

GUINEA-BISSAU
COUNTRY READER
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MELISSA FOELSCH WELLS
Ambassador
Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau (1976-1977)

Ambassador Wells was born in Estonia and raised abroad and in the U.S. She was educated at Mount St. Mary’s College and Georgetown University. In 1958, she joined the Foreign Service and served in Washington and abroad. Her foreign assignments include posts in Brazil, France, United Kingdom, Trinidad-Tobago, and Switzerland. She also served in senior positions at the United Nations in New York. Her ambassadorial assignments include: Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau (1976-1977); Mozambique (1987-1991); the Democratic Republic of Congo (1991-1992); and Estonia (1998-2001). Ambassador Wells was interviewed by Ann Miller Moran in 1995.

Q: It shows how glamorous the Foreign Service is. There was also a scene you described of sitting on the floor eating black olives.

WELLS: Gosh, you remember all these things. I wasn't on the floor; I was on the sofa of my little sitting room with the refrigerator in it.

Q: Was this your first day? When was this?

WELLS: Early on.

ALFRED WELLS: What country?

WELLS: Bissau.

Q: She was telling this at the ambassadors' course. I didn't have my machine on.

WELLS: Yes. It must have been the first week or ten days. The refrigerator just sort of came with the room. I think it was U.S. Government stock. It didn't come with the hotel management.

Q: Did that stay in your living room the whole time?

WELLS: Yes! I was very glad it was there. That was my food supply, because there was nothing to eat in the restaurants. "Ca tem. Ca tem." [Creole for "Don't have any."] Every time you'd go in, they'd tell you they don't have anything. Then we would get supplied either from Dakar, people would bring food, chocolate bars, things like that, or else you would find eggs, maybe. The refrigerator was a very important thing to have, but it was a big refrigerator and took up a lot of space.

We had just recently had the flying commissary of West Africa, where you put in your order and you order so many cans of olives and things like that. Anyway, I hadn't been there long enough to have any orders of anything, so people gave me things until I put my order in. The lights were out again and had been out for a couple of hours, and the pumps weren't working, so you couldn't take a shower; there was no water. I had a little flashlight and I got to the refrigerator, because with the window, there was a little more light than in my office, but it was dark. Then I found this can of olives, which I had opened earlier at some point. I sat there. I had opened the can, but the lid was sort of down. I remember these were big, ripe California olives, and I ate the whole can.

Q: The whole can! [Laughter]

WELLS: This is the life of an ambassador! [Laughter] Because I remember when they telephoned when I was in Rio de Janeiro to say, "Can we put your name on the list?" and I said, "Wait, wait. I want to talk about it."

I went to talk to my friend Myles Frechette, who is just now ambassador in the Cameroon. Myles happened to be there, and I told him what had just happened. We went down to have coffee, and Myles said, "You're gong to live in one of those old Portuguese beautiful colonial buildings!" I could just see my beautiful old, rambling building, you know, with vines.

Q: Thick walls!

WELLS: And here I am, in the heat, in the dark, eating olives! [Laughter]

Q: That's a lovely story; that really is.

WELLS: But I did it, and I was very involved. I got my can of olives out, I sat down. This is the life of an ambassador! I was in the mood for playing a part! [Laughter]

Q: And you wouldn't have missed it for the world, I'm sure. One last question of you, and then I have one for your husband. How is it going with the Wang?

WELLS: I took a course.

Q: You said you were going to. You said they terrified you.

WELLS: We worked on it about four hours a day or so, and I loved it! I had all these little disks and things. I couldn't do it for you right now, but I think once I get to post and we do have the personal computers there for unclassified material, I think I can swing into it.

Q: Good!

WELLS: It's fun. It's fun.

Q: And you have a new skill.

WELLS: I wouldn't call it a skill at this point. I had enough exposure that I feel I can jump in.

Q: Do you use computers?

ALFRED WELLS: I've just begun. I was in the Library of Congress and in a search with one.

Q: Good!

ALFRED WELLS: Then I used one also in London in National Geographic to make a search.

Q: You won't have any trouble. The government provides these now?

ALFRED WELLS: I took a computer course to use in architecture.

Q: Obviously, this has been a partnership thing, and you have both been very successful. You've raised a family and everything. What is the one piece of advice you would give a young tandem couple starting out in the Foreign Service? In effect, that's what you people were.

ALFRED WELLS: Yes. Be careful picking your spouse! [Laughter] Now, let's see. Seriously, it depends so much on the character of the individuals. You can't give advice. I suppose the best advice I can give, which sounds rather ridiculous, is don't ever take vacations without your children, particularly in the Foreign Service. Make sure that the children know, from when

they're one or two years old, that they're part of the group. I think it's always important, but particularly that they feel they're with you and get to enjoy Foreign Service and get the feeling of loving travel and loving different places, different people. Otherwise, you're going to get this syndrome that you get in the Foreign Service of children feeling that they've missed something. It may not be good advice.

RICHARD C. HOWLAND
Inspector General's Office
Washington, DC (1978)

Mr. Howland was born and raised in New York and educated at Adelphi College and George Washington University. After service in the US Army, he joined the Foreign Service in 1960, serving several tours at the State Department in Washington, DC and abroad in Phnom Penh, Djakarta, Vientiane and Surabaya. In his Washington assignments, Mr. Howland dealt primarily with personnel and East Asia matters. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1999.

HOWLAND: From there the team temporarily split. Bill and Harry and I flew to Guinea Bissau; "econ Sam" went to start the inspection at the Cape Verde islands, and Bill went there a few days later. Guinea Bissau had just won its independence in 1974, after a bloody war with the Portuguese, and had established a pro-communist regime which, like Angola, was really being run by Castro and his Cuban expeditionary army.

The pro-French, rightist Senegalese weren't happy about this little cancer of Portuguese Marxism-Leninism, stuck right there on their southern border, and there were constant incidents. The Guinea Bissau government was on in a permanent war footing. We flew down on Air Guinea Bissau, in a laboring C-47 with no doors, with inebriated Portuguese pilots, just like my trip to Portuguese Timor which I told you about earlier. You know, when you're young, things like that are a great adventure. We landed at a military field and a mob of armed soldiers, with bayonets fixed, just converged on the plane. We got into town somehow. The Embassy didn't have any vehicles. It had just been established less than two years earlier, and the first Ambassador was Melissa Wells. Have you ever had Melissa Wells in for an interview?

Q: No, I would like to get a hold of her.

HOWLAND: She was the first Ambassador. Before she went, the Department had to open that post. So it sent an FSR admin officer whose name was Fred something, and the Ambassador's secretary, whose name I can't remember either, and one other officer to open the post in Guinea Bissau. The admin guy had been in Africa before as a Peace Corps volunteer, but had never been done Foreign Service admin work. The Department had said to them: go out and open the Embassy there. Well sure, but how? Well, go there and get a building and so forth. They arrived the same way we did in Guinea Bissau, driven in for a bribe on an army truck from the military strip, and dropped on a street corner. From there

they had to create an Embassy, speaking no Portuguese. Luckily, they were terrific. In similar circumstances, in Equatorial Guinea, there had been a violent incident at the post.

Q: Oh, God.

HOWLAND: The Department does it every time, don't they? So, I think Melissa came a couple of months later, but these people, three people, one woman and two men, Fred and this other economic officer, were sent with no experience into the unknown to create a Foreign Service post. And they did it. As I said, when you're young, everything is a great adventure.

They rented a building, repaired, cleaned and painted it themselves. There was a lift-van of equipment already in the port, and they found it and cleared it through customs. They were firing off orders to bring in desks and they were doing all these things. The staff all slept on the next floor up from the Chancery, which was on the second floor. When we did the inspection two years later, they had a functioning Embassy. Melissa went on as Ambassador for almost two years and then left for better things. Now there was a new Ambassador, Ed Marks. A nice guy and good manager. His secretary, who was about to leave, took me around, showed me all the painting she'd done, the repairs that they'd made, how they put in the doorknobs and locks themselves and so forth. It was inspiring.

Luckily, we weren't there on Saturday morning. The Embassy building had a kind of alleyway through the bottom floor, and behind it was a courtyard in the back. The whole courtyard stank and there were bloodstains everywhere. The secretary said, that's where they kill the pigs for the market every Saturday morning. If you're here on Saturday mornings, you can watch them cutting up the pigs and eating the entrails raw. That's the real Africa, she said. After a while you get used to it.

The town of course was still a mess. It was a quasi-communist regime; there were no food markets and the ordinary people were just starving. Of course the members of the ruling party got all the food they wanted, brought in by the Cubans. The other diplomats used to wait for one weekly plane to come in from Dakar with orders of food. There was an egg ration in town and the government controlled the distribution of eggs. So, one egg per person per week was the ration. There were six or seven people in the Embassy. Whenever their egg day was, one person would have to take a basket and go to the government store and be handed seven eggs and certify that there were seven people eating seven eggs. Then they'd go back and the next morning they'd have a big egg breakfast. That was how they got their eggs. But apparently the shrimp and other seafood were good, and frequently available.

There was no medical care of course. When one officer cut himself with a saw, he had to go to the Cuban hospital for care. The Cuban hospital had a doctor, but no medicines, no anti-biotic, nothing. So, with no anesthetic they put in stitches with fishing line. Then they had to take them out of course in a couple of days when the wound had started to heal. They pulled the fishing line out just like that. No anesthetic for any of it. That was what it was like in Africa in the Foreign Service those days.

The only problem now seemed to be a gulf between the “founders of the post” so to speak, and new people who were just arriving, who took everything for granted and hated it. It was the old “hardy band of brothers” syndrome but time would take care of that. We were very glad to leave Guinea Bissau, which in the ensuing 35 years now has gone from coup to coup, and is now a dangerous “failed” state used for various narcotics traffickers.

GLENN SLOCUM
USAID, Sahel West Africa Projects
Washington, DC (1979-1984)

Glenn Slocum was born in 1940. After finishing graduate school at the University of Maryland in 1969 he joined AID. His career includes positions in Cameroon, Senegal, Paris, Washington D.C., and Burundi. Mr. Slocum was interviewed by W. Haven North in November, 1998.

SLOCUM: In addition to Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde, I also was responsible for some regional projects. I guess I have never thought about it so much until you and I have started talking here about the extent to which I have been involved in many parts of my career in regional activities. These are the ones I remember most. I remember two of the bilateral activities in Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau but the regional projects were a little more dramatic.

Q: Talk about the bilateral first.

SLOCUM: Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde were newly independent, and AID offices had been set up only in the late '70s. The first new project in which I was involved was fisheries. The project design had already been approved, and then managed technical review of the contract bid proposals. Another duty of a PDO is to manage the contract review process. Usually he or she chairs the review committee and writes the memo for the contracting officer to decide on best and final proposals. I did that for the fisheries project. A major irrigated agricultural project was in the early stages of design. There was a rehabilitation activity, which was an independence gift to restore broken agricultural equipment and buildings to their function. But this was a project in course and required no support from my office.

EDWARD MARKS
Ambassador
Guinea Bissau (1977-1980)

Ambassador Edward Marks was born in Chicago in 1934, and received his BA from the University of Michigan. He served in the US Army from 1956 to 1958. Entering the Foreign Service in 1959, his postings included Nairobi, Nuevo Laredo, Luanda, Lusaka, Brussels, Lubumbashi and Colombo, with

ambassadorships to Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on August 12, 1996.

Q: You served in Guinea-Bissau from when to when?

MARKS: Fall of 1977 to July of 1980.

Q: What was the situation in Guinea-Bissau when you went out there?

MARKS: I was the second ambassador there, the first having been Melissa Wells who had only been at post for three or four months before being withdrawn and sent to the U.S. Mission to the UN in New York. The embassy had only been open about a year, following independence in 1975. I was accredited to both Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, and the intention was to have a resident mission in both with one ambassador going back and forth. The post in Cape Verde had not yet been opened up and the post in Guinea-Bissau was small. Counting myself there were three officers, a communicator and an American secretary, an AID mission officer with three or four technicians - ten or eleven Americans in all.

Later, when we opened up in Cape Verde we had a resident staff of eight or ten Americans plus locally engaged staff.

Guinea-Bissau was a very small, very poor country and conditions were about as difficult as you can imagine. Although the post had been open a year when I arrived, we were just moving into permanent housing. The staff had spent that year living in hotel rooms and I assure you the hotels in Guinea-Bissau were not exactly 3 or 4 star. They were about a half star. It was grim. The Chancery was the bottom floor of the highest building in town, which meant five stories, and we had three floors up above where we were building apartments. They were fairly big apartments (for Bissau) with two bedrooms, two bathrooms, living room, dining room, kitchen and an entry way. They had marble floors and were pretty classy for the local scene.

We arrived by Defense attaché plane from Dakar and were taken to the Ambassador's residence. It was ludicrous, although by Guinea-Bissau standards it wasn't all that bad. But it was really pretty bad. There was no electric power most of the time even though later we installed a small generator. Water was kept in a roof-top reservoir which was filled by the local fire department once a week. The Residence was next to a cemetery and a guy who made coffins, and a pig farm was across the street. It was just grim. We were there about a month when the new apartments above the Chancery became available so I pulled rank and bounced one of the staff and took the top apartment. The administrative officer had one of the other apartments (he was the one I bounced from the top floor apartment) and the communicator and my secretary, a married couple, had the third one. However, it was grim and even this permanent housing would not have met most standards elsewhere in the world.

There was little food available except what we brought in by the West African commissary delivery service organized by the African Bureau. This arrangement ran its own airplane, which would drop by every three or four months. There was practically nothing on the local market except rock oysters, not bad shrimp, and occasionally some vegetables, papaya, and mangos.

Sometimes there was rice and peanuts, and once in a while once could get hold of a suckling pig or very small, quite delicious little birds.

The country suffered enormously from water and power shortages and in the three years I was there we spent over half the time without power. Finally we installed our own generator. Remember this was in a West African tropical environment so the lack of power and water was serious.

There wasn't much to do, and there wasn't much to see. The foreign community was very small and the local community was still quite standoffish.

I suppose the worse thing was that it was boring. We could get to beaches only after driving for an hour and a quarter up a miserable road; and the beaches weren't that good. There was very little social life. There were only two tennis courts in town, one of which was taken away by the ruling Party for its use. There were no clubs, only a small foreign community, no cultural life - life was really very limited.

From the day I got there until the day I left, we spent an incredible amount of time on administrative questions, in an effort to keep the Mission functioning while trying to upgrade it. Rent a little bit better house, get generators brought in and installed, obtain a little more space so we could spread out a bit. There was a Washington approved project to build an American embassy compound on land set aside by the Guinea-Bissau Government for the diplomatic corps. The site was located on the road to the airport. The idea was to build a compound with a swimming pool, residences and an office, etc. I spent three incredibly frustrating years negotiating with alternating teams of people from FBO and the architects who never somehow could get together. So, although the project had been approved in principle before I got there and the money approved, I spent three years and it still hadn't even been started when I left. The compound was built a year or so later.

Only a very few journalists and VIPs came through. One journalist, Lamb from the Los Angeles Times, visited for a few days and wrote a little article about the American Embassy with the dirt floor. In fact, although the Chancery was in a relatively modern building we did still have a dirt floor, although we also had gorgeous hardwood paneling separating the little offices. Lamb didn't know what to make of an American Embassy with a dirt floor and where the Ambassador lives four floors - without an elevator - above the "store."

We did eventually manage to rent some additional space next to us, spread out some and lay down a floor. I doubled the floor space of the Chancery, which allowed us to set up a small USIS display, and we ended up with hardwood floors just like real civilized people.

So, that is a sense of what we did, spending an enormous amount of our time on administrative activities. I remember when I went to a Chiefs of Mission meeting in the Cameroon. We were sitting around exchanging war stories and I think it was our Ambassador to Nigeria who made the comment that his phone at home hadn't worked for six months. I couldn't resist it and into the silence I said, "Oh, you have a phone?" It was generally accepted that we had the worse conditions in all of Africa. When we were inspected in our third year, the Senior Inspector stated

in his report that "It is a very real question as to whether we should ask Americans to live in these conditions to represent the United States of America." We didn't think it was all that bad, but the inspectors did put that statement in their report.

Q: What did your wife do?

MARKS: She just sort of got through the days. She mingled with a few of the other ex-pats and we were away a lot taking longish vacations; she spent time visiting family. Boredom I would say was a problem almost more than anything else. We finally acquired a TV and VCR, which helped a little. I remember the sensation we caused with some showings of "West Side Story." My wife was also ill a lot and was med-evaced three or four times. We never really did figure out the cause of her illness. One particularly bad attack occurred when we could not get a USG government plane and the President of Guinea-Bissau lent me his DC-3 to fly her up to Dakar, where the Peace Corps doctor was available for an emergency case.

Bissau was a weird place. One of my best friends was the Portuguese ambassador, Antonio Pinto da Franca, now Portuguese ambassador to Germany. We were very close, both husbands and wives, and we now go often to Portugal to see them. Antonio had an artistic, literary sensitivity and pointed out that Bissau was really a very surrealistic place. We had many little incidents or adventures that are sometimes difficult to explain but were straight out of Lawrence Durrell. Remember the *Sauve Qui Peut* and *Noblesse Oblige* stories about Yugoslavia in the early days of the Cold War?

Q: Oh, yes. I went to Yugoslavia a few years after he wrote the Esprit de Corps.

MARKS: Well, we had a little bit of that atmosphere there. Let me tell you a few stories. First: the official car. When I arrived in Guinea-Bissau, the Embassy official car was a big Ford Tourino sedan. It gave us prestige because it was big and American. The local government types had Volvos that the Swedes had given to the government. The other ambassadors had Mercedes except for the French, of course. And, I had this big Ford which was about a third the price and a tenth the quality of the others, but it was big and flashy. As you know, we fly two flags on our cars (the American and the Ambassadorial) while other embassies fly only one. My driver loved that. But, when I arrived the car was showing wear very badly, although it wasn't that old. I put in a request to have the car replaced and was told that the replacement wasn't scheduled for another 44 months or so. I kept arguing that the car was not working very well but didn't get very far in convincing anyone in Washington. Finally, one day we had a situation which changed everything.

The prime minister of the Guinea-Bissau was killed in an automobile accident and a state funeral for him was organized at the Presidential Palace - the former Governor's Palace. The Palace was located on a traffic circle in the center of town, and much of the city's population was gathered around this circle. On the stairs of the Palace were gathered the local dignitaries and the diplomatic corps. We dips [diplomatic representatives] had all pulled up one by one to be let off to join our group on the stairs before we went in to see the body lying in state. My driver had the two flags flying on the big white Ford and off we went, actually a distance of only about five blocks from the Chancery. We drove up the main street, and pulled around the circle and stopped

in front of the Palace. My driver got out and ran around to open the door for me (I was dressed in tie and jacket, even in the tropics.) He then ran back to start the car - and it wouldn't start. In front of practically all of Guinea-Bissau, the American Ambassador's car would not start. I disappeared into the diplomatic crowd, distancing myself from this disaster as fast as possible. My driver, to his permanent humiliation, had to find four or five guys to push the car off the circle.

When I reported this scene to Washington, they immediately diverted a new car to me. It was a big, new; bronze colored Chevy Impala and my driver loved it. It was the biggest, flashiest car in town.

Like most African and Latin countries...remember that Guinea-Bissau was African, Latin, and Communist at that time...a big event was an official arrival or departure at the airport, particularly if it were the president or the prime minister. We - the diplomatic corps - would be convoked. The 12 ambassadors, counting the PLO representative, would get into our cars and drive out the 15 to 20 minutes to the airport where we would stand in the diplomatic line-up, grouped right after the government officials and the local notables, to say hello or goodbye to whoever was coming or going. We would watch the ragged little honor guard, still using the Soviet goose step. One day this ceremony gave rise to an amusing incident.

I had been in Bissau about a year and a half at the time, and was now number four or five in protocol ranking. At that point the Russian Ambassador was the dean of the corps and the Chinese, I think, was the number two, the Portuguese was number three. We all arrived that day but as the Russian Ambassador was away a young, thug-looking Russian second secretary immediately went to take the place at the head of the line. Horror reigned in the diplomatic corps. A junior officer cannot take the place of a Chief of Mission in a receiving line; he must move down to the end of the line where the chargés stood. But, the young Russian wouldn't move or respond to our comments; he just stood there dumbly. The Chinese Ambassador was furious, and we all were indignant (some more seriously than others). The Chinese Ambassador got hold of the G-B [Guinea- Bissau] protocol officer who went to the Russian and told him he had to move. The Russian did so, grudgingly, and the Chinese Ambassador took his place at the head of the line. Then the Portuguese took his place, and I followed next to him. Next to me was the very smooth, sophisticated ambassador from Guinea-Conakry, a man who had been ambassador in Paris and Moscow and was now in their neighboring country with whom they were trying to improve relations. He was a very suave, French African type with flowing robes, and he moved into his place next to me. Now, right next to him usually came the East German ambassador; a tall, gangling, Ichabod Crane type, a modest man. By protocol, he was supposed to come after the Guinea-Conakrian but the young Russian now appeared and took that place instead. The East German fluttered around, trying to get the Russian's attention without actually saying anything but the Russian just ignored him. The East German finally resigned himself and, with a shrug, accepted a place next to the Soviet Second Secretary. The next in line after the East German was North Korean Ambassador, a short, dour looking man, who took all this in but didn't say anything. All the rest of us were all watching this, and as the East German accepted his role and took his place after the Russian Second Secretary, the Guinea-Conakrian raised his voice and commented loudly, "Il n'ose pas!" ("He doesn't dare!").

We had a sequel to this incident. The next week was the regular monthly luncheon meeting of the diplomatic corps. The Portuguese ambassador and I decided we had to do something about the airport incident. After all, we had had a breach of diplomatic protocol, precedent, tradition and manners. We got together with the Guinea-Conakrian ambassador and agreed to do something at the meeting. At the luncheon, the Portuguese ambassador started out, and speaking more in sorrow than in anger about the problem of junior officers who do not understand, and how they must be educated and taught to understand the rules and traditions of the diplomatic service. When he was done I jumped in spoke more or less along the same lines. After I finished, the North Korean ambassador jumped in and made a little speech. While we had actually been joking, he was serious and furious. Following a little more discussion, we passed a resolution calling for the dean of the diplomatic corps, the Soviet member, to address all chiefs of mission reminding them of the rules and traditions and practices of diplomacy. Specifically, all chiefs of mission were enjoined to insure that their subordinates understood these rules and behaved as required of responsible diplomats. All this was directed towards the Soviet ambassador, of course.

The only real result to come out of that exercise, other than we had had a good time, was that I could later take cigarettes off the North Korean ambassador who up until then would not even shake hands with me. (I was giving up cigarettes at that time - unless, of course, someone offered me one.)

Speeches at the national party conventions: Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde were independent countries with their own government structures, but they had a joint political party - the PAIGC, Amilcar Cabral's party. The president of G-B was the president of the PAIGC party and the president of Cape Verde, Pereira, was the vice president. They used to have national conventions. Now, I mentioned before that the Guinea-Bissauans and the Cape Verdeans are African and Latin by culture and the leadership had grown up in a Communist political culture. Remember all three of those environments have what we would call in an Anglo-Saxon community, diarrhea of the mouth. They all believe in and practice rhetoric. One year President Cabral spoke at the joint national party convention for ten and a half hours over two days. The next year President Pereira spoke for twelve and a half hours in one day. My Portuguese colleague and I made it a point of honor to stick right through it, the end.

Q: Were your eyes open?

MARKS: I wouldn't swear to that. Not all the time. But other people bugged out. Pereira gave his speech in one day while Cabral gave it in two days. It was incredible and I can't remember a single word that was said.

Dress: Now being proper Africans, leftists, and freedom fighter types, the slogan of the party was "À Luta Continua" (The fight continues) and they, of course, wore a version of the African safari suit in Bissau. I used to notice, however, that when they got into an airplane to go to Lisbon for delegations they all wore black suits, white shirts, dark ties, just like the Portuguese. Then I noticed something really funny. One day I went out to the airport (this was in Cape Verde, not Guinea-Bissau) and I found the foreign ministry crowd out there in black suits, white shirts and dark tie and asked what was going on. They replied "The Senegalese are coming." The

Senegalese are very formal, very French. Apparently once the Cape Verdeans had gone out to meet a Senegalese delegation who got off the airplane in French cut suits, ties and jackets, and there they were slopping around in their safari suits, terribly embarrassed. From then on they would wear safari suits at home except when the Senegalese were coming.

There were lots of incidents but here is one that was really very Lawrence Durrell. The new minister of foreign affairs decided he would have an annual diplomatic dinner. So, he arranged one at the hotel.

Q: You are talking about the North Koreans, the Cubans, and there must have been some others with whom we didn't have relations.

MARKS: We'll get to the political side later.

The dinner was going to be outside by the swimming pool, which hadn't been cleaned in years. All the diplomatic chiefs of mission - all 14 if us - showed up. The Soviet came not only with his wife but two aides who were not given seats. There was a big fuss about that. We all sat down around this table next to the swimming pool, in the dark African night with light coming from the windows of the hotel dining room. There were bugs all over the place. After we were settled, or less, the Foreign Minister got up to speak but the lights went out, in the hotel and all over the city. But, he was prepared and had an aide with a flashlight who held it over his shoulder while his read his speech. We sat there in the dark next to an empty swimming pool on a hot African night while the Foreign Minister of Guinea-Bissau read a classic and meaningless diplomatic speech - long, in the Latin fashion - by the light of a flashlight while the mosquitoes buzzed and numerous wild cats roamed around and scrounged for food. The Chinese ambadress passed around a little tin of anti-bug ointment and all went pretty well, considering, except that the wife of the Brazilian Ambassador was bitten by one of the cats. That was the first government sponsored diplomatic dinner in Guinea-Bissau. I reported on it by dispatch; I just couldn't resist not doing so.

Anyway, those are a few incidents illustrating the type of place it was. As I said, we were largely involved in administrative questions, trying to get along and build up our resources and facilities. It was all essentially boring but there were periodic surrealistic incidents and events.

Okay, now the place. Guinea-Bissau is a small West African country, with a long connection with Europe as the Portuguese had gotten there in about 1460. This was part of the legacy of Prince Henry the Navigator and the great period of Portuguese exploration when they changed the world. They created the First World Empire and created the first lasting connections between Europe and the rest of the world. When the Portuguese were done, the world was tied together in a way that it never had been before and remained so. The Portuguese began rounding the coast of Africa in the early 1400s and hit Cape Verde about 1446 or so. That is about the time that Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks. They established themselves in Cape Verde and then moved on to the African coast and there is at least one fort in Guinea-Bissau that dates back to the late 1400s. Then they continued down the coast. So, the Portuguese had been in Guinea-Bissau a long time.

But, what you had in Bissau was a mixed society with three major elements: the Cape Verdeans, a mestizo people from Cape Verde, the local mestizos, and pure Africans. Interestingly, the frontier between the Moslem north and the animist-Christian south ran right through the country. Historical records showed that Islam had been working its way down the continent for centuries, and that there were really no Moslems in G-B until sometime during the last half of the last century. Now, in the last half of the 20th century, Senegal to the north and Guinea-Conakry to the west and south were almost completely Moslem while Guinea-Bissau was about 40% Muslim or so. This was a process of conversion, no immigration. Despite centuries of Portuguese rule and the existence of a relatively small Christian mulatto class, the general population remained animist or traditional until converted to Islam.

The leadership class was basically Cape Verdean, an upper class of society of ten thousand or so who had, as a group, been in Guinea-Bissau for centuries. The existence of this class gave rise to the observation that Guinea-Bissau really had been colonized not by the Portuguese but by the Cape Verdeans. Under the leadership of Amilcar Cabral, a very interesting and sympathetic character, it was the G-B Cape Verdeans in cooperation with exile Cape Verdeans from the Cape Verde Island which fought the anti-colonial war.

It is interesting to note in Guinea-Bissau, this tiny little spit of land, the Portuguese had close to 60,000 troops and were losing. By the time the Portuguese rebellion occurred in 1974, Amilcar Cabral and the PAIGC literally controlled two thirds of the territory of the country, night and day. They actually administered it. Meanwhile, in Angola, where the Portuguese had about the same number of troops they were never seriously threatened by the rebellion. They controlled the territory up until the revolution in Lisbon. But in Guinea-Bissau, the PAIGC was literally beating them on the ground. In fact, it is the only place in Africa where independence was really won on the battlefield, despite the fact that everybody now talks about liberation struggles. Guinea-Bissau is the only place where armed insurrection actually succeeded, where the African guerilla group was actually winning on the ground. Even in Rhodesia the struggle was won politically although the armed struggle certainly had an impact.

So, the Bissauans were very proud of themselves and the memory of their victory was what gave them a tremendous sense of confidence. As a liberation movement, they were very close to the Cubans, the Palestine Liberation Movement and other liberation movements. As in the case of all of these movements, the Soviets had provided at least morale support and now after independence the Cuban, Soviet, Chinese, East German and North Korean embassies were very prominent in our little city, as well as PLO mission with full diplomatic status. There were resident ambassadors from Portugal, Brazil, Egypt, Guinea-Conakry, Zaire, and, of course, us. There was a French embassy headed by a Charge d'Affaires, and Swedish embassy staffed with aid types. And yet, I found when I got there that their communist identification, their affiliation with the East in terms of the Cold War, had been clearly very instrumental. If you were a liberation movement, where else do you get help? You got it from the Left, from the Soviet side of the Cold War. After all, the Americans and the West weren't really going to help you. So, although several years after independence the Guinea-Bissauan government still used all the terminology of the liberation movements of the Left and were still talking about setting a state economy, you could see the beginning of a shift. Their commitment to revolutionary ideology was clearly not held by all down to bedrock. I was able to see shifts in their alliances while I was

there. We tried to work on it as best we could. We had a USAID program, tried to establish the Peace Corps and while there was some initial standoffishness, we could see it melting. So, we worked on that melting for the three years I was there.

WESLEY EGAN
Ambassador
Guinea Bissau (1983-1985)

Born in Pennsylvania of Foreign Service Parents, Mr. McIlvaine was raised in Washington D.C. and abroad. He graduated from Harvard University and served in the US Army before joining the Foreign Service in 1967. His assignments abroad took him to a number of posts in Africa, including Kinshasa, Bissau, Dar es Salaam, and Lusaka, where he served as Chargé d'Affaires. At the State Department in Washington, Mr. McIlvaine dealt primarily with African issues. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2003.

Q: Then you left there in '80?

EGAN: I left Zambia in 1982. I had a call from Lannon Walker, who was the senior deputy assistant secretary in AF, saying the bureau wanted to send my name forward as the bureau's candidate to be the next ambassador to Guinea-Bissau. Well, I was, this was what 1982? I'd been in the Service 11 years. I was I think an FSO-1 in the old system. I was surprised and delighted by that phone call. I remember only the briefest hesitation when I said to myself, but not to Lannon Walker or to Frank Wisner, where is Guinea-Bissau? Why would anybody want to go there? Of course sometimes when you are told that you're being considered at a job at that level, it is very flattering, and it can go to your head very easily. Sometimes there's also a second thought that follows that very quickly, assuming that you're not being asked to be the ambassador to the Court of St. James, or Paris or Delhi, or Ottawa or someplace like that. You may think to yourself that if you are good enough for them to ask you to serve in a tiny, far away, barely known place in old Portuguese West Africa, maybe you could angle for something a little bigger. But I quickly figured out that the first time you're asked whether you would be available to serve as an ambassador, it doesn't matter where it is. The first time is always really special and it doesn't matter how big or how small it is, how important or unimportant it is, how far away or how close it is, it is one of those great professional thrills. Some people get a little pickier later in their career, but I think the first time, anybody with any commonsense at all says, "I'm your guy, send me." That's what I said.

Q: I always wanted to go to.

EGAN: I've always wanted to go. I came back to the States. I had a very brief overlap with my successor in Lusaka. I think Frank also came back to Washington in 1982. He was replaced by Nick Platt. Nick had his own DCM coming and so I served as Nick Platt's DCM for three or four weeks and tried to help him settle in before his chosen DCM arrived. Nick asked me if I would stay on for a week with the new DCM which I agreed to do, but it was a mistake. I don't think

the overlap was helpful. For the same reason no embassy needs two ambassadors at post at the same time, no embassy needs two DCMs at post at the same time. So, I moved on as quickly as I could.

I'm not sure you can still do this these days, but I didn't want to come back to Washington and walk around the halls on overcompliment and I didn't want to be assigned to a make-work job just to pass the time while the nomination process went ahead. It didn't take as long in those days for an ambassador to be selected, nominated, heard, sworn in, and arrive at post. I think it now takes over a year. In my case it took about six months. So, I just said to Washington, well, I'm going to be at my house in Chapel Hill, North Carolina and when the process is far enough advanced that I can begin consultations and get ready for hearings, call me and I'll come up to Washington. I put myself on administrative leave for about six months. I moved back to Chapel Hill, put my youngest child in local junior high school and had a rather relaxed life for about four months. Finally, President Reagan called the house and asked me to go to Bissau. I said yes and returned to Washington several weeks later. He liked to call and have a photograph with all new ambassadors.

Jesse Helms was the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Nancy Kassebaum was the chairman of the Africa Subcommittee. When my hearing was scheduled, my parents and my brothers all came to Washington. The ambassador of Guinea-Bissau to the United States was also there. I was already a Portuguese speaker, so I didn't have to do any language training for Guinea-Bissau, but I prepared like crazy for the hearing. I don't think there was much I didn't know about Guinea-Bissau. Senator Helms started the hearing by saying, "Mr. Egan, I understand that you went to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill." Senator Helms was not a friend of the university in those days. He thought it was far too liberal. I had thought about how I would respond to such a question and said, "Yes, Senator that's correct. I did go to the University at Chapel Hill." Having a little fun and with some edge to his voice he then said, "I wonder if you can explain to me and to the Committee how it is that the North Carolina Tar Heels have dropped from number one to number 11 in the NCAA rankings?" You can imagine the odd expression that passed over the face of the Guinea-Bissau ambassador. He was having trouble following the discussion in English, but to have this first question be about a basketball team was confusing. I said, "Senator, I can't explain why they've dropped from number one to number 11, but I will give you my personal guarantee that by the time of the NCAA finals, they'll be in the top eight." Helms sort of sat back and said, "Well, that's fine with me, no further questions." He then turned the hearing over to Nancy Kassebaum who turned to him and said, "Well, Senator, I think we can take Mr. Egan's word on that because after all, the North Carolina Tar Heels have a fellow Kansan" meaning Dean Smith "at the helm." At that there was a big round of laughter in the hearing room. Then the police came in and said there was a bomb threat. The hearing room was cleared. We all went and stood out in the hall for 15 or 20 minutes. The dogs came in sniffed around all the chairs. Everybody was standing around and Senator Helms and Nancy Kassebaum came up to me, and my family and she said, "Mr. Egan, the Chairman and I have talked about this and thank you very much for coming up today and I don't think we're going to have any further questions for you. You may go." That was the end of my first confirmation hearing. Afterwards the poor man who was the Guinea-Bissau ambassador to the United States came up to me and in Portuguese so that the others didn't quite understand

said, “What was that all about? What am I supposed to tell my foreign minister?” I was confirmed by the Senate a few days later and got to Guinea-Bissau in early spring of 1983.

Q: You were there from when to when?

EGAN: I was there from 1983 to 1985.

Q: First, what about living conditions there?

EGAN: Without question they were the most difficult living conditions we ever faced in the Foreign Service. Guinea-Bissau was very small and extremely poor. It’s where the resistance to Portuguese colonialism in Africa began in 1954. I was only the third American ambassador in Bissau. Melissa Wells had been first followed by Pete De Vos. They had been accredited to Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, but resident in Bissau. The same political party, the PAIGC, was the government in both countries. When I was sent in 1983 the decision was made that we would send separate ambassadors to Guinea-Bissau and Praia in Cape Verde. I had a colleague who went through the confirmation process almost exactly at the same time as I did who was on his way to Cape Verde.

The assignment presented us with the most physically demanding and difficult living conditions my family and I have ever faced. My son was in boarding school in the States, but my daughter was only an 8th grader, so she spent her first year with us. There were no schools and you could not buy an aspirin on the local market. Our consumable allowance was 12,000 pounds. We even took several thousand pounds of rice to Guinea-Bissau, a country that had been a rice producer. The residence was two little attached houses next to the crumbling national football stadium in the center of town. Out the backdoor you had about eight feet before there was a wall that surrounded you on the back and on both sides. We had a wonderful household staff and a terrific embassy staff. We had two or three hours of diesel generated electrical power everyday. For most of our time there was nothing coming through the national grid and fuel had to be imported from Senegal by truck.

The embassy itself was a storefront. It had been a small shop in the main street of town that the United States government had bought. It was like a small jewelry shop, perhaps 1000 square feet. It had huge plate glass windows that looked out on the street. They were subsequently replaced with steel shutters that made the whole place kind of dark and brooding and forbidding. There was a large warehouse in the back and three floors of staff apartments above. We had to warehouse all of our equipment and supplies and fuel oil. I found 200 50-gallon drums of gasoline in the warehouse, like a bomb. It scared me to death when I first saw it. We later moved the fuel to another location where they presented a little bit less of a threat. The diplomat community was very small. I think there were 13 resident ambassadors. The ambassador from Senegal lived in Dakar, He wouldn’t live in Bissau because it was so difficult. There were ambassadors from Portugal, Brazil, France, and China. All the others were from the East Bloc and the PLO.

We had a very tough time, but we also had a very good time. One 4th of July, the Embassy was down to five liters of gasoline. We were building a new residence compound outside of the city

on the way to the airport. As soon as construction began, we started to use the property for volleyball games and that kind of stuff on the weekends. We were going to have our 4th of July party there using food people would contribute. But we also had a pouch coming in on the plane the day before the 4th of July. We didn't have enough fuel to use the truck to go to the airport to get the pouches and to use the truck to go around town to collect all of the American and local staff for the 4th of July, we couldn't do both. We had an embassy-wide meeting to decide which was more important, the pouch or the 4th of July. The unanimous decision was to have the 4th of July party and we just let the pouches sit at the airport. The spirit of community was absolutely terrific. I would guess, I never served in Paris or London, but I would guess that our embassy morale and community spirit might have been a lot better than at many larger and more important posts.

Q: Some of the grand posts basically doesn't exist.

EGAN: There's no community.

Q: What were we doing there?

EGAN: We were trying to turn what had been a Marxist-dominated, post-colonial government a little more toward the West and toward support for our positions on various West African regional issues, positions that we favored in the UN and in other international organizations, and we were trying to develop a more normal bilateral relationship with a government that had been heavily influenced by its Soviet, Chinese, and East German patrons since Guinea-Bissau's independence from Portugal in 1974. We had a small bilateral assistance program to help that process. I was surprised during my consultations to learn that our assistance had traditionally been supplied as PL-480 Title II emergency food assistance. It was almost all in rice. Well, I hadn't been in country too long before as a result of a lot of questioning and a lot of travel I realized that Guinea-Bissau was in fact producing quite a good rice crop every year, but the farmers who produced more than their needs had no choice but to sell their surplus to the government for which they would be paid in a worthless currency to use in empty shops. So, the farmers did what any enterprising farmer would do. They smuggled their surplus into the Casamance in southern Senegal, and sold it for CFA, the French franc-supported currency of Francophone West Africa from which of course Guinea-Bissau was excluded. The farmers would then use their CFA in Senegal to buy fertilizer, plastic buckets, shoes, whatever they happened to need and then smuggle those goods back across the border to Guinea-Bissau. I told the president of Guinea-Bissau, Nino Vieira, that I was not going to request any more Title II emergency food assistance. I felt strongly that I was not going to use scarce Title II emergency food assistance for a country that was already producing a surplus. The president was furious. Washington wasn't too happy either. We didn't provide it for a year and a half and slowly the process by which agricultural goods were commercialized in Guinea-Bissau changed and they slowly became less dependent on external food assistance.

There were only three ambassadors resident in Guinea-Bissau who spoke Portuguese: the Brazilian, the Portuguese and myself. The Cuban and Russian ambassadors and the PLO spoke only Spanish. We were the only three who spoke Portuguese and it made a difference.

Q: Oh, I'm sure it did.

EGAN: It helped a lot in my relationship with President Vieira. My Russian colleague had a helicopter in Guinea-Bissau that he used to offer to President Vieira for in country travel. I went out with the Russian ambassador and President Vieira several times in this helicopter to try to find the President's old headquarters camp deep in the bush. The Russians could never find it. The president used to get very frustrated. One day I had the C-12 and defense attaché visiting from Monrovia and I invited the President to come and try to find this camp with us. We sat down and we looked at a map. He pointed directly to it on the map. The air attaché used his new global positioning system, keyed in the coordinates, and we flew right to it. It made quite an impression on President Vieira. It was a difficult assignment in that if you wanted to get anything done, you really had no choice but to deal with him, his minister of defense or his minister of foreign affairs. It was very direct and very personal. There was no structure with which you could interact. We had some success on votes in the UN. We had some success with respect to economic reform. We got the first U.S. navy ship into Bissau ever on a port visit. Bissau is quite far up the river from the ocean. The channel is very difficult to find and the navy captains used to have to pick up a harbor pilot from a dugout canoe at the mouth of the river. He would guide them about 40 miles upriver to the city. Primitive conditions, but I think you always look back on your first assignment fondly. It's a very sort of special bond of friendship that was formed. I wouldn't want to go back to Guinea-Bissau and it was very hard on the family. It was very hard on my wife and on my daughter. It's an experience we will never forget and I think we actually got some good work done.

Q: Were there any particular developments while you were there? You were there two years?

EGAN: I was there from 1983 to 1985. It felt very isolated. The biggest regional issue involved the profound suspicion between the governments of Guinea-Bissau and Senegalese based on the anxiety that Guinea-Bissau has supported a separatist resistance movement in southern Senegal. There were also suspicions in Guinea-Bissau that the Senegalese had designs on their territory.

I had no DCM or political officer. Our staff was one American secretary, a first tour vice-consul, an admin officer, two communicators, half a dozen AID staff, no station, and no military attaché. It was a minimal staff.

Q: Well, then when you left there in '85, whither?

EGAN: This was before the days of e-mails and easy telephone contacts, fax messages and that sort of thing. One day I got a telegram from the Assistant Secretary of African affairs who said, I think I got this cable on a Monday, it said, the Deputy Secretary of State wanted to see me on Wednesday at 11:00. Please advise your travel plans. That's all it said. Well, you know, I'm sitting out there in Guinea-Bissau wondering why the Deputy Secretary of State wanted to see me in 48 hours. What have I done? What's happened that I don't know about? I sent a very quick message back to the bureau to say I couldn't get from Bissau to Washington in 48 hours, I could be there by such and such a date, and could they tell me what it was all about? The bureau didn't know. I subsequently got a message from Ned Walker who was the Deputy Secretary's chief of

staff who told me that my name had been suggested to the Deputy Secretary as his possible replacement as his chief of staff. So, it was about a job.

Q: Had you met the President at all and get your picture taken?

EGAN: No. As I recall President Clinton didn't do that. I did have a meeting with Warren Christopher who was then Secretary of State, but that was relatively pro forma. The only time, the only president I met before going out like this was President Reagan who loved to have not just the ambassadors, but their families into the Oval Office for a chat and a cup of tea and a couple of photographs. I did that back in 1983 before going to Guinea-Bissau and he was fantastic. My parents were there and my wife and children and even my brothers. We were a crowd of seven or eight Egans and the President had all the time in the world. They each got their own photographs chatting or shaking the President's hand. It was quite a thrill.

Q: Talk about an Irish gathering or anything?

EGAN: A little bit, you know, that kind of silly sort of ethnic stuff. He just bowled everybody over because he was that sort of a personality. It chewed up maybe 15 or 20 minutes of his time which as presidential schedules go that's a long time. There was nothing substantive about it, but it was a thrill for me and a thrill for the family. I don't think anybody since Reagan has done that as routinely as he did. I also had before going to Guinea-Bissau, this is retrospective, but before going to Guinea-Bissau had asked to see the Vice President who was George Bush at the time and much to my surprise not only did he ask me to come over to his office in the Old Executive Office Building, but we spent about an hour and 15 minutes talking about, if you can believe it, Guinea-Bissau which could not have been terribly high on the list of things to do for the Vice President. He had smart questions and thoughtful comments. As I was getting ready to leave, he said, "Now, Wes, here's what I want you to do when you get there and keep me posted." I think he meant it. I don't know how many vice presidents have done that to 36 year old ambassador going to a very far away and small place, but I don't think that sort of thing happened after the second Reagan administration. I don't believe it happened as a routine matter at all with Clinton except for people going to the most important posts or people who were close political chums and friends.

STEVENSON MCILVAINE
Charge d'Affaires
Bissau, Guinea-Bissau (1985-1986)

Born in Pennsylvania of Foreign Service Parents, Mr. McIlvaine was raised in Washington D.C. and abroad. He graduated from Harvard University and served in the US Army before joining the Foreign Service in 1967. His assignments abroad took him to a number of posts in Africa, including Kinshasa, Bissau, Dar es Salaam, and Lusaka, where he served as Chargé d'Affaires. At the State Department in Washington, Mr. McIlvaine dealt primarily with African issues. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2003.

Q: You left there in '85. whither?

MCILVAINE: Somebody had sent around a thing saying they were looking for temporary chargés in Guinea Bissau and I raised my hand, so I got what turned out to be 5 months of running a little embassy in a country so obscure that even Graham Greene never got there. Bissau was really... There is the end of the line and then there's 2 steps further. That's Bissau. There was one restaurant in town, but you had to bring the food. They'd cook it if you brought it. But nobody had any food. I remember going to the market for the first time and these women with 3 tiny tomatoes waiting for somebody to buy those 3 tiny tomatoes. It was pathetic.

Q: Let's look at this. Why did we have relations with the country?

MCILVAINE: This was where the revolution against Portuguese colonial power peaked. Amakar Cabral was a Bissauan, a leading figure, and he led a revolution of all these African intellectuals at the University of Lisbon against Portuguese rule that spread to Mozambique and Angola and much more important places than Bissau. Cabral was the original intellectual underpinning of that. In Bissau, the guerrillas actually defeated the Portuguese army, unlike Mozambique and Angola, where eventually the Portuguese just withdrew after their revolution in 1975. In Bissau, they were defeated. So, it was an interesting little country from that perspective. We had no particular interest there, but a new government, the revolutionary government, was strongly Marxist- (end of tape)

Who were largely from Cape Verde. There was a joint thing, one party for Cape Verde and Bissau. Then Ojoão Viera, who was one of the guerrilla commanders and was definitely a bush Bissauan and a fighter, not a Marxist from the University of Lisbon. He led a coup 5 years after independence in 1980 and took over the government and threw the Cape Verdean mulattos out. When I get there in '85, Marxism, as it did practically everywhere else, had totally destroyed what little economy there was. There was no economy at all. Viera and the country were beginning to look around for ways out of this. There was a French embassy, a Portuguese embassy, the Scandinavians (who always loved African socialists), and that was it. And the UN, UN agencies. It was pretty hard to argue that we really needed to have an embassy there. You could only argue on the basis of universalism, that it's a good idea because we are a preeminent superpower to have an embassy in every country because they all have votes at the UN. You can argue that case, but that was about it. If Bissau fell apart, it wouldn't make much difference. Bissau indeed later did fall apart and it didn't make much difference. The embassy was evacuated and closed and there has been no push to re-open it.

Q: What did you do?

MCILVAINE: Oh, it was great fun. The people were very nice and friendly. The Portuguese had paid so little attention to it that after 400 years of Portuguese rule, only 5% of the population was Catholic. That was just a few people in the city and that was it. They hadn't bothered with any missionary thing or anything else. We built a little compound outside of town and I would go walking through the cashew groves that went for miles and miles beyond my house between me and the airport. It was traditional, pre-European, Africa with fetishes, drums in the night, villages,

ladies didn't wear tops. This was before the Christians and missionaries and the bureaucrats and everybody else from Europe got to Africa. So that was kind of fun. Plus, they were, as so many Africans are, so welcoming. Despite the fact that it was a Marxist country, everybody was perfectly nice to me, the representative of a capitalist power.

What did we do there? We presented all the usual demarches that embassies present all over the world. Protect tropical mahogany, for example, to the poor bewildered Bissauan foreign minister who was trying to figure out if there was some way he could find the cash to keep his entire embassy in New York for another day in order to vote on some of these things. We had a little AID mission. We worried about trying to get them going on a path towards some sort of economic stability and economic reform, which they were eager to try.

Q: Did you talk to the president?

MCILVAINE: Yes, several times. He was quite accessible. I met him several times. In fact, one of the rituals I remember vividly is, they were doing, as so many African countries do, whenever the president leaves or arrives, the entire diplomatic corps was convoked to the airport to greet him or to send him off. It was a great ritual there. We would all get to bitch and whine as we stood out in the sun on the tarmac waiting to wave as the plane went by. Then the moment the chief of protocol gave the signal, there was this great duel amongst the embassy drivers as to who would get out first. My driver was the champion. It was touch and go as to whether he could get out ahead of the Cuban or not. Of course, I wasn't allowed to talk to the Cuban or even to acknowledge his existence, but our drivers were in constant combat.

Q: Were the Soviets there?

MCILVAINE: They were very much there. The Soviets and Cuba and all the East Bloc. The Palestinians. The only place you could get avocados was from the PLO-run farm. I wasn't allowed to talk to them either. This was shortly after Andy Young had been fired for talking to the PLO. I wasn't allowed to talk to the PLO. I had to go to the Egyptian ambassador and ask if he could smuggle me a few Palestinian avocados.

Q: The Scandinavians have this love affair with socialist countries in Africa, most of which are failing.

MCILVAINE: I later spent 3 years in Tanzania and saw lots of that.

Q: What were they doing there?

MCILVAINE: The same thing. All sorts of noble causes, good things, that probably never amounted to anything. It's been written about a number of times. I don't know anybody that's ever managed to get the whole story of 30-40 years of European aid in Africa and what it has accomplished. It's a hard one. All for the best of reasons... Well, not all of it. There were a few exceptions. Some of it was self-interest. But a lot of it, particularly the Scandinavians, was reasonably altruistic and accomplished so little. You could really see that in Tanzania, which had been one of the major recipients for many years and had so little to show for it.

Q: I take it on UN votes, this was hopeless?

MCILVAINE: They were trying to inch out of the Soviet Bloc. The Russian embassy – this was '85 – was not doing a very good job of defending its turf. The only way they could defend it was by bringing in assets and they weren't willing to spend much money on Bissau. So, the government was turning away from the Russians and looking to particularly the World Bank, us and the French. The French embassy was very active and big compared to mine.

Q: Your staff was what?

MCILVAINE: I had an admin officer, a junior officer who did everything – GSO, political officer, you name it – a communicator who drove a jeep, and an AID director and a couple of Americans in the AID mission.

Q: What was AID doing?

MCILVAINE: They were doing some village agricultural projects. It was a small AID mission just starting to see whether this was going to be a go or this was just a flirtation.

Q: Were there any dramatic events while you were there?

MCILVAINE: Yes. There was a coup attempt. I was quite pleased with myself in that I picked up reports of it 2 days before. I got the cable in, the sort of thing that I'm sure nobody ever noticed. But as a chargé and a political officer, you're doing your job. Locked the embassy down, made sure everybody was at home and in the right place and safe. I predicted that it would fail. Indeed it happened that night and it did fail.

Q: Against who?

MCILVAINE: Oh, it was some of the army officers going after Viera. Later, long after I left, they did it and they had a nice little civil war and they overthrew him. It was tribally based.

Q: Tribalism was a major...

MCILVAINE: It was really all most people had to rely on. The modern or developed world's presence was so light in Bissau. Because all the government figures had been in Guinea when they were fighting the war, Sekou Toure gave them a base, and most of them had learned French, so I was able to operate in French. My Portuguese was very limited. It was a charming little country that I suppose couldn't even feed itself unlike some other African basket cases, once it got rid of the Marxist trappings. I was in this huge cashew grove. Cashew is a very high value crop, but they weren't making a cent off it because it had all been nationalized and run into the ground. So, the local folks were just making cashew wine and having parties. There would be these big wooden troughs where they'd pound the cashew into juices of some sort and make wine out of it, ferment it, and have a good party.

Q: After this interlude as chargé, what happened? This would be late '85.

MCILVAINE: I got a job as political officer in Tanzania that wouldn't start until the following summer. Of course, I hadn't had my wife with me in Bissau. I came back in November and had 6 months of family life here in Washington. Now we had a baby, a son. Then we packed out and went to Tanzania in June. I spent 3 months learning Swahili.

Q: What about events in the Congo? Were they intruding?

MCILVAINE: Yes. It's the whole northern border. It was the fall of Mobutu and the rebels were sweeping down along the Zambian border. The rebel movement that came originally from the east swept down along the border towards us and across the country and heading to Kinshasa. So, we followed that very closely, did a lot of refugee work, a fair bit of reporting on how the Zambians were responding, and a certain amount of... Part of our concern was, we were going to be the base for evacuation of those Americans who were in the southern half of the country and setting all that up, being in touch with the missionaries and all that, but in fact, in the Congo, it didn't amount to much for us. The missionaries that were still there knew how to get out, knew how to take care of themselves, and they had been through a lot of trouble before. They did a pretty good job of taking care of themselves.

But one small anecdote from that time. We had a young Belgian officer up from Harare. The Belgians had closed their embassy in Lusaka and made it a regional embassy in Harare, but of course the Belgians still had a large number of nationals in Zaire and he was up trying to organize, get permission from the Zambian government to bring in a Belgian plane to Zambia and bring maybe some paratroopers in to guard it and to help the Belgians evacuate any of their nationals. He basically operated out of our embassy for a couple of weeks trying to get this through the Zambian government. I remember him coming to my office one day and sitting down with a heavy sigh and saying, "Just once I'd like to know what it's like to be an American diplomat." I said, "Why?" He said, "Because then people return your phone calls. They make decisions. They talk to you." He had been going 2 weeks with the Zambian bureaucracy and gotten nothing. Nobody would make a decision or even talk to him. It was an insight... With the fall of the Soviet Union when we became preeminent, we were the big player. In every country, no matter how obscure... I remember back even in '85 in Guinea Bissau, which had to be the most obscure country and I had to be the least important embassy there - I wasn't giving them any aid and I wasn't doing anything for them - they still would listen to me. The foreign minister would hear me, would give me an appointment whenever I asked for it. Being an American diplomat was indeed different. No matter how trivial the issue or how little we had to do with it, we were a player. Many other embassies were always scrambling to get into those meetings.

WILLARD DE PREE
Office of Inspector General
Washington, DC (1990-1993)

Ambassador Willard De Pree was born in Michigan in 1928. He received a B.A. from Harvard University and an M.A. from the University of Michigan in 1952. He served overseas in the U.S. Army from 1944-1946. His Foreign Service career began in 1956 and included positions in Cairo, Nicosia, Accra and Freetown with ambassadorships to Mozambique and Bangladesh. Ambassador De Pree was interviewed in 1998 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.

DE PREE: In Guinea Bissau, for example, clearly one of our most challenging posts for an administrative officer, we sent out a junior officer as GSO with no prior GSO experience. This wasn't fair to the post. If you do that, and at the same time cut maintenance funding, inevitably you are going to have deficiencies. I urged my inspection team to remember this when assessing how well the post was doing. While we did point out deficiencies, we were always careful to note that some of these deficiencies were inevitable, given the resources made available to the post. Often the fault was with the Department as much as it was with the post being inspected. I think most of the inspection teams took this approach.

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