged up. They persuaded me to leave the vehicle there and to drive in his vehicles that are designed for riots. At this point I was thinking that historically Gabonese had never faced a challenge to its security to this extent. If I threw my lot in with the security forces, am I not seeming to be taking sides with Bongo. At the same time, of course, I've got my family with me. This was a time that the family had to come first. I did want to get back to the house. My two year old son was at home and he wouldn't be able to understand that his mom wasn't there. So, I grilled this colonel to be sure he knew exactly where I lived. I made him pinpoint on a map where I lived. I then asked him to tell me what was going on there. He said, "Well, it's not unlike it was last night. There are rioters all over that area. They're looting the stores and our gendarmes are drawn up on this hill on the opposite side of the road, but we will come in an adequate force if necessary, to make sure that they don't harm you." I figured that at least the guy knows what he's talking about, and he did have radio communication with these vehicles. We were put in the van with the wire over the windows following a French-made six wheeled armored car. The troops were standing in the hatches with their rifles. We went down from the hill and around what we called the beltway west of the city and exited near the residence. We came off at the interchange and at the top and you're in the commercial area across from the residence. Everything had gone reasonably well to that point. There had been some burning tires along the beltway, but when we came up the ramp and it was like Dante's Inferno. There were fires everywhere. There were buildings on fire and tires burning in the street. There were

rioters by the hundreds if not thousands, and they were now looting the Lebanese stores. It was one thing to steal from the Senegalese, but the Lebanese had the real good stuff. They were smashing in the steel doors were trying to get into their stores. As, we came roaring up the exit ramp the armored car in the lead the rioters were startled and scattered immediately. But as we came out onto the street, there was a burning obstruction in the road, a combination of burning tires and junk. The armored car stopped and the driver tried to figure out how to proceed. The gendarmes had the good sense not to fire risking creating martyrs. When the rioter realized there was only one armored car and a small van in our convoy, they quickly regained their courage and moved forward stoning our vehicles. The troops in the armored car buttoned it up, closed the hatches. The stones were hitting our vehicle and it was getting a bit dicey. The officer in command in our vehicle radioed to the armored car, "Just push that junk out of the way, for God's sake." The armored car backed up and then hit the gas and banged through the barricade with us following close behind. He then charged up toward our driveway. Our driveway ran parallel to the road and was a fairly steep incline. When we roared ahead, I was afraid they'd run over somebody, and we'd have a martyr. The Americans would then be implicated in killing some hapless rioter. When the armored car got to our gate, my guards wouldn't let it in. There was an obvious screw up as our staff had been told about our plans. There was a brief brouhaha about that, while the rioters began to pull in behind us. Finally the gates opened and we rushed in. I thanked all the gendarmes when we got to the house, and they immediately turned around and headed back out. They plowed through the crowd without incident, but did nothing about the ongoing looting. I guess the Gabonese thought that, as for the Lebanese, you pay your money and you take your chances, and that's the way it goes. The rioters thoroughly looted all the stores and took everything they could carry off.

This situation continued for a third day and by which time Bongo had obviously realized that he had to deal with the new reality. As I say, he is a very street-smart fellow. First he let the mob satiate itself over a period of time and work out its frustrations, all the while exhausting itself in the effort. Finally on the third day he brought in his military in unparallel force. That opened the streets and drove the rioters into cover. He established a curfew and brought order back in the capital. At this same time there were problems down in Port Gentile, which is the economic heartland of Gabon. At the center of the oil industry with its large port for the export of oil, especially for the onshore oil. The French have a very substantial presence there. By contrast, ours was modest, but also in the oil sector. The French of course were the dominant presence. Ironically, Gabon was the mirror image of what we were in Liberia. They were the absolute end all and be all in power and influence in Gabon. We used to say the number one man in Gabon was Bongo, and the number two man was the French ambassador, closely followed the Elf Gabon representative who had vast amounts on the money to throw around. With their network in the ministries, the Presidency and the security forces, they knew virtually everything there was to know in Gabon.

We knew that the French technicians had bugged all our phones. When I say the French, I mean the French who worked for Bongo. He had hired former intelligence people at the suggestion of the French government, and he had an extraordinary effective and well

financed intelligence network as a result. They knew everything that was going on in the diplomatic community at least that went over the public lines. The French ambassador was sort of a potentate in his own little empire there. Prior to the riots, he had been proper in his dealings with me, but somewhat distant. When the French were in trouble in Port Gentil, and it became apparent that the French were going to have to intervene, my status rose sharply. The French had 600 paratroopers in Libreville, as they have to this day. They also have a small air transport unit there. The question was long range transport. Out of the blue the French ambassador calls and asks if he could come by to see me. Now, this is almost unprecedented. If there were any contact with the French Embassy, the American ambassador would always ask to see the French ambassador and go to the French embassy. He began his conversation with, "We have a common problem here." I thought to myself, well, yes, I've got about 350 to 450 Americans, and you have 35,000 French. "Our common problem" was not an issue of the numbers, but the threat. He said that "we" may need American air transport capability to get our nationals out if the situation deteriorates further. I promised to let Washington know and to see what they could do for you. He did send about 100 paratroopers to Port Gentil to protect his citizens and their interests. They quickly freed the French Consul who had been forcefully taken from his office which was then burned. They threw a cordon up around European housing and gathered together the French citizens, in particular. I was in contact with the American representatives there as well. I asked about their situation and about their plans. There were about 50 Americans in Port Gentil. They said they had talked to the French authorities there and were told that the priority for evacuation would be the French first, then the British, because Shell was there, and then the Americans third. These guys were from Texas and they weren't going to be third in anything. If it comes down to evacuation, they would get themselves out, thank you very much. And they did. They arranged for one of the oil service boats that they used to supply their offshore rigs, loaded all the Americans aboard and took them over to Sao Tome and out of harms way.

It turned out that, with the French paratroopers in place, the looting and destruction wasn't too bad. The French were so closely tied to Bongo that the rioters felt that they were getting back at Bongo by going after the French, whereas the Americans were not viewed as being implicated in this whole exploitation process. As the Port Gentil situation subsided, Bongo had to figure out how to deal with the overall situation. He acknowledges that there clearly were going to have to be some changes made. His first approach was to say that the single party can accommodate different positions within its ranks of the party, the Parti Democratique de Gabon. He took the position that he could manage this challenge to his authority. The response of the people and his opposition was unenthusiastic. They demanded a multiparty system. He resisted and resisted, proposing several alternatives along the same line. As the agitation continued in the form of demonstrations, strikes and boycotts, he decided that he had to go a step beyond. So, he agreed to permit said, okay, here's the deal, any three people can form a party. They've got to get another 500 signatures or something like that and they've got to have a charter and they've got to make a statement. They can form their own political parties. This was unprecedented in Bongo's era. His opponents, tasting victory over Bongo, immediately started to organize. They organized a bunch of friends and obtain the 150 names needed for a petition and raised the nominal amount of money to establish a party. In a matter of

weeks seventy-three new parties were formed. Obviously this was part of Bongo's plan, to fragment the opposition thereby making it impotent by setting the diverse groups against one another. On top of this ploy, Bongo pulled off perhaps the greatest coup of this exercise. He offered 10 million CFA, worth approximately \$75,000. to each party that met the criteria to be certified. The money was supposed to fund their campaigns. Of course, they all greedily sucked up the money. Among the 73 parties that qualified, there were all manner of minority elements represented.. There was one called the Party of God. Bongo's supporter gave great play to the fact that this group alleged that it represented God. There were several other bizarre fringe groups. There were a significant number of groups that represented ethnic or tribal elements. Bongo knew that would happen, and that they would fight among themselves for power. In any event, he gave the parties the money, and a number of them immediately went out and splurged on material things they craved. For example, the party leaders started remodeling their homes, they bought themselves a big SUV and expensive gear. Bongo continued to control the media, the television, radio and the newspapers. On instructions, they sent out their investigative reporters to find out how this money was spent. The reporters took pictures and wrote stories about how the recipients used the money Bongo had given them to campaign. These exposes played into Bongo's hands and he said to the public, "They accuse me of mispending the nation's resources. Look at this. I gave these people money to run a campaign and they went out and bought cars and rebuilt their houses." So, he is able to turn this corruption issue back onto his opponents. While this proved a good ploy, they had plenty to attack in Bongo's tenure, and there was a good deal of conflict at all levels. Bongo and his party hung together because they had a vested interest in keeping things the way they were. In early 1990, Bongo did agree that there would be legislative elections in the fall of that year allowing these people an adequate time to get themselves in trouble and into conflict with one another, which they inevitably did. He at least brought the disorder under control. The kids returned to school, the university was eventually reopened. The university's opening and closing was of great concern to us because we had two Fulbright scholars there. These problems disrupted our program not only for the people at the university, but whether we should bother to bring another scholar out next academic year. We had close ties with people at the university as well.

This is a good point to talk about what our interests were in Gabon. The principal one was to support the American interests in the oil sector. Again, Gabon produced 300,000 barrels a day, not an overwhelming amount, but there were those who believed that there was a substantially larger amount of oil both onshore and most particularly offshore. The big producing field onshore was the Rabi Kounga field that produced about 170,000 barrels a day. This was a pretty good size; it had been the largest onshore find in the preceding five years. The sense was that there probably was more oil nearby that field. The leases for the surrounding areas were coming up for sale in '91, and the American companies were trying to position themselves to compete for those leases. Of course Elf Gabon had been in Gabon since before the Second World War. It had greatly expanded its operations in the postwar period. Elf was the dominant power, by far in the local oil sector. In point of fact, Elf's role in Gabon is still a hot issue. I saw a piece on the Internet about ELF and French officials continuing to be investigated for payoffs.

Q: Very much so.

WAUCHOPE: It's been going on at least since the early '90s.

Q: Including a lady, the mistress of the republic I think she wrote a book about her use of her prominent attributes in order to advance the cost of oil.

WAUCHOPE: There you go. Well, they advanced it very well. Elf obtained preferential contracts with the government again and again. It owned the Rabi Kounga field with Shell. Shell was the operator of that field, but Elf had both onshore and offshore operations. They controlled the oil terminal and the shipping and the storage. The Elf Gabon head man, Mr. Chabet was a no nonsense fellow and a very powerful and influential player in Gabon because he had a lot of money to spread around. Elf's largesse was possible because it was paying the Gabonese about \$2.70 a barrel for the oil in the ground. That was the lowest in the world except for Congo Brazzaville, which was about \$2.50/ barrel. In any event, with that spread between what Elf was paying and what oil was selling for, they had a tremendous amount of money to spread about. An example was the hospital in Port Gentil. The government lamented that there was no proper medical facility there, and Elf stepped forward and build the hospital and then presented it to Gabon as a token of its generosity.

I developed a fairly close relationship with President Bongo's son, Ali Bongo. For a year or so he was the foreign minister until the court found that constitutionally he was too young to serve as minister. He had to step down in favor of his older sister. Ali Bongo had been to the States, and he was a pretty savvy guy. Even after he had stepped down we would have long conversations at the Presidential Palace lasting as much as two hours. I knew he was a reliable conduit to the president, and we had a good rapport. On Elf's "generosity" I said, "Why do you think Elf is building hospitals in Gabon? If the Americans are involved in your oil sector here, they're not going to build you hospitals, but they'll pay you a market price for a barrel of oil, and you can build your own hospital, if you want to. Elf is building a hospital and taking credit for it. But you know what this is all about, don't you?" He said, "Yes, well, you know I guess that's right." Of course the Gabonese had been so accustomed to Elf providing them these benefits from Elf that many thought of it as being out of the goodness of Elf's heart. It was because Elf received such an incredible margin on their oil in Gabon.

In any event, U.S. firms were competing for Gabon's oil reserves. There were six American oil companies present in Gabon. Conoco was the biggest in terms of personnel and range of activities. It was exploring in three different areas. Exxon had partnership arrangements, but no active operations. Arco was drilling test wells offshore in the southwest coast. I visited one of its test wells which was then at 13,000 feet in some 2000 feet of water. Drilling at this depth reflected the cutting edge of offshore technology Sun Oil had a joint operating agreements and interest in exploration with other companies. Mobil actually had a production operation offshore of 15,000 barrels a day. Hess was a story unto itself. Hess is mostly a gasoline refiner and seller in the United States. Leon Hess, the CEO, apparently decided that Hess Oil should get into the production business.

So, Hess sent out a representative who was a Haitian American, who was really sharp and very aggressive. He analyzed the overall oil situation and obtained extensive technical information. God knows how he did it; that was not mine to know. He learned that the Rabi Kounga field probably had a lot more oil reserves than Elf was willing to acknowledge. Hess estimated that this field had some 800 million barrels vs the 350 million that Elf/Shell said publicly. Also the technology being used was not the most modern and that there were ways in which they could get a good deal more out of this field if they exploited it more effectively with modern technology. He set up a company, Hess Gabon, and he appointed the president's daughter, who also happened to be the foreign minister, to the board of directors. He selected several other well-connected Gabonese leaders for his board. He learned that there was a 15% share of this field that was not owned by either Elf or Shell the ownership of which was vague. He researched this surreptitiously and found out that this 15% was split 10% to the Bongo family, and the remaining 5% was owned by Bongo himself, both under various levels of corporate cover. These were a form of operating slush fund. Once he learned this, he explored how to make an approach to buy the 10% share. He probably worked through Bongo family members. Having obtained approval from Hess U.S., he offered \$7.50 a barrel in the ground for this 10%.. This is almost three times what Gabon had been paid by Elf. This came to \$300 million. Immediately Elf Gabon found out about the offer because everybody's phone is bugged and they had their informants everywhere. Hess was offering President Bongo, who was in the midst of this political turmoil and facing legislative elections that fall, a \$300 million check right now, cash on the barrel head. This \$300 million looked awfully appealing to him at that moment. Bongo is clever enough to temporize to see how Elf would react. The Elf representative and I believe the French ambassador intervened, but their message was confused. Elf took the line the Americans could not possibly pay this amount as it was way overvaluing the field. The Ambassador's line was more like, this would be a blow to the special relationship that Gabon has with France. . But the \$300 million was just too good for Bongo to pass up. Leon Hess, in person, came out with the \$300 million check, and the deal was signed before the TV cameras in a ceremony at the presidential palace. The \$300 million check is passed to Bongo. We were all there for the signing event and the later reception. This was good stuff; Americans 1 French 0. But, of course, there was a lot more to this deal.

Among other repercussions, this coup resulted in the Elf representative being canned. Actually he was recalled to Paris and kicked upstairs to a job in charge of cultural and educational affairs for Elf Aquitaine. He was held accountable for not being aware of the deal in advance, and not being much firmer with the Gabonese in keeping the Americans out. Before he left the country, however, he invited the Hess representative to a dinner party with some French colleagues. Nothing but the finest food and wines were flown in from France. He laid on a beautiful dinner, at the end of which, the guests went for cigars and brandy. The Elf rep asked the Hess rep to come into his private office in the house. He said to him, "You know you have had great success in a very short period of time. That must be pretty heady stuff for you. But you know, you really have to watch out if you're move too fast in this country. Things can happen." There could be no linguistic misunderstanding because the Hess rep was a Haitian fluent in French. The Hess rep jumped up out of his chair and he said, "Are you threatening me? Is this like a mafia

thing? Are you threatening my life?" The Elf rep immediately backed off and the subject was dropped.

Q: This was, who was talking to him?

WAUCHOPE: The Elf representative is talking to the Hess representative. He claimed he did not mean his statement as a threat. Ironically and probably not connected to this obvious threat, about six months later the Hess rep was in Miami and was hit by a car and very seriously injured. It broke both his legs. Now, whether it was a connection one may never know. But the next phase of the Elf effort against Hess was not to permit Hess Gabon reps sit in on board meetings of the joint venture. They refused him to allow to attend the board of directors meetings. He went to the president and he asked, "What is this nonsense? I bought 10% of this field I'm entitled to participate." Elf's position was that Hess was not a significant player. Bongo overrode Elf and Hess did attend meetings. What Hess had done was to analyze the data that they could get their hands on and established that the Rabi Kounga field probably had 800 million barrels rather than 350 million barrels Elf and Shell had claimed. Two and a half times or more than what it was originally thought. By using horizontal drilling technology, Hess knew how to do, it figured they could get a lot of more oil out. So, \$7.50 a barrel didn't seem like it was all that crazy. As it turned out, in order to protect itself even further, Elf immediately bought up the remaining 5% that Bongo owned for \$7.50 a barrel as well, despite having told the Bongo family this was an insane figure that had no basis for reality. Hess had had great success and they began to move people to Gabon in significant numbers. Having gotten into one of the existing fields, they were thinking of trying to invest in other potential fields.

Gabon's geological structure is such that there is thought to be more onshore oil and even more significant amounts offshore, but the latter required drilling at extended depths, through the sloping continental shelf. Along the coast in Congo and Angola there is a tremendous amount of offshore oil. They have since found a substantial amount of oil in Equatorial Guinea as well and apparently in waters between Nigeria and Sao Tome. I'll talk a little bit about Sao Tome later, as I was also accredited as ambassador in Sao Tome, as well.

In any event, the jockeying for position over oil continued, and it was my job to try to persuade the Gabonese that, when future oil leases became available for bidding, they should give the Americans a level playing field. The U.S. was not promising anything under the table, or any hospitals or any sweetheart deals. I said Americans would give them the best price for their oil, and would import world class technology to exploit it. The contracts would be open and above board, and Gabon will benefit and our companies will generate employment and revenue. That was my line. I remember returning from an ambassadorial conference in Washington where Secretary Baker gave us a long spiel about promoting American business. This is what I spend most of my time doing for the American oil companies. I spent an awful lot of time and effort to support these firms. I used to meet with the oil reps, all six-company reps about once a month. We'd have a sundowner, where we would talk about the security environment and the situation in the

oil sector. It's may have been against the law regarding collusion in the restraint of trade but it could always be justified based on our concern about the security of their people, and an on operational problems such getting their offshore workers in and out of the country. In any event, my team and I continued to press the government to ensure us a level playing field, and I would keep them informed on what the embassy was trying to do on their behalf.

I'll talk about how this situation played out, but I have to go back chronologically to explain. In the fall of 1990, Gabon was preparing for parliamentary elections, and then the Iraqis invaded Kuwait. Our focus shifted to follow instructions from the Department to pressure our host government to condemn this action and to call for the Iraqis to withdraw from Kuwait. I went to the government and made this case. They understood what we were saying, but there were two problems with our position from their perspective. One was that Omar Bongo had converted to Islam and became Omar Bongo because he wanted to curry favor with the Arab members of OPEC, and thereby increase his clout in that organization. There were several prominent Arab nations represented in Libreville as an earnest of Gabon's relation with the Arab world. So, Bongo felt that he could not be directly identify with the U.S. and the West on this issue. Second, there was the question of what happens if the efforts to get Iraq out Kuwait were not successful. Would there be retaliation against Gabon which could ill afford OPEC's animosity as it was the smallest producer in OPEC? So, there were both the religious and economic concerns. Gabon made a very tepid statements about territorial integrity in general. As the U.S. and it allies built up our force in Saudi Arabia to take back Kuwait, Gabonese officials offered warnings of disaster. Then the air war began, and while the level of criticism of the U.S. increased, Gabon responded by reprinting what other nations were saying. The Gabonese had a general ill ease at this phase of the war as we all watched the bombings on CNN. Then when we launched the ground attack and quickly knocked the Iraqis out, driving them out of Kuwait, all of a sudden everything changed. We became the heroes of the moment, and the Gabonese could not say enough favorable things about the Americans. By this time the Soviet Union was coming apart at the seams and we were the only remaining super power. Thank God, we were allies with the French who had made a respectable contribution to that effort, and they were not in a position to criticize us. It was widely acknowledged that the American military technology was head and shoulders above everybody else's. Now, all of a sudden the Gabonese were congratulating us and saying, "We were behind you all the time." They were behind us, way behind us.

Anyway, as the sole remaining super power and so recognized by early 1991 even the French were now much more responsive to our interests and concerns. As was the case globally, there was now more interested in buying American military technology, not that the Gabonese had any need for it, but their military always wanted to buy the best new toys. So, we were riding high, and I wanted to try and translate that into benefiting some of our other interests in the country. Beyond the petroleum sector our other interests were primarily in economic development and the environment. Gabon's per capita GDP was about \$4,600 well above any other Sub-Saharan African nation. So we didn't have a direct AID program, but we had about 100 Peace Corps volunteers many of whom were

involved in rural development. We were trying to persuade them to shift more of the nation's resources to the rural areas. Up until the political upheaval in 1989-90, the system had been that Bongo designated two prominent people from each of the nine provinces, to represent the interests of their provinces. They were known as the "barons" from those provinces. They were senior political figures, usually with strong family and ethnic ties to the people of those provinces. They would take up residence in the capital and they would argue the case for their province. Over time, they found life in the capital to be so good and so much better than it was in the provincial capitals that they seldom returned to their provinces. Therefore didn't know the problems of the people and lost touch. Gabon is extraordinary in another way because it received an average of 400 inches of rain a year and roads were very difficult and expensive to maintain. In the rainy season the roads washed out and road communication was cut off. To compensate, Gabon constructed a large number of air fields, something like 45 air fields, so internal air connections were good. Even at that, these barons were less and less inclined to return to the countryside. So, when Bongo was pressed for multiparty democracy, he realized that the baronial system had collapsed, that it wasn't fulfilling the role that he had intended. He peremptorily eliminated their positions and moved them either to ceremonial positions or out altogether. He did change his cabinet and brought in people who were a younger and more responsive to the changed political realities. The U.S. was trying to promote that concept and practice of democracy. What was happening in Gabon was being mirrored in other countries like Benin and Zambia, moving to multi-party systems. We wanted to promote the democratization process and I felt it was my responsibility to be in the forefront of this effort in Gabon. Working with the Country Team, we recognized that there was real change going on, and we wanted more programs to bring in Americans to talk about a free press, the democratic system and representative government. We wanted journalists, political scientists and other experts to help us promote responsible democracy.

We had these multifaceted objectives. We were interested in expanding American participation in the petroleum sector. We were promoting democracy with a government that was very suspicious of that process. Real democracy would mean breaking down a system that had worked very well for all those around Bongo, and had been for many, many, years. He had been buying domestic tranquility by paying off people handsomely since he assumed power. I would invite Gabonese involved in the democratic effort. We sponsored high profile events for our visiting experts. I would call on Gabonese ministers and other officials to discuss the evolving political liberalization. At the end of each such meeting, I would be set upon by the local television crew. The reporters always asked the same questions, and I had plenty of practice shaping our message of promoting democracy. I was on television so often that there was some jealousy from other ambassadors in Gabon. There were 44 other diplomatic missions in Libreville when I arrived which is amazing for a small nation with barely a million people. I would be on television three or four times a week because made a point of meeting with ministers to seek their views on the political process. The other Ambassadors asked why I was on TX all the time, and I'd say because I go out to meet the Gabonese leaders, and there's always a camera when I come out. Some of the other Ambassadors did arrange such meetings, but I had a decided advantage. After the Western victory against Iraq, the

American Ambassador had heightened stature and as a result, it seemed that my activities were deemed always to be newsworthy. While there was some resentment in the diplomatic community, more importantly, my efforts did arouse considerable resentment and animosity among the people around Bongo. Clearly, those who had most at risk and were the least able to function outside their relationship were my most intense critics. Since Bongo's party still controlled the press, there was a fair amount of criticism about the American ambassador. There was a political cartoon which I particularly enjoyed and which I've saved. It depicts me with my mustache as a cowboy with my guns drawn shooting in all these directions. Clearly, it's meant to be the American ambassador, but, under the circumstances, you have to expect that.

I was concerned that my efforts in support of the democratization process could work against our interests in the oil sector. That was yet to be determined, but I continued to do all that I could to support the American companies as they positioned themselves to bid on new leases that were expected to open in the second quarter of 1992. These firms were all very well represented by experienced and capable people. There was a great deal riding on the outcome of this bidding process, and the American oil reps were on the edge of their seats on how this would play out. Sure enough, in April 1992, out of the blue, the government announced that a number of tracts around the Rabi Kounga field had been granted to Elf Gabon after secret negotiation. That was the ballgame. These were the tracts that generated most interest among the American oil companies. Their reaction unfolded fairly quickly. With this insider deal, they saw that the handwriting was on the wall. Our best efforts had come to naught. The Americans could not compete with a company that is willing to make deals under the table. The arguments that I was making were the classic American arguments, but these arguments apparently said all the wrong things to the Gabonese because this approach would upset the process in which they had entrenched interests. Sure Gabon would receive more revenue, but they'd have to account for it. It would now be transparent and the transparency was never something they were that interested in.

Within a matter of weeks after Gabon's announcement, Conoco's senior vice president for operations came out to meet with the President. He alerted the head of Conoco Gabon, an old-time Texas oilman who had some 50 or 60 Americans working for him in three different exploration projects. He asked me to meet with his VP, but he had no idea what the VP's plans were at that time. When he arrived, we had a ceremonial meeting and a briefing, and then the VP went directly to see Bongo. According to the Conoco rep, he said to Bongo in just about this many words, "How much would it cost us to buy ourselves out of Gabon?" By that, he meant how much it would cost Conoco to buy itself out of its commitments. As the result of signing agreements, Conoco had certain obligations like its project to computerize the ministry of petroleum. They were training people in the United States as well as installing equipment and systems in Gabon. Bongo and his advisers thought about it, and then said \$25 million. "Done," said the VP. The \$25 million changed hands shortly thereafter, and the Americans in Gabon were told they had six weeks to shut down, pack up and leave. It was a good object lesson on how a U.S. corporation can operate, and how its employees are guaranteed nothing. Conoco said it

would try to reassign those it could, and the others would be let go. That was it; the closeout began immediately.

In the meantime, Arco, which had been drilling offshore in the southeastern part of Gabon near the Congolese border, had come up dry several times. With the announcement of Elf's success, it decided to pack out as well. Exxon in Libreville was mostly involved in both Chad and Angola. The Exxon rep was spending less and less time in Gabon and again could see where things were headed in Gabon. Hess was there for the duration and Sun, well, it had some marginal partnership operations. There position was, if anybody wanted to buy us out, we're gone. Mobil had the actual production operation, some 15,000 barrels per day offshore. Its production was declining however. Without the prospect of larger operations it didn't make economic sense to continue. Mobil went to Elf to ask if it was interested in buying Mobil. Elf did so, probably at a minimal price. So, four of the American companies just closed down. So much for the level playing field, and the promised American technology. It was a real setback. I felt very badly about this development, but you know, there are things you can do in this life, and there are things that you can't do anything about. This was one of those cases. American companies could not compete with Elf in this environment because of the constraints of the SEC rulings on bribery. This would also violate American law, the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, and American companies knew that. Their attitude was relatively philosophical. They said, Elf wins here, but we'll get them somewhere else in the oil world. And that was the way it was left. Elf was, of course, very pleased with itself, but the corruption was now very transparent. It was soon thereafter that Elf's activities involving French and foreign leaders were suspect. In 2002 Mr. Le Floch-Prigent, the head of Elf, was convicted of bribery and fraud during his tenure from 1989 to 1993, and sentenced to five years in prison. The press reported that, in addition to major bribes to all of France's leading political parties, during this time, Elf was also paying Omar Bongo some \$15-20 million annually for his cooperation. In retrospect, I realize that the American companies and I had little chance competing against such unbridled corruption

Q: François Mitterrand was the president at this time.

WAUCHOPE: Right.

Q: Had he had his sort of his own son was probably Mr. Africa, wasn't he?

WAUCHOPE: He was a key player in French policy in Africa. The press termed him Mr. Africa, but he wasn't Mr. Africa in the traditional French sense. Charles de Gaulle's henchman and fixer Jacques Foccart was the real Mr. Africa, although he would shun that title as an anathema to his low-profile style. He was thoroughly unscrupulous and he knew where all the bodies were buried. He did all the payoffs and he put the squeeze on recalcitrant African leaders and disposed of troublesome opposition figures. Young Mitterrand used to travel around to represent his dad. Of course, as the French president's son, he clearly did have the ear of the president and African leaders received him with respect. As we discussed before, competing with the French in former Francophone

Africa was virtually a no win situation for the Americans. French diplomacy in Africa has always been personal, which is to say it revolves around the relationship between the French president and the African leaders. African chiefs of states can call the president of France anytime and can expect to speak to him directly and say, "I've got a problem that needs to be addressed immediately." The president can react without any constraints from a Congress or a bureaucracy, and he usually did something for them. He doesn't have to worry about the chamber of deputies or about the French public. That's how it worked. The Americans can't compete with that approach. I know of cases where African chiefs of state tried to call the White House, and even the fantastic White House switchboard didn't seem to know who they were or what to do. The White House would pawn them off on somebody in the State Department. Chiefs of state want to talk to other chiefs of state, which is understandable. We never could compete with the French in that regard.

Q: A significant portion of the money that Elf was producing ended in the coffers of the French Socialist Party.

WAUCHOPE: True, but largely because the socialists were in power and were in a position to be helpful to Elf. Apparently, Elf favored the conservatives, but they spread their payoffs widely. I can give you some sense about how the money flowed in Gabon. Bongo divorced his wife of many years. Remarkably, we had in our files visa applications for both Bongo and his wife, including their marriage certificate. These documents were related to their daughters having studied in the United States. Mrs. Bongo was described on the French marriage certificate as a menaguese, which is a housekeeper, and he was an army sergeant. They had been husband and wife for a long time and produced at least four children, although Bongo was rumored to have sired some 50 children. By the late 1980s he decided he wanted to be rid of her. By this time, she was spending a great deal of her time in Los Angeles where she owned a big mansion. Bongo had decided, apparently for "reasons of state" to marry the daughter of Sassou Nguesso, the President of Congo Brazzaville. This decision raised all kinds of questions in Libreville: Why does he have to go outside his own country to get a wife? Was it right to divorce his first wife? Does this show that he's not really Gabonese, he's really Congolese because most of his tribal group is located in the Congo. Despite the heat, there was a big marriage ceremony. In anticipation, Bongo built her a grand mansion just outside of the Libreville beltway near the airport. A member of our embassy knew somebody who was an architect/contractor for this mansion. Bongo bought the best of everything from throughout the world. The mansion had gold bathroom fixtures and marble spa baths and indoor fountains. They installed extraordinary antique wall hangings as draperies and enormous Italian chandeliers. Bongo willingly paid for all these elaborate decorations that the designer proposed, but on the condition that he be given, one fully appointed room as a cadeau, as a gift, for free. Of course the decorators just jack up their price on everything else and gave him his "free" room. Among other features, there was a half-mile tunnel that ran from this mansion to the French military compound at the airport. Should the political situation turn against him, Bongo could always rely upon the 600 French paratroopers that he knew the French would deploy to protect him. Now, what other nation represented in Libreville could compete with that? Bongo knew that the Americans were not going to save his skin if events turned against

him. Unfortunately we, as a nation, failed in our mission of economic reform and political in Liberia where, if we had the political will, we could have made a difference, but we did not. The French would have shown that political will as they had when they Bongo's predecessor, Leon Mba, back on the throne, but the Americans would probably not have done so, and Bongo realized that.

Q: Were you getting heat from Washington or pressure groups saying get out there and change the whole attitude and all that?

WAUCHOPE: One of the really great things about being an American ambassador in Africa, especially at that time following the decisive victory in Kuwait demonstrating that we were the only remaining super power, we could pretty much write our own ticket. This was true both in country and from the Washington perspective, as long as we didn't go way off the track. We were promoting democracy and a free press, and we carefully reported on what we were trying to achieve. In part this was to generate support for more USIA grantees to come to make presentations on issues like a free press. Ambassadorships in the AF bureau were particularly rewarding because you had considerable latitude to set your own agenda and experiment with initiatives generated within the Mission. I would call on the country team to come up with ideas for such initiatives and we would work out how to make them work. Perhaps the only area which we didn't do as much as we might have was to use our public affairs capabilities to promote the positive benefits to Gabon of working with the American petroleum companies. That said, I'm not sure how much influence this effort might have had to offset Elf's hefty payoffs.

Q: It's not a people thing.

WAUCHOPE: Exactly.

Q: What about your relations with Bongo? You didn't mention how you presented your credentials and that sort of thing.

WAUCHOPE: Yes.

Q: Let me flip the tape over at this point. This is tape nine, side one with Keith Wauchope. Yes.

WAUCHOPE: Concerning my presentation of credentials, the Gabonese are much given to ceremony and such formalities. Obviously they took this from the French. On the day of the presentation, the chief of protocol came to my house with a big black Mercedes with the American flag on it to use for the ceremony. We were escorted by a phalanx of motorcycles. This is a wealthy country, and Bongo wanted to flaunt it. Such ceremonies gave him the chance to impress both the foreign representatives and his own people. We sweep up to his palace, which overlooks the estuary, the inlet from the sea. On the vast ceremonial plaza along side the palace the troops all lined up on the side, came to attention and both national anthems were played. I entered the palace and the chief of

protocol escorted me and the country team into a beautiful reception area. The amount of money Bongo spent on his various palaces just boggles the mind. He had a penchant to Moorish tiles and woodwork, and the reception room was not unlike what you might see in certain parts of Spain in the days of the Moorish Empire. The TV camera lights went on and I presented my letters of credence and recall, and then gave my speech. Bongo responded warmly and we were ushered into a room for a brief chat. Bongo as an individual is a really intriguing guy. I used to call on him about every other month. I didn't want to overdo it, and I knew I had a channel to him through his son. He was always cordial and relaxed. He could be ironic, and he seldom showed irritation. He had a reasonably good sense of humor. He maintained his perspective and projected that he felt secure and in control. Once he had gotten the political process back under control by agreeing to a multiparty system by fragmenting the opposition and thereby ensuring its ineffectiveness, he had nothing to fear.

As an example of that, a congressman from California, Ron Dellums, came to Libreville for some unspecified purpose. We received communication from Dellums' office in Washington that he would be coming about this time, but they were very vague about the purpose. I pressed them, and they deflected my inquiries, but they did agree I would meet him at the airport. When I met him at the airport, and later briefed him at my office, he still wouldn't tell me why he wanted to see Bongo. I expressed appreciation for my background briefing and was ushered off by the Gabonese who looked after his accommodations. He had a private session with Bongo and I was invited to join Bongo and Dellums immediately after their meeting. During the very convivial lunch in which we discussed Gabonese politics, I explained to Dellums who didn't speak French, about Bongo's ploy of granting each opposition party 20 million CFA. Dellums immediately grasped the genius in this move and admired Bongo all the more for it. He said this shows a high degree of finesse. As an ambassador or as an FSO, you have occasion to observe how American and foreign political leaders interact, and you learn that politicians get together, no matter what their background or linguistic obstacles exist, they understand one another better than we'll ever probably understand them. Dellums could instantly understand the brilliance of Bongo's ploy, the object of which was to stay on top of the pile. Bongo had assured himself that that would be the case.

Bongo was always quite decent to me, even while those around him were instigating stories critical of our democratization efforts. He was a very down to earth and seemingly candid on the issues I raised. I tempered my requests to call upon him as I knew that it always caused consternation among the ever-suspicious French. The French were beginning to disseminate rumors that the Americans were trying to displace them in Gabon. In fact, it was the furthest thing from our minds. I tried to persuade the Gabonese that this was not the case. I made clear that we would like to be a cooperative partner in a variety of areas, but I had no intention replacing French influence or presence. Clearly the American people had little knowledge of the country and no interest in getting further involved there. I'm not entirely sure how Bongo saw it. I think he was probably more realistic than most Gabonese elites. I spoke with the French ambassador about it. I said, "You know enough about the United States to know that you can't get the Americans to think even for even ten minutes about Africa for God's sake, never mind about replacing

the French in Gabon.” I think he himself understood it, but it was in his political interest to keep the idea afloat; so we had to deal with that reality.

Another one of our objectives was to try to persuade the Gabonese to be more environmentally sensitive. I made a personal trip to Lope, one of the major game preserves in the center of the country. I met there by chance an English woman zoologist and a French scientist who were studying primates. Gabon has probably more primates and a more diverse primate population than anywhere in the world. They had been studying primates for several years in this preserve. They were very dedicated to their research, but were outraged that the ecosystem in the preserve was being transformed by logging operations. They said, “Can you believe they are logging this game preserve? They’ve allowed the French logging companies to come in and take out the high value species.” Gabon is a major exporter of tropical hardwoods and has been since colonial times. It exports not just mahogany and mahogany veneers, but some of the most extraordinary tropical hardwoods which are sold to Europe and the Far East to be used for furniture and paneling. The loggers first send in trained locals to identify the high-value trees. Then they plot them on a map and bulldoze roads that take them closest to the identified trees. They fell the trees, drag them to the road and then truck them to the rivers to float down to the ports. The logging of these trees obviously changes the ecosystem for the primates. The idea that the Gabonese would maintain a game preserve and try to promote themselves as being concerned about the environment, and then to allow logging was clearly ridiculous. As I promised the researchers, I spoke to the president about it. I explained my experience and pointed out that logging game preserves undermines Gabon’s environmental credibility. He claimed to be surprised about the logging, saying he had not been to that preserve himself in 20 years. He claimed that many of these logging concessions dated from the pre-independence period. Obviously, as chief of state he could demand a renegotiation of the terms if he chose to. I continued to lay it on, pointing out Gabon’s tremendous potential for ecotourism. Gabon has extraordinary biodiversity and there for great potential for tourism. He replied, “Well, I’ll look into it.” Ironically, Gabon today touts its ecotourism and biodiversity, and apparently now earning considerable revenue from it.

I don’t know that anything ever came of my approach in this instance, but recently Secretary Powell was in Gabon and he went to the Wonga-Wongue game preserve just south of the capital to be shown the forest elephants. You have to travel there by helicopter, and at dawn you can see the elusive rain forest elephants. This particular visit is especially ironic because late in my tenure I learned that a senior Gabonese police official had been going out with his buddies and shooting forest elephants from helicopters. When it was brought to my attention and I went to the president's son to complain about it. I said, “You know if this incident gets out to the international community, Gabon is going to become the laughing stock of the world in terms of its commitments to environmental issues.” That activity at least did come to a halt. Unfortunately when the Secretary went to Wonga-Wongue he didn’t see the rain forest elephants apparently they didn’t get there just at dawn when they come out of the woods but when the sun comes up they retreat back into the jungle.

In any event, I did bring environmental issues to the president's attention, and tried to persuade him of the tourism potential that exists. Like most African leaders and I don't mean to denigrate him in particular, his sense of time horizons and the vision was simply not there. Of course he was deeply engaged in his effort to maintain control over the restive political environment. Tourism revenues could serve to replace some of the revenue from its other resources. While the manganese industry was going well, it was still not price competitive with manganese from Russia. Uranium was under a cloud from the Chernobyl incident, as a source for power generation. So, uranium operations were winding down. The logging interests were increasingly subject to a range of restrictions by environmentally concerned governments particularly in Western Europe So, Gabon was looking for alternative revenue sources.

Q: AIDS. Did AIDS come up?

WAUCHOPE: AIDS was an issue and, not surprisingly, it was not being handled very well. It was not a terribly serious problem at that time, but knowing how explosive the disease can be, more action was indicated. Knowing that one of Kenneth Kaunda's sons had died of AIDS and another one was is HIV positive, Africans were beginning to feel some discomfort. The elites are most susceptible to AIDS as they are the most mobile segment of the population. AIDS is being brought into the Gabon's cities because the elites had a insatiable taste for "bush meat" which included monkeys. I remember one time biking around the city and seeing four or five monkeys quite large monkeys laid out on the sidewalk for sale. I tried to take a picture, but the vendors became very exercised. When you drove into the countryside, there were all kinds of game for sale on the roadside from crocodiles to small deer, and occasionally monkeys. Ideally, buyers got there early enough before it got too ripe in the sun. An American primate researcher told me that the Gabonese were shooting every animal within 20 miles of the roads, and poachers were then killing everything along the rivers as well.. Having wiped out all the game it was becoming increasing difficult to meet the demand in Libreville. Bush meat was selling for more than air-freighted filet mignon in Libreville. Libreville was well known from having some of Africa's most spectacular grocery stores where you could buy 500 different French cheeses and all kinds of cuts of meat. Nonetheless, the elites preferred loved bush meat without regard of the price.

Q: Speaking of finance, at the embassy were these high costs, was this compensated for?

WAUCHOPE: Yes, the cost of living allowance was quite good, all things considered. It was pretty reflective of the real cost of living, but prices would still stagger you. Apples were \$3.00 a piece, a six-pack of Budweiser was \$20 or more, but remarkably it was available There was one store where an enterprising north African had set up a store with almost exclusively American goods brought in by containers. You could buy a jar of mayonnaise that would cost \$2.50 here, would cost you \$9.00 there, but it was American. His clientele was mostly Americans in the oil sector. Food grown on the economy was reasonably priced, but it was very limited. Libreville was a very expensive place, and so designated near the top of the list by the UN cost of living index. Going out to dinner cost at least \$80 a person at a decent restaurant. There were a lot of very high quality

restaurants. The 35,000 French residents were getting paid very handsome salaries, and they could support a very substantial culinary establishment.

I remember one time the visiting Mobil Oil vice president had eight of us out to dinner. The bill was over \$2,000. The meal was excellent, I remember I had the ostrich, and the chef was French, a graduate of the cordon blue. Most Embassy people could only rarely go out to dinner. By contrast, the French were having a high old time. When the lyceés closed during the time of political confrontation however, a lot of them took their children out of school so they not fall behind. They anticipated that the lyceés would have disruptions in the future and so they could not take the chance. When the children returned to France, many of the wives left as well. Their departure put a dent in the high end part of the economy. During the rioting in late 1989 the world class cinema complex in Libreville was torched by rioters because it belonged to the president's son. Some of the glitter began to fade during the time I was, but it was still a stimulating and challenging period even though the U.S. remained a distant second to the French in the country.

Q: Well, did you find that you or your staff were kind of, couldn't help but dig at the French for, I mean either in public or not, for what you were doing?

WAUCHOPE: Yes, there was a certain amount of resentment against the French. The French would high-hat us; at least until our success in the Gulf War. That really did change their attitudes. They became a good deal less inclined to condescend to us. I'll tell you one other change that took place as well. My predecessor was of the belief that.

Q: Who was that?

WAUCHOPE: Warren Clark, who later went on to be the PDA in AF, although he didn't last too long. In any event, he had been of the belief that the best and the quickest way to find out what was going on in Gabon was to invite the French conseillers technique from the various ministries for lunch or dinner. When I took over, the only Frenchmen who came to the ambassador's residence were the French diplomats, the Ambassador and those with whom we worked. I did not invite the conseillers technique, because I didn't think that was right approach. I thought we were there to. . .

Q: These were the French, these are the white?

WAUCHOPE: White advisors, yes, in each of the ministries. They did know a lot about what was going on. They usually countersigned everything the minister did. I believed that I should talk to the minister directly. I decided to play according to the book, and not play this side game. Whether the French resented this change I don't know, but they recognized the different approach. I figured I was not accredited to the Gabonese government, not the French government.

I should say a word about some of the prominent visitors Gabon hosted in the last six months of my tour. The most bizarre was the visit of Michael Jackson, the great Michael Jackson.

Q: He's a rather oddball entertainer.

WAUCHOPE: He's a very strange individual indeed. Apparently, he had been doing a music video about Egypt in which he played a young pharaoh, when the idea of visiting Africa seized him. Bongo's son Ali had had friends in the entertainment industry in the United States, and he extended an invitation to Michael Jackson to come to Gabon. So, Michael Jackson assembled a group of people, and they worked up an itinerary to Africa. It was the most extraordinary visit that one could ever possibly imagine. He arrived in his own chartered 737 aircraft. Everybody on the plane was an African-American except for one English fellow who was a holistic healer from the Caribbean. The party was accompanied Irv Hicks, an old AF hand, as the State liaison person. I've known Irv for many years, and he seemed bewildered as to purpose of the trip and his role. The visit began to unravel from the moment Jackson's plane landed. First, there was an endless delay for Jackson to deplane, and it seemed the president's entire family including all their kids, were waiting in the VIP lounge. They hoped for a photo opportunity with the great entertainer. He was apparently enthralled about coming home to Africa and hesitated at leaving the aircraft. One of his security men finally went up and assured him that everything was fine. The understanding was that he would come down to the VIP lounge and spend a little time with the president's family, schmooze and then leave in a limousine the president had laid on for him. When he finally raced down the ramp, he looked like Mickey Mouse. He had a red shirt and black pants and he wore white gloves. He had on a wide brimmed hat with hair streaming out underneath so you could barely see his face. He has an affectation of putting his hand to his face like this, which came back to haunt him. As he brushed past, I tried to introduce him to the president's daughter who was the foreign minister. He raced through the crowd with fans screaming from the balconies of the main terminal, charged through the VIP lounge with his bodyguards pushing people out of the way. By this time, crowds of fans on the grounds around the airport and from the balconies above us were erupting and screaming. It was like an explosion. He and his guards roared to the limousine parked in front of the VIP lounge. He jumps into the limousine by himself with a couple of his security people. The escort had no idea what's going on. The motorcycle policemen were befuddled, but when Jackson stood up in the sun roof and started to wave, the crowd surged forward screaming, they start to form up. Jackson panics and ducked down and says let's get out of here. The escort blasts through encircling crowd and disappears toward his hotel. I apologized to the foreign minister, and said to his people that we have no role to play in this visit, but we were prepared to assist his party.

That afternoon there was an event at his hotel and the president's daughter was also supposed to be there and kids from the president's family. My older boy was on the stage with an international children's choir performing for Jackson. We were sitting close to Jackson and we noted that he had one of those little boys, 13 or 14 years of age, with him whom he described to us as his nephew. He constantly had his arm around the boy.

Q: This was Michael Jackson?

WAUCHOPE: This was Michael Jackson and his young friend. It was later revealed that he had these relationships with young boys, which landed him in deep trouble. The people in Jackson's party were almost as bizarre as Michael himself. They described him as a "gift from God" and they virtually worshipped him. For his second day in country, Ali Bongo had arranged a trip to several cities in the interior. I asked the PAO to accompany the party and offer to interpret and to provide advice. She had the most extraordinary experience. They were given an Air Gabon plane to take them up to Oyem in the north, and then down to Franceville. In Oyem, the people thought Jackson would perform, but he had no intention of performing. His trip was being videotaped to work into a possible music video. In Oyem, when they found out he wasn't going to perform, they went ballistic. They charged across the big public square and his people panicked. Once again they hauled him away, and raced back to the airport where the military could hold off the crowds back. He left immediately for Franceville. This was considered to be Bongo's hometown, it had more amenities than you could expect to find in the African bush. Air Gabon, which was run by the French, told Ali Bongo that it had to have the plane back to fly regularly scheduled flights that evening. The plane returned to Libreville and Jackson and party are stranded. The people in Jackson's entourage went into panic mode. It seems that Michael Jackson has to sleep every night in a special container to preserve his complexion and his many plastic surgeries. The people around Jackson were just unreal; it was like some sort of a cult. All efforts to obtain a replacement aircraft failed. There is a luxury hotel in Franceville that is seldom more than 10 percent full. Obviously he survived a night without his container, but when he returned the next day there was a good deal of unhappiness about that episode.

On this, his last day in Gabon, there was to be a presidential presentation of a medal, something like the Order of the African Elephant. I was asked to attend, and while awaiting the festivities, I was in the waiting room when Michael Jackson arrived. In lieu of the little boy, Michael Jackson entered with a baby chimpanzee clinging to his midsection. The president's son introduced us and I was amazed at how little presence this mega-star exhibited. His handshake was limp and spoke in a mumble. The conversation turned to arranging to take the chimp back to the U.S., and the president's son says, "I'm sure the American Ambassador can make arrangements to help you to take this chimpanzee to the United States." I said, "It's not going to happen. They are an endangered species and there are endless restrictions on importing chimps." Even research institutions take months and months to obtain permission. Ali Bongo replied, "I'm sure you can overcome all that." I offered no hope. Inevitably the chimp's mother had been killed by poachers and it would cling to anyone. Someone took the chimp from Michael before he was ushered into the president's office. Jackson's PR people wanted to videotape the whole ceremony. I went in before him and was part of the furniture. From there I could hear the exchange between the President and his son. Of course Michael and his people didn't speak any French, and had no idea what's being said. Bongo said to his son, "Now, tell me again, who is this guy? Why am I giving him a medal? What has he done for Gabon?" Bongo was completely bemused. When Michael Jackson entered, the

lights went on, and pictures were taken, hands shaken and finally the pinning on of the medal. Michael Jackson said a few whispered words.

In any such event, after the presentation, the lights go down and the two principals usually sit down and have an exchange of words. Michael had almost nothing to say. The president thought, well, okay, I guess this is finished. He essentially dismissed Michael Jackson, the lights go back on and Michael Jackson leaves the president's office. His managers had set it up a photo op those who had missed the chance previously. They went to one of Bongo's very opulent receiving rooms on the ground floor as backdrop. All I want was for Jackson and his people to leave; his flight was at 2:30. They asked me if I wouldn't like to have my picture taken with Michael Jackson. I demurred, while for half an hour they ran from one side of the room to the other taking photos with various family members on a banquet with Jackson. Finally he and his party departed for the airport and he was gone. I sent a telegram, advising the embassies on his itinerary to be aware of this bizarre individual and his party of sycophants.

Overall, his visit to Gabon did not redound well for Ali Bongo and his father. The opposition, who now had their own newspapers, asked, "Who is this guy Michael Jackson? We thought he was a black American, but he doesn't look like one." Because he has a very pale complexion, they seized on that to criticize the Bongos. They criticized Michael Jackson for not performing. Jackson's affectation of keeping his hand in front of his face, which I assumed was a symptom of shyness, was seized upon as a sign that he didn't like the smell of Africa. This issue arose again when Jackson went on to the Cote d'Ivoire next. The African press reamed him over the implication that he couldn't stand the smell of Africa. It was unfair, but the trip proved to be a disaster and he curtailed the rest of his trip. I think he went on to Tanzania, but then he returned to the U.S. He was going to go onto Egypt but the trip just fell apart. That was my brush with real fame as far as I'm concerned.

I also met the Pope. He came to Sao Tome, a Catholic country, the last stop on a three-nation African tour. Being simultaneously accredited to Sao Tome I was invited to be present for the visit. It was my sense that he was a man of great gentility and sincere humility. This was his last stop on his visit and he appeared completely exhausted. I thought he was probably not going to survive another six months. The Sao Tomeans did not seem particularly impressed by the Pope's visit. No more than, 5,000 or 10,000 people turned out for the open air service. For an island nation of 140,000 mostly catholic people, and no place is more than 20 miles away, I was surprised by the light turnout. After the service there was a reception in the presidential palace. We were asked to line up and the Pope's assistants came along and gave the women rosaries and the men commemorative medallion of his trip. As I moved through the line and I'm watching how the Sao Tomeans were treating the Pope. They were just shaking his hand, and I thought that as Catholics aren't they supposed to be more deferential? When I came before the Pope, I figured I'm neither Catholic and nor should I be deferential as I was the American president's representative? So, I shook his hand and spoke in English. He was obviously tired, and, while he speaks 36 languages, it took him a moment to recognize English. He said it was nice to meet you, and I didn't figure I should burden him further so I just

moved on. He spent about eight hours in the country and then returned to Rome. He is still the Pope today and I had figured he wouldn't make it to the end of 1992. So much for my prognostications.

I was accredited to Sao Tome Principe, and I took that responsibility serious, making 23 trips there during my tenure. When I first arrived the government in power was Marxist oriented. I wouldn't call it Marxist-Leninist per se, but it basically the successor leftist government that arose after independence from the Portuguese in 1975; this was now 1989. The whole Marxist process was wearing very thin. The country is a nation of about 140,000 people. They are people who were brought by the Portuguese from other nearby regions of Africa. The islands had first raised sugar, than coffee and then cocoa under a plantation system. In 1913 it was the largest cocoa-producing country in the world. At about this time there was a report circulating in Europe that the plantation labor system by which they imported laborers to work in the cocoa plantations was essentially a form of slavery. The workers were brought to the islands under a contract labor system, but none of them ever returned home. Most of them died on Sao Tome. Many of them died within two years, and those who would live beyond that had their contracts extended, probably involuntarily. This became a scandal because the British candy maker Cadbury which was owned by Quakers was the major purchaser of Sao Tome's cocoa. Quakers are longstanding opponents of slavery. The Portuguese were forced to make major improvements in the treatment of their workers and in opening the islands to modernization. Cocoa production declined in competition with largest producers on the African mainland, but cocoa was still the most important economic activity on the islands at the time of independence. In 1913 Sao Tome had produced 35,000 tons a year, but by independence it was down to 10,000 tons. Within five years, with production under the control of state companies, it was down to 4,000 tons. These plantations were no longer really economically viable activities. They were more a form of extended welfare where it just happened that the product was cocoa. Many workers were still working on the pre-independence Portuguese plantations using the antiquated turn-of-the-century equipment and houses that were 150 to 200 years old.

In any event, the people of Sao Tome are very gentle, and the elites were reasonably well educated. Despite their socialist perspective, they remained very much oriented toward Portugal, and, to a certain extent, toward Angola. There are some inhabitants who are Cape Verdeans by origin, and they are very capable people. Our interests there were very modest, primarily to promote the democracy and to promote economic development, while discouraging closer alliance with the Bloc nations. I suppose that the most significant event in our bilateral relations arose when I was tasked to negotiate for a site for a VOA relay facility, an alternative, ironically, for the facility we had been forced to close in Liberia in 1990. The proposed new facility would require only six or eight people and have a very low profile. The Sao Tomeans were more than happy to have us come. On the larger stage, there was a sub rosa competition between the Portuguese and the French; the latter were interested in extending and expanding their influence in the country and the former wanted to maintain and strengthen its political and commercial relations. The Portuguese welcomed our involvement while the French harbored suspicions about our intentions.

The Marxist government's mandate eventually ran out and the new elections brought in a fellow named Trovoada who was viewed as a more liberal politician and not wedded to the one party system. He held office most of the time I was there and he was always interesting to talk to. He was considered particularly friendly to the French, and the French became pretty cozy with him. He had spent his time in exile during the Portuguese rule in France rather than in Portugal, while most of the hard-line leftist had spent their time in Angola. Despite a promising start, regrettably he has proved to be a person all too susceptible to bribery and political machinations. He did not have a very successful tenure. We had a very small military assistance program which provided several patrol crafts so they could patrol their fishery zone. This program fizzled as they could not provide the fuel and spares to keep the craft operational.

Recently foreign oil companies have found very substantial amounts of oil offshore in areas bordering the Nigerian economic zone. There is an inevitable conflict about how these offshore tracts should be divided up. There is an article in this week's New Yorker Magazine about Sao Tome, our new friend, as it says. In fact, there are a modest number of Sao Tomeans in the United States. They are friendly and decent people, and deserve to be treated with respect.

At the time I presented my credentials and made my calls on the few resident ambassadors, the government's Marxist orientation was apparent. I called on the Soviet ambassador and the Chinese representative, but not the Cuban. The Chinese had built a stadium and were involved in building low cost housing. The Soviets, soon to be just Russians, were closing down, and elderly Soviet ambassador was ill and seemed completely worn out. He wished the best for the Sao Tomeans, and asked that the U.S. be generous to them. The Cubans were considered a sinister presence, but they were doing a few modest development projects. The Europeans had a presence there as well. I think the Portuguese had the only resident ambassador, a very gracious, elegant and intelligent fellow who was always available to meet with me. All other accredited nations were represented from either Luanda or Libreville.

It is a delightful little country with tremendous possibilities for tourism. There was a project underway to develop a resort in the northern part of Principe. The developer was a mysterious South African named Hellinger, who was in the arms/diamonds/gold business in Angola. He had set up a base near the airport in Sao Tome, and as such, was able to transport all kinds of unidentified cargoes to the Marxist Angolan government, the MPLA, in return for access to diamonds. He had his own compound with his own armed guards. He was right out of a James Bond movie. He was persuaded that the Americans were intent to do him in and my few meetings with him were always laced with recriminations. Once he insisted on showing me one of his transport aircraft that had been supplying the MPLA against UNITA. A rocket had hit the plane just below an inboard engine. The hole where the rocket had impacted was evident, but it had not exploded. This was particularly fortunate because he had several American pilots working for him. He also hired American flight crews and mechanics who flew in and out of Sao Tome. God knows what his real business was, but he was believed to be moving Angolan

diamonds to markets where few questions were asked. If these diamonds were not fiscalized, after paying off the MPLA leaders, he had plenty of money to pay off officials in Sao Tome. The new president said to me that he really wondered what being transported on those planes and claimed he would find out. In fact, it seems that he too made an accommodation with this character, and their operations were never seriously impacted. Nonetheless, it was an interesting place to visit and as I walked around the small capital, I would wonder about the lives of those who lived in the brightly painted modest little bungalows just up from the ocean front and what the future of this nation was to be. There were times when there was little food to be had in the capital as there was virtually nothing in the market. They'd run out of fuel and so the fishermen couldn't go out to fish. It is possible that oil revenues will change all that, but more likely it will ruin a country with great charm and gentility

Q: This is probably a good place to stop I think.

WAUCHOPE: Okay.

Q: You left when?

WAUCHOPE: I left in August of 1992.

Q: Whither?

WAUCHOPE: Well, I came back to the States. I'm not sure if that assignment even warrants a whole session in its own right. I came back and I took over the Office of Performance Evaluation for two years and then from there I worked as special projects for the Director General on issues of women's class action suit and black officers' suits. I also initiated an effort to modernize the information management systems in Personnel which were desperately needed.

JOSEPH C. WILSON, IV
Ambassador
Gabon (1992-1995)

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

WILSON: I went to the Gabonese Republic. It's always called the Gabonese Republic because Bongo wants his country to be known in the feminine tense in French, because 'La France' is feminine. 'Le Gabon' is masculine, which in the great scheme of things was viewed by Bongo as being of lesser stature than feminine 'La France.' So you don't call it 'Le Gabon,' you call it 'La République Gabone;' that gives it stature. I was also ambassador to the Democratic Republic of Sao Tome and Principe. My orders read that I should serve concomitantly - being ambassador to the Democratic Republic of Sao Tome and Principe came without additional compensation; so it was a two for one. I got to be ambassador to two countries; got paid for being ambassador to one. I resided in Libreville. Had a great Peace Corps program in Sao Tome and Principe, had a \$60,000,000 Voice of America transmitter station built while I was there. We basically were the GDP of the country for the three years that I was there with our investment.

Q: Let's move to Gabon. Could you give a little background about where it had come from and then what happened while you were there.

WILSON: Gabon is the home of Omar Bongo. Gabon was a former French colony. It straddles the Equator. It is probably best known to Americans and Europeans as the site of Albert Schweitzer's mission and hospital where he worked with lepers and other people in Lamborini. He wrote of his experiences over the years. Gabon is a land well endowed in natural resources. It has a lot of oil, uranium, manganese, and timber. It has good fishing both in its rivers and off the coast. It has a coast, it has forests, and savannahs in the interior. Gabon is lightly populated; there are only about 1,200,000 Gabonese. The country is about the size of Colorado. It has had a peaceful history. It is the one country in the former French colonial empire that actually voted to remain French at the time of independence, but we denied them that right: "You will be independent." To this day it has remained staunchly in the camp of the French. French interest in Gabon is predicated on its historic ties and also on the very real and pragmatic consequences of being a petroleum exporter. So ELF has been active in Gabon since ELF has been active.

Q: ELF being the French oil company.

WILSON: ELF being the French state-run petroleum company until recently. During the time I was there, it was still state run. It later became privatized and was gobbled up by Total, so it is now Total Pina ELF - I think that is its name now.

Q: When you say 'privatized', I think that's done with quotations, isn't it, with ties to the French government?

WILSON: Initially for the transition period the French government held what they called the "golden share," which gave the government veto power over any management decisions. Once it was listed on the New York Stock Exchange and on a number of other exchanges, then it became subject to shareholder rights. Once it became part of Total Pina, it has been essentially privatized. The consequence of that has been a long inquiry and audit into the way it did business when it was a government enterprise.

Q: Could you talk about Bongo and your relationship with him?

WILSON: El Haj Omar Bongo stands about five foot three or five foot four. To compensate for his lack of stature, he wears boots that have maybe three-inch heels to give him a little bit more height. In his younger days, he was an inveterate sipper of champagne and had an eye for the women, which in this day and age would land him in lots of trouble with the politically correct. He was known for actually chasing women around his office - obviously quite boorish behavior.

Gabon is a different part of the world. I like to say that the difference between the central Africans and the west Africans is that the west Africans don't have a lot of resources; with what they do have they manufactured goods, and then they trade back and forth. Great trading societies grew up in west Africa. In contrast, in Gabon, you found lots of forests, making transit difficult. They had to use a river system, which is cumbersome. Natural resources are plentiful. If you want to eat fish, you just put a line in the water. If you want meat, you just go out in the woods - a place abundant with meat. If you wanted wine, you just cut into a palm tree and waited. There isn't a lot of social interaction between ethnic groups. In fact, the first marriage between a member of an ethnic groups in the north, the Fang, and an ethnic group from the coast and the south, the Gneni, took place in 1954, which was the same year that the U.S. Supreme Court decided on "Brown versus the Board of Education." That marriage was such an event in the history of Gabon that it is still discussed to this day - in terms of the upheaval possible with ethnic groups.

Bongo is Bateke; he came from the interior, and grew up in the Congo, Brazzaville. Batekes sit astride the Congo-Gabonese border. From early on, he was directed into the bureaucratic work. I think he always seemed to be rather clever. The rumor is that the French tested him - like a young Albert Bernard - his tests results were right off the charts, at which point they decided that this was going to be their guy. They moved him into positions of increasing responsibility as Gabon moved through independence and the post-independence phase - when the French still ran the country but behind the offices instead of at the front desk. When Leon M'Ba died in 1967 of cancer, Bongo was the one that the French supported for president. In his youth - I used to talk to him about this and kid him about it - the stories are that when he would host a party at his palace, his minions would lock the doors and nobody could leave until Omar himself had left, which was often not until three or four o'clock in the morning. Many in the diplomatic set liked to be home by 10:30 and in bed by eleven o'clock; they'd have to sit there until about three o'clock in the morning. One of my predecessors at Gabon told me that someone finally realized that if you went to a certain bathroom, you could open the window and crawl out to get away from these parties. I used to kid Bongo about it. I used to go to these parties and they still would go on until two o'clock in the morning, but by this time, they left the doors open so that people could leave earlier. As a matter of principal I used to stay until the president left. First, I thought it was a wise thing to do in accordance with proper protocol. Secondly, with everybody else leaving early, you were the last person seen by Bongo. Since we wanted our interests to be favored in Gabon, it was useful to be seen to be consistent with protocol and to be seen to be enjoying oneself. We enjoyed the Gabonese tremendously. I enjoyed Bongo tremendously.

...So we did these dinners. We would put people together and I'd stand up at the beginning of the dinner and say, "You guys understand that anything goes except for physical violence. I'm bigger than all of you, so if your passions get to the point where you're going to be physically violent, understand that I will step in." Then we would sit down and have a nice dinner. We had just enough Americans. We had maybe five tables with an American at each table; the rest of the people at each table would be Gabonese of different political persuasions. It was great. They would get to know each other personally. They would spend a half hour talking politics and then an hour and a half talking about their cultural differences, because all parties were essentially ethnically based and geographically based. So they had different cultural experiences. The forests or the sea would mean different things to different ones. The intermarriage between the Fang and the Bateke was a different experience for the Fangs than it was for the Batekes, for example. We would talk through all this. It worked pretty well. That helped us to have good relations with all political parties. We had facilitated their contacts with each other, and put us in the position in the run-up to the election to have good contacts across the board.

...The elections took place, it was very close. There were three candidates. One was a Fang candidate from the north, and they have the largest plurality of the population. They have about 35 or 40 percent of the country. Bateke live in the south and the southeast, principally the southeast and the inland. That was Bongo's group. They had about 35%. Basically in Gabonese politics there are the Fangs and then everybody else, who got 35% or 40% of the vote. There was a third group which lived along the coast and it had its own candidate. They were the swing vote. In the first round they're going to vote for their own candidate, getting maybe 20 percent of the vote. That was the way it looked before the elections with Bongo slightly ahead.

The French could not abide, and Bongo himself could not abide, the idea that he would not be reelected in the first round. The French ambassador commented to me, in an inadvertent moment, that neither the French nor the Gabonese could afford a second round. I think that was right. I think ultimately that they were afraid that, if they didn't win the election in the first round, they would have trouble keeping it all together in the second round. I think frankly that if the Mienay would have thrown their weight behind Bongo, that he would have won in the second round. The Gabonese did not share that view. So they decided that they weren't going to allow a second round to take place. At 12:30 at night the chief justice of the constitutional court announce that 51.17 percent of the vote went for Omar Bongo, who therefore was declared the victor in the first round. The opposition just went bananas; they were not happy. They take to the streets and rioted. The Gabonese minister of defense, who was Bongo's cousin, decided to deploy his troops. He took his artillery pieces out and he shelled the opposition radio station and the opposition leader's house. There were riots in the streets; the Gabonese trashed and burned and overturned cars belonging to foreigners in particular; and then dragged some of them out and beat them up. They didn't beat too many up, but they were roughing them up a little bit.

So we had a security problem on our hands. My house was in an area controlled by the opposition. The opposition had for a long time decided that they were going to play street theater in front of the American ambassador's house. They would start all their riots right in front of my house so that the American ambassador would see what was going on. A person was killed in front of our house. I think we had two people killed in front of our house. It got pretty nasty. We couldn't go in and out; so we ultimately moved. In the aftermath of the election, this is what's going on. We held a meeting and decided that at a minimum, since we still had to move around the town, to give it some measure of protection. Since nobody was really mad at the Americans, we flew the American flag in our cars. We put flags up on all the windows of our private vehicles. We gave everybody a flag, and we put flags on the official vehicles. We would drive through the city and people would come up to the car in a threatening way; then somebody would say, "No, no, look, there's the American flag. These are Americans." People would applaud and we would be able to drive on. It was great. It was so great, in fact, that the French ambassador complaint to Bongo and said, "These Americans - in addition to everything else - have put American flags in their cars so that they wouldn't get hurt."

... Secondly, even in terms of democratization, it's important to understand that presidential elections are the culmination of the democratic process, not the beginning, but we in our approach to democratization see presidential elections as everything - the beginning, the end, and everything in between. The foundations of democracy are based on what goes on in localities and communities and everything up to presidential elections. We do ourselves and our friends in Africa a great disservice when we put all of our eggs in the presidential election basket. I was bound and determined not to do that. I made a lot of enemies in Washington for not doing this, but at the end of the day we still had to do business with Gabon. They were very active in the Angolan peace process. They've proven themselves to be active in the Congo, in Chad and in CAR in positive ways. It was important not to deny the lack of transparency in the presidential election but to put it in its proper context. To this day, if you take a look around Africa, Bongo is still the most adroit and the best politician on the continent - a man who knows his country better than anybody else. He also has the luxury of having a lot of liquidity so that he can spread the money around as inducements. So we got through the election.

... For example, the Equatorial Guinean president, Obiang, was having some problem with his opposition, so he was coming to see Bongo. He was having lots of trouble with the American ambassador in Malabo.

Somebody from the palace called me up and said, "Bongo is receiving the president of Equatorial Guinea this afternoon. Is there anything you want him to say?" I said, "I wish I had known. I could have given the president a paper on American complaints about the way the president of Equatorial Guinea was acting towards his population. But on such short notice, I don't have much. He can say whatever he wants. But he should know that we have some human rights concerns in that country." I left it at that and went back to my business; 10 minutes later I got another call from the palace saying, "Bongo wants to know if you'd like to come over and tell President Obiang yourself." I said, "Let me talk to Washington. I'll get back to you. It's somebody else's turf and I don't want to be

poaching on his turf.” So I called up Washington and talked to Bob Pringle, who said, “Yes, sounds good. Why don’t you go over there. Go on over there. You know what to tell him.” So I called the palace back up and said, “Sure, I’ll come over. Tell me what time. I’ll be over there.” They said, “Sure. We’ll get back to you.” I got a call back from Bongo’s daughter, who’s is director of the cabinet. She said, “Fine, the president would like you to come to dinner, you and your wife, at his private residence. It will just be the president, his wife, and myself and their foreign minister -just a very small dinner.” I said, “Look, I’m under instructions to tell Obiang what we think of him and his regime, but I don’t really want to break bread with the man if I don’t have to. I don’t want to have a meal with this guy. This guy’s a thug.” She says, “Okay, got it.” Ten minutes later I got a call from the chief of protocol at the residency; he was a general. Now, a general in the Gabonese army is maybe not a real general like Colin Powell, but they have a certain general bearing. He gets on the phone and says, “Monsieur l’Ambassadeur [French; Mr. Ambassador],” and I said, “Oui, Mon General [French: Yes, General].” He said, “The president will receive you at his residence with Mrs. Wilson for dinner at 8:30,” or “You will arrive at 8:30. You will have your meeting with the president and the president of Equatorial Guinea, and your wife will arrive at nine for dinner with the president and his wife and the president of Equatorial Guinea and his wife.” I said, “Oui, Mon General.” There it was. I’d been given my instructions.

Q: What about these oil concessions? ELF obviously was in there greasing the transactions. This is their modus operandi, but we were now working under the new rules of no corruption, no bribes and all that? How did our oil companies work?

WILSON: Of course, they’re not going to tell me if they’re bribing anybody in violation of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, but Bongo understood that to be 100 percent dependent upon the French was not in his own interest. Before I arrived in Gabon, there was an open bidding round; just before the bids closed, the French had managed to sabotage the process and pick off for themselves the choice concessions that they wanted. ELF had managed to do that. The American oil companies howled in protest. Keith Wauchope, who was my predecessor, had been very aggressive in his defending of the American interests. The French had used that to turn the Gabonese press against him, and the American oil companies had basically been shut out. We were able to turn that around, because, among many reasons, we were able to make clear that it was not in Bongo’s interest to be so dependent upon just the French.

By that time, his relationship with the French had soured in some respects anyway. He didn’t like the ambassador. He thought the French hadn’t been treating him quite the way he wished. At the time, in France there was the beginning of a debate on their Africa policy. The ministry of finance was beginning to realize that French policies towards Africa were beginning to cost a lot of money. We’re getting towards the end of Mitterrand’s years. The right was in power and Chirac, who was close to Bongo was the head of the party even if he wasn’t prime minister. There were some dislocations within the French governmental system, and Bongo didn’t like that very much. He didn’t like the fact that they’d taken the French ambassador away and that they’d replaced him with this guy that he just couldn’t stand. All that gave us an opportunity to press our case for

having American oil companies participate in the development of the oil sector. We obviously were concerned about possible violations of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act. We were at a net disadvantage with ELF in head to head competition - very clearly.

Q: Were we providing any economic or military assistance?

WILSON: No, Gabon had one of the highest per capita incomes of any country on the continent because of its oil resources; so we were constrained by that fact. We had no development projects. We did have a regional project that was just in its inception - the preservation of the rainforest which was to cover Gabon, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Congo (Brazzaville), and maybe Zaire. But that was the only infusion of development assistance we had. There were some relationship in Franceville between CDC and Gabon because there was a research center there that had originally been put there by the French to study the high incidence of infertility in Gabon. The Gabonese population growth rate was very low. Initially they thought it was because of the high incidence in venereal disease that resulted in sterility, but they were examining other possible causes of low fertility rates. The research center then started exploring retro viruses and subsequently HIV-AIDS. Gabon had a large primate population and that also interested the CDC. They had a liaison relationship with the institute and had the people working there. That was really about it in terms of a non-political relationship, with the exception of a Peace Corps program which had about 120 volunteers.

Q: Was AIDS developing as a problem?

WILSON: We are now talking about the mid-1990s. Gabon was not publishing statistics that reflected the high incidence of AIDS. It was not as bad there as it was in Burundi or Rwanda, for example, but it was clearly a problem. Gabon was on the northern edge and the western edge of the problem that was, by and large, an eastern and southern one.

Q: I was wondering whether, as AIDS became known, it had any effect on the morale or the operation of the embassy, particularly because it was sexually and a blood-transmitted disease. You know, you're driving around and you have an accident and blood is needed. Did this cause people to be uneasy?

WILSON: I think people were uneasy. We did everything we could to insure that we had safe blood supplies. We had, for example, lists of potential donors, all of whom were presumed, because they were Americans, to be AIDS and HIV free. We had done everything that we thought that we could to keep the staff safe. We hadn't gotten to the point where we were donating blood for freezing. We didn't have that technology to do, but we did have a list of potential blood donors so that we could...

Q: You had your own needles.

WILSON: We had our own needles. We had our own health center; we had a doctor, we had a nurse.

Q: What was the Peace Corps volunteers up to?

WILSON: They were up to everything. They were in health, in education; they built schools and roads; they did a little bit of everything.

Q: Did the French get nervous about that?

WILSON: The French had initially used the Peace Corps in its early years as a way of arguing, and had done so in Gabon, that the Peace Corps was really just a CIA operation. In fact, the Peace Corps was thrown out, I think, thanks to the French in the mid 1960s. By the 1990s, that was no longer the case. The Peace Corps was a pretty successful operation. The French, if they didn't like it, at least kept that to themselves. The volunteers were all over the country. It was great; it was a good program.

Q: Is there anything else we should cover on your tour in Gabon?

WILSON: No, I think that's about it. After we vanquished the French, it was life in paradise.

End of reader